

DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICAL-JURIDICAL STRUGGLE IN THE BRAZILIAN COUNTRYSIDE

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ABSTRACT

This paper starts from the reality of violence and exploitation that historically marks the Brazilian countryside in order to point out ways of trying to overcome this situation. The struggle for agrarian reform as a starting point for the democratization of social relations in the countryside stands out, considering the same fact as the beginning of an incessant process of political participation and distribution of land and power in rural areas. The continuation of the struggle and the formation of foci of resistance are fundamental in this process. In this paper, the dialectical method is adopted, and we have chosen the critical procedure treatment for democratic conformation (or its absence) in the Brazilian field.

Keywords: democratization of the countryside; land ownership concentration; land reform; social struggles.

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*A DEMOCRACIA E A LUTA POLÍTICO-JURÍDICA
NO CAMPO BRASILEIRO*

RESUMO

Parte-se da realidade de violência e exploração que marca historicamente o campo brasileiro para apontar caminhos de tentativa de superação deste quadro. Destaca-se a luta pela reforma agrária como ponto de partida para a democratização das relações sociais no campo, tendo-se em vista que a mesma figura como momento inaugural de um processo incessante de participação política e distribuição de terras e poder no âmbito rural. A continuação da luta e formação de focos de resistência são fundamentais neste processo. Adota-se, no presente artigo, o método dialético optando-se pelo procedimento crítico na tratativa da conformação democrática (ou sua ausência) no campo brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: *concentração fundiária; democratização do campo; lutas sociais; reforma agrária.*

FOREWORD

The issue of democracy in the Brazilian countryside is of fundamental importance, as there are very serious structural obstacles to its implementation, such as the violence of weapons, landlordism and poverty, but, likewise, there is a tradition of struggle that is part of the history of its people. Rural social movements have a history of fierce struggles and intense political mobilization, even when suffering from the most varied forms of violence. If democracy is present in a way that can be continually redefined by people from the countryside, all this mobilizing potential and all the founding energy of the rural population can become the central element for all further democratic development.

It is believed that, in order to establish democracy (or what is expected of it) in the countryside, it is essential for the popular element to be a part of the process, acting as its protagonist. The reflection to be developed here intends to substantiate this view that intensive rural population action, inside and outside state institutions, is what can catalyze the process of realization, of actualization of rights already established on a formal level.

And this is where Law is linked to the democratic question. It is a matter of demonstrating that this intertwining between law and democracy is a more interesting alternative for rights to come true, abandoning the slanderous position of mere “fictions” that exist only in abstract normative predictions. Therefore, it is necessary to seek subsidies in contemporary democratic theory, aiming at widening the legal field in a struggle for effectiveness.

Founding a substantial democracy in the rural context against the historic violence and the dispossession of its workers is an indispensable step towards the democratic consolidation of the country as a whole.

This is what we are going to argue for, here.

1 VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

In Brazil, one cannot talk about democratization without discussing the lack of democracy in rural areas. This, of course, impacts the democratic issue of the country as a whole. The violence of weapons, which has historically turned against social workers and militants, is compounded by the violence of poverty, misery, the absence of the possibility of a dignified

and productive life by means of the land and subsistence obtained from it, as well as the violence of large landholdings, which concentrate what should be distributed, going against the secularization of private property, leaving in poverty millions of families that could raise the struggle for food sovereignty to another level.

Therefore, it is urgent to think of Agrarian Reform as “[...] a central axis of a democratic political program” (MANIGLIA, 2002). To this end, one must take into account the Brazilian rural context, which is characterized, to this day, as a space of *anomie* and democratic deficit.

The “reality” of the countryside is an obstacle to “[...] the realization of social and economic democracy, whose pillar [of this ‘reality’] is the archaic landholding structure, marked by great concentrations of land that, since colonial times, which has been accumulated side by side with the concentration of misery and inequality” (MANIGLIA, 2002). Therefore, to speak of democracy in the countryside today is also to speak (and perhaps mainly) of its absence.

Abramovay and Morello (2010, p. 1, emphasis added) emphasize in this respect that the (let us say, relative) distribution of income that takes place in the countryside through federal government cash transfer programs is an isolated fact, not accompanied by other advances, such as healthcare, sanitation, and education. The authors point to the need for democratic mobilization so this extension can take place:

But it is precisely because they depend on democratic mobilization – and not on indirect mechanisms such as economic growth – that reducing inequality does not simultaneously reach all the dimensions it is composed of. Success in reducing poverty and income inequality is not nearly as successful as what is achieved in other aspects, such as education, sanitation and access to healthcare. The extraordinary social mobilization that generalized retirement in rural areas had no equivalent, for example, in a movement aimed at improving the quality of education.

For example, with regard to the precariousness of rural education, which is in an even worse situation than education in cities, the authors point out (ABRAMOVAY; MORELLO, 2010, p. 5) that:

It is true that Brazil has advanced a lot in terms of school attendance, both in urban and rural areas. However, in 2000, no less than 72% of rural children were failing to be promoted in school, compared with 50% of those living in urban areas. Only 12.9% of 15 to 17-year-olds living in rural areas were enrolled in high school, a school level appropriate for this age group. For urban Brazil, the proportion was 38.1% in 2000.

In addition to education, Abramovay and Morello (2010, p. 6) stress that

[...] child death rates, access to running water, sanitation, and household waste collection are also factors where rural indicators are far more precarious than urban ones, although progress in one case and the other has been clear during the current decade.

If that were not enough to constitute an absurd deficiency of state action in rural areas, there are several other factors that hamper its democratic development. The Brazilian countryside is still marked by various manifestations of violence against its population, such as the violence of land concentration in large estates, the repression of social movements that legitimately fight for rights often recognized by the legal system, the absurd persistence of slave labor and child labor, in addition to the violence of rural drug trafficking, crimes against indigenous people and the environment, and even violence arising from government neglect of this social situation, when the State “[...] by the tardiness in acting of its powers, endorses legal violation of constitutional norms and omissions regarding situations of poverty and violence” (MANIGLIA, 2006, p. 3).

Based on the thesis of Maria Silvia Carvalho Franco, Leonilde de Medeiros (2002, p. 184) points to the finding of the aforementioned scholar that “[...] violence was constituted in Brazil as a routine manner of adjustment in neighborhood relations and was institutionalized as a pattern of behavior”. In rural areas, the figure of the large landowner or foreman, accompanied by “jagunços” (armed bodyguards), stands out as a form of showing strength. In these contexts,

If notions of justice/injustice are among those affected by these practices, in most cases, they do not deploy into resources to other levels of power, suggesting that the possibility of recourse to law as mediating instance of relations is often not part of the world of common workers, much less the search for spaces for discussion and negotiation (MEDEIROS, 2002, p. 185-186).

Medeiros (2002, p. 189) diagnosed that the modernization of agriculture did not result in overcoming the old violent practices, and “[...] as the world of rights did not reach the countryside, a large social space was maintained for the use of arbitrariness and of strength”. To further aggravate this situation there is the commitment of the Judicial Branch to the interests of large landowners:

In a context where the use of force becomes a present and naturalized face in social relations and in which the possibility of an appeal outside the sphere of these relations of domination is excluded, the commitment of the Judicial Branch ends up stirring the violent actions even more, insofar as, socially, the idea that it is not possible to resolve any pending issues outside the traditional rules is built into the expectation.

In other words, modernity and the world of law and contract have not reached the countryside (MEDEIROS, 2002, p. 193, emphasis added).

One cannot talk about democracy in the countryside without considering this violent aspect of the rural situation. Land reform, based on the rural reality described above, will only become an instrument of rural democratization if it frontally attacks violence and poverty.

2 THE POLITICAL FIGHT IN THE BRAZILIAN COUNTRYSIDE

Maria da Glória Gohn (2006, p. 7) sees a paradigmatic change in the 1990s regarding the notion of participation:

In the context of the 1990s, participation came to be viewed from the perspective of a new paradigm, as Citizen Participation, based on the universalization of social rights, the expansion of the concept of citizenship and a new understanding of the role and nature of the state. Participation came to be conceived as a periodic and planned social intervention along the whole pathway of the drafting and implementation of a public policy, because public policies gained prominence and centrality in the strategies of development, transformation and social change. Civil society is not the only social player that can innovate and streamline the channels of participation, but the political society, by means of public policies, also becomes an object of attention and analysis.

Also along those lines, Leonardo Avritzer (2008, p. 159) believes that the 1988 Constitution “[...] changed the pattern of citizenship existing in Brazil both in the city and in the countryside”, as it was responsible for the introduction of instruments for universalization of social rights, as well as launching central elements for land reform.

It turns out that in Brazil, especially in the 1990s, there was, on the other hand, what Evelina Danigno (2004, p. 95) called the “perverse confluence” between the democratizing political project (which comes from the struggles for redemocratization of the country) and the implementation of the neoliberal project. On the one hand, there is a democratizing process, “[...] which is expressed in the creation of public spaces and the increasing participation of civil society in the discussion and decision-making processes related to public issues and policies,” whose formal milestone was

the 1988 Constitution. On the other hand, since the election of Fernando Collor in 1989, “[...] there is the emergence of a project for a minimum State that progressively exempts itself from its role as guarantor of rights by decreasing its social responsibilities and transferring them to civil society”, a project that corresponded to a global project of alignment with the “Washington Consensus”, whose ideas were based on the models of neoliberal societies.

The perversity lies precisely in the fact that, even pointing in opposite directions, both projects converge on the need for “[...] *an active and propositional civil society*” (DAGNINO, 2004, p. 95-97). And from this comes the need for caution regarding the exaltation of this new participatory paradigm of the expansion of citizenship, as these concepts can support projects with contrary purposes, especially considering the banality with which they are currently used.

This is why it is essential to deal with “political participation” as a collective action of the rural people under the focus of an action identified with the political struggle undertaken in the Brazilian rural area.

In the Brazilian countryside, there is little room for the idealism of citizen participation. The history of peasant movements in Brazil has always been marked by the often open and violent struggle against the established order:

Due to the challenge posed by these peasant movements against the established order, José de Souza Martins states that “few know and realize that the Brazilian peasantry is the only social class that, since the proclamation of the Republic, has had a repeated direct experience of military confrontation with the Army: in Canudos, in Contestado, and in a different way in Trombas and Formoso; or else, an experience of direct intervention by the Army in the uprising in southwestern Paraná, in the Northeast Region, and more recently in the peasant conflicts in Araguaia-Tocantins” (COMPARATO, 2003, p. 48).

The capacity of these oppressed populations for uprising is notorious:

The fact that, until recently, the oppressed populations of the countryside did not have the means to consciously situate themselves politically and economically in order to devise a strategy for changing the situation, however, does not mean that they have not been able to rise against the precarious living conditions they were forced to endure, even if these uprisings had to be mediated by messianic movements or religious experiences (COMPARATO, 2003, p. 46).

The violent repression of the peasants’ manifestations of revolt is the answer given by the ruling classes, who were able to see in them a potential for transformation:

The ruling classes, however, were never mistaken as to the revolutionary potential of these occasional displays of dissatisfaction, always pointing to the danger of contamination of other segments of society. This may be the explanation for the fact that the revolting movements in the countryside have always been firmly fought against (COMPARATO, B. K., 2003, p. 46).

According to José de Souza Martins (1993, p. 32), violence is geared at undermining the organizational capacity and political expression of the rural population, maintaining a situation of duplicity, placing them outside the historical process. Therefore, there is a violent reaction when there are manifestations of struggle of the rural people for their rights, since

[...] by occupying land or staying on land, they also invade the political space of local power, escape personal domination and fear of the potentate of the place, and violate the foundations of power, that is, in other words, threatening the ownership of the land means affecting the economic and political power of the landed oligarchies (MARTINS, 1993, p. 32, 91).

And violence in the countryside is not only directed against those who struggle for land and reform, but also manifests itself in the daily lives of rural workers who submit to exploitative relations that correspond to the “[...] traditional mode of relationship between workers and farmer owners, based on the personal power of the latter, an unequal relationship of command and obedience and not, in the foreground, a contractual relationship between equals” (MARTINS, 1994, p. 61).

The configuration taken on by the Brazilian countryside as a place of oppression and the suspension of fundamental rights and guarantees makes the establishment of democracy enormously difficult. Moreover, the struggles undertaken in the countryside are often struggles for already formally established, but lacking in effectiveness, rights. Whether by land, land reform, or compliance with labor rights, these are all struggles for the effectiveness of existing rights. Via mobilization and land occupation, the rural social movements demand nothing more than the normative enforcement of the 1988 Constitution on the State and society (SAUER, 2010a). In other words, rural social movements are violently attacked by demanding compliance with the Constitution.

Thus, the political character of these movements is notorious, and it is inappropriate, according to José de Souza Martins (1993, p. 55) “[...] to classify the social movements of populations with these characteristics and who live under these conditions as pre-political. Because these allegedly pre-political movements actually proclaim the necessity of politics”.

Speaking about the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), Bruno Konder Comparato (2003, p. 24) highlights its political nature:

We consider that MST has constituted itself as a political player because it is a group capable of influencing public opinion and forcing the government to adopt certain measures that are of interest to it. In setting the agrarian policy, the government cannot fail to consider the reaction of this group, without risking a negative impact on its popularity. [...]

The novelty lies in the articulation that has been made from known tactics and elements, and in the political skill that the movement has shown in making allies in various segments of civil society. It is a different form of social claim for rights or, if we prefer, a new form of political action.

The political scientist (COMPARATO, 2003, p. 214-215) gives this performance an even stronger tone, later in his work, stating that, contrary to a supposed tradition of passivity of the Brazilian people, “[...] MST manages to organize, have political strength, and defy the constituted powers, never allowing Brazilian society to forget the existence of thousands of rural workers who have no land to cultivate”. And these movements, as political subjects, replace the relevance of the “rural” in the Brazilian political agenda (SAUER, 2010a, p. 28).

Marcelo Dias Varella (2002, p. 162) also gives prominence to the political force of MST’s performance, a movement capable of putting considerable pressure on the established powers:

[...] the Executive Branch is forced to undertake an agrarian reform process to meet social demands; the Legislative Branch (where the agrarian movement gains supporters with each election) drafts more socially advanced laws; and the Judicial Branch comes to view that the positive legal system is in favor of the whole social fabric, not a small number of individuals.

Maria da Glória Gohn also points MST out as a political player, because “[...] it gives quality to the social players that make up its bases by inserting them in a plan that goes beyond the struggle for access to land, which is the struggle for democracy, for equality against exclusion”. The author understands social movements in general as catalysts for changes in society, thus composing the national struggles for power, configuring themselves as social forces and part of the more general struggle for power in civil and political society (GOHN, 2000, p. 114, 167).

It is worth mentioning the authoritative opinion of Stédile and Fernandes (2000, p. 35-36) about the political nature of the movement:

MST was only able to survive because it managed to match private, corporate, and class interests. [...].

[...] [The political nature of the movement] has always been present since the beginnings of the organization. We had the understanding that the struggle for land and land reform, despite having a social basis in the peasantry, can only be carried on if it is part of the class struggle. From the beginning, we knew we were not fighting a land grabber. We were fighting a class, the large landowner class. That we were fighting not just to have the Earth Statute enforced, but fighting against a bourgeois State. Our enemies are the large landowners and the State, which does not democratize social relations in the countryside, does not take development into the countryside. That State is saturated with class interests. We believe that MST was able to understand and incorporate this political component in its ideology, in its doctrine.

It is interesting to highlight in the standing taken by the MST leadership that the struggle turns *against* the “bourgeois State”, which appears as one of the “enemies” of the movement. Stédile’s speech is from the year 2000, and we believe that, since then, there have been considerable changes at least in the Brazilian State’s attitude towards social causes, but it is clear that the movement saw the need to fight against type of State that did not at all help the cause of the countryside militants. A State that, as pointed out, neither democratized social relations nor promoted rural development, which makes it an enemy of popular causes.

It is known, on the other hand, that this view of these movements as political players has not always had reasonable acceptance in the media and among some governments. Stédile and Fernandes (2000, p. 36) also comment on this lack of understanding:

Of course, many people on both the right and left cannot correctly interpret this political nature of the movement. They easily simplify the political component as if it were just a partisan vocation. At various times in our history there have been claims that MST would become a political party. It was never on the agenda of MST to become a political party. But we also never gave up participating in the political life of the country.

Stédile and Fernandes (2000, p. 50) also state that it was the MST that crystallized the need for mass struggle:

“This assembly business of signed petitions to the government and hearings, that doesn’t solve anything,” was what we thought. It could even be a pedagogical learning for the masses, but if there was no mass struggle, agrarian reform would not move forward. We had been fighting for six years, and if it had worked so far, it was because the people had gotten involved. That was our experience.

Along those lines, José Carlos Garcia (2000, p. 171) interprets the MST performance as an act of civil disobedience:

Hence it can be said that the occupations and manifestations of MST tend to be nonviolent, or that violence is most often used reactively and with extremely moderate means when compared to those employed by the aggressors. [...] It is possible to characterize the ordinary performance of MST as a practice of acts of civil disobedience, which legitimizes its presence on the national scene in accordance with the Democratic Rule of Law and modern conceptions of democracy.

This leads, according to the author, to the understanding of disobedience as an element that is part of the democratic rule of law, which amounts to defending the struggle for the formation of a democratic culture and an understanding of the Constitution as something open, as an unfinished project (GARCIA, 2000, p. 172). This understanding of the Constitution as an open, unfinished project, matches the relevance of MST and other rural social movements of acting as interpreters of the constitutional text in a struggle for the rights enshrined in it.

Garcia (2000, p. 172) also equates the work of MST with its importance for democratic consolidation:

Only the strengthening of civil society and active citizenship can sustain a democratic notion of governability in times of uncertainty and transition, such as today. Therefore, the incorporation of collective subjects such as MST and the acknowledgment of their importance in democratic consolidation are part of the effort to resist the neoliberal governability theses and put forward a wider range of counterpowers capable of offensively building a different paradigm of practicing politics and the relationship between the State, the market, and civil society.

Regarding the struggles in the countryside, Sérgio Sauer points out that some authors have shown that they transcend the demand for land, constituting rather as a struggle for liberation and emancipation. These are struggles for survival, but they are not restricted to the economic aspect, as they include demands such as healthcare, education and justice, among others, and enable “social and political processes of recreating the countryside and a new rurality”. These are struggles against political exclusion, against social marginalization; they are eminently political struggles not just for land, but for citizenship and democracy. For the author, what is going on is a social process of “reinvention” of the countryside materialized as the struggle for land that, by adding new elements and outlooks, ends up creating a new rurality (SAUER, 2010a, p. 36-37).

In this process, the democratization of access to land has a central place:

[...] the democratization of access to land ownership – more than just a compensatory social policy to combat rural poverty – represents the possibility of building identities and citizenship in rural areas”, a struggle linked to a search for a place of opportunities and self-determination that is different from the urban space (SAUER, 2010a, p. 36-37).

Sauer (2010b, p. 43) links the landless people’s struggle to Michel Foucault’s idea of “heterotopies”, which amounts, in the rural reality of Brazil, to the construction of [...] *another qualitatively different place* of resistance to the territorialization process enforced by the agrarian model implemented in Brazil”. To better explain the Foucaultian concept, the author relates it to something like the existence of “counterplaces” in today’s society, which serve as a locus for questioning the space in which one lives. In the words of Sauer (2010a, p. 66, 69-70), “[...] they are singular spaces that oppose domination and spatial homogeneity. Places of resistance and freedom, built from perspectives and social relations that differ from the hegemonic domination of capital or imposed cultural values”. Heterotopia thus emerges as the possibility not of inventing an entirely different place, or a non-place, but to bring about a change of perspective from the center to the margins, with the struggle for alternatives being fought by those excluded and marginalized by the economic system.

Encampments, and later settlements, can be spaces for social reinvention, made up of “[...] different biographies in search of a place for life, work and citizenship” (SAUER, 2010b, p. 38), with experiences of struggle and access to land being driven by cultural, symbolic changes, in a process that produces new values and social representations, innovating rural perspectives.

This process can be identified by analyzing some settlers’ experiences. In an empirical research, Fabiana Severi (2012, p. 161-162) surveyed some of the changes resulting from the struggle through interviews with some settlers, pointing to the construction of a more complex view of politics, a better perception about the rights, with the acquisition of an active voice in the claims, and on the condition of the settlers as right-holders, in addition to greater equality between men and women, the feeling of belonging to a collectivity, and other things.

According to Severi (2012, p. 164), besides the manifestation of various forms of sociability and solidarity, there was the experimentation of public space as a place for claiming rights, a space that lost its private nature to gain “political density”, since it was occupied by subjects fighting for rights, not just for property.

Severi (2012, p. 185) exemplifies this substantial change in the understanding of rural workers regarding their standing as right-holders:

They have already mobilized in the settlement to gain rights they considered important. At Serra Azul City Hall, they demanded garbage collection and electricity, not through traditional clientelistic forms, but within the rules of the democratic game and the understanding of these assets as rights, and not favors to be offered by the government.

Cléria Botelho da Costa (2002, p. 151, emphasis added) also stresses the fact that rural workers are not satisfied with obtaining land; they claim for better working and production conditions, and a more egalitarian society:

The historical experience of MST shows that even after the Government (via Incra) vests them in the possession of the land they occupy, the landless confirm that the struggle is not over, as we can see from the reports from the workers: *we now want the mayor to provide a school for our children to study*; or, *We want the mayor to open a road for our produce to leave here.*

Costa (2002, p. 150) understands that these and other narratives reveal that citizenship for members of MST is not restricted to established rights, such as the right to land; it goes beyond that, in a search for rights that they see as part of the struggle process itself, incorporating rights whose daily practice gives them importance. And this means that MST goes beyond the liberal concept of citizenship, taking the struggle beyond the rights attached to this paradigm.

Severi (2012) concluded that there is a confrontation among encampers and settlers between the ideological content of the discourse of neutrality of modern law and the divergences and ambiguities that exist between the guidelines of State bodies, and this stance made it possible to expand the meaning of some fundamental rights that are only formally guaranteed in current democracies. This changes the perception of rights and the state through political praxis.

The struggles bring about a change even in the language of those involved in them, with the “appropriation of political contents” that comes from the struggle for liberation itself and from the relations lived in the sociability spaces they belong to (encampments and settlements) (SEVERI, 2012). There is the abandonment of “[...] speech as a set of loose sentences” to become the elaboration of a political language through which the wants suffered can be “re-signified in terms of rights and guarantees” (SEVERI, 2012, p. 191).

It is believed that an adequate notion of democracy (unlike the current liberal democracy) fits in with the attempt to maintain this political language acquired in the social struggle, a struggle that can creatively hint at the model of open democracy, causing a change in reality to take place through the exercise of sovereign power by the people of the countryside.

The democratic regime that is open to creativity and popular will, and which must have the institutional openness necessary to enable the transformation of the people's wishes into rights, guarantees, and public policies that enable the realization of these same rights, seems to be the appropriate regime for the continuity of social struggles and the consequent formation of a democratic culture that will not allow participation toward the ongoing expansion of rights and the continuous reorientation of the Democratic State in social change to cool down.

3 THE CONTINUITY OF THE STRUGGLE

However, it must be borne in mind that the risk of losing this acquired political "language" is real, since "[...] in the long run, the strength of the integration and desensitization mechanisms of the managed societies will act brutally in favor of forgetting the achieved language" (SEVERI, 2012, p. 193-194).

In Severi's opinion (2012, p. 193), the antidote against the loss of militancy could be "[...] the permanent and living exercise of language in the collective spaces of the settlement and in the spaces outside the settlement, in a collective way", which necessarily calls for the construction of a radically democratic culture to receive permanent incentives for its propagation.

A substantial concept of agrarian reform (POSSAS, 2014) comes handy toward firmly establishing – in the perspective of the political struggle – that the settlement is an important achievement, but is not the final destination of all mobilization. Enabling the settlement calls for a wide variety of public policies that will give substance to the ideals of the settlers, and will make up the entire framework of the reform. And then, the struggle continues, precisely as regards the decisions about these policies that will make up the agrarian reform. The struggle continues toward overcoming the prevailing paradigm, that is, the paradigm of vertically establishing reform plans that suit the political elites and do not take popular aspirations into account.

Sérgio Sauer (2010a, p. 94) proposes an interesting differentiation between struggle for the land and land reform. That author says that “[...] it is important to make clear that land reform is, quintessentially, a State policy. Unlike the struggle for land (a popular action), the very notion of land reform is linked to the role and responsibilities of the State”. This differentiation is clear, easily assimilated, but needs a necessary complement: reform and the struggle for land must be intertwined with the configuration of democracy, especially with regard to the Brazilian rural environment, obviously, but having direct implications for the country as a whole.

Sauer himself (2010a, p. 96) highlights this aspect and the need for this approach:

[...] land reform – far beyond a public policy implemented only to fulfill the right of access to land – must be combined with the struggle for the land (social mobilization) as an autonomous action of full participation that consequently enables people to become subjects of their own history.

And rural social movements play a major role in this overlapping when they come up in the public arena and brings out popular protagonism and the sovereignty of the people, and act in demarcating public policies (citizen action), in addition to demanding the realization of the fundamental rights of the inhabitants of the countryside – which rights are systematically disrespected –, an action that revitalizes the concept of democracy by redeeming two of its essential assumptions: popular sovereignty and respect for human rights (SAUER, 2010a, p. 122-123). And, on the other hand, it represents the continuity of the struggle that does not end with the settlement. The political struggle climbs to a new level, involves new rights and demands, but participation persists in the social construction of the new reality. The continuation of the struggle implies the definition of subsequent public policies responsible for enabling the settlements. And it goes much further.

CONCLUSION

“The buds of pain and revolt were growing in that red crop of blood and hunger; the time had come for the harvest.”

Jorge Amado (1987, p. 335).

This text argues for redeeming popular sovereignty as the central pillar of contemporary democracy. It is pertinent (even more so when the

reflection is focused on the Brazilian countryside). For that purpose, the formulation consecrated by Fábio Konder Comparato (1989) that points to the need to think about this sovereignty in terms of a “sovereignty of the poor” stands out. The jurist argues the need to move away from Aristotle’s distinction between democracy and oligarchy, the former being the government of the poor, while the latter is led by the wealthy, and openly opting for the sovereignty of the poor.

Comparato claims two reasons for this choice: on the one hand, the excluded, those who do not own property and have no economic power, have the biggest interest in establishing an egalitarian regime, where access to power, culture, leisure, production, and consumption are equally available to all, and play the subversive role of transformation of society. Secondly, bearing in mind that the poor are the actual majority of the general population, it is only fair to attribute a sovereign role to this contingent. Beyond any idealistic reductionism, this sovereignty must also imply the possibility of direct intervention in the functioning mechanisms of the state. The consecration of this principle is not enough; it also requires the organization of society to effectively exercise this power (COMPARATO, 1989).

This option for changing the dynamics of power, especially in its rural manifestation, where large landowners and the state violate the peasants in their fundamental rights, is the central aspect developed in the present work. And this redistribution of power can only be accomplished through the exercise of sovereign power by the excluded, the exploited.

The idea, therefore, of “sovereignty of the poor” gains great relevance when considered for the rural situation. Only by being sovereignly present in the public arenas will this exploited contingent be able to make their rights provided for in law – and others not yet formalized ones – socially effective.

And here it is no longer just about pushing for an agenda, as commonly advocated by liberal writers. Pushing is of extreme relevance, no doubt. Without MST’s efforts, for instance, the “agrarian problem” with its lack of democracy in the countryside, would be even more deplorable. But the issue goes beyond pushing, and includes also fighting for a material democracy marked by openness, changeability, a continuous reinventing of itself as a regime, as a democratic society (as in Claude Lefort’s theorizing, 2011). This “indomesticability” (in the Lefortian sense) would be something positive in shaping new realities. And who would be at the head of this

self-reinventing society, which breaks out of its cell to bring about the democratic revolution, and that frontally attacks its most grotesque evils, such as poverty, but the people? Those people who, in the countryside, as shown, have an old heritage of struggles and resistances against violence, neglect, and omission.

Slavoj Žižek (2008) expressly points out that the primary task of the 21st century is to politicize the excluded people. He refers specifically to those who live in slums, but the idea is fully applicable to the excluded who live in the countryside:

If the main task of 19th-century emancipatory politics was to break away from the monopoly of bourgeois liberals by politicizing the working class, and if the task of the 20th century was to politically awaken the immense rural population of Asia and Africa, the main task of the century 21 is to politicize – organize and discipline – the “unstructured masses” of those who live in slums. If we ignore this problem of the excluded, all other antagonisms lose their subversive bias.

And the rural workers have diverse social movements that can carry out this task of politicization. As argued above, MST already satisfactorily performs this role among rural workers, and the prospect is that this struggle will continue even after the settlement conquest stage has been achieved. Every organization, politicization, and history of struggle of the rural movements are prime factors for the popular struggle in the countryside.

In short, the struggle against the power of the land is a struggle for democracy, against oppression, against exploitation, a respect for fundamental rights and the political protagonism of the people. The demands all fit perfectly into the democratic spectrum that entails – it can never be stressed enough – also the widening of the limits of the “possible”. Only through this democratic struggle can the agrarian problem be settled.

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