

Susanne Käss: Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST). Between Chance, Chaos, and Criticism of the System

Brazil is a country of enormous social differences. The unequal distribution of property is especially dramatic in rural areas, where the elite has always been interested in preserving the status quo, and where almost all endeavours to implement an agrarian reform have failed so far. When, in the mid-eighties, the military dictatorship ended and the country opened up, numerous new social movements began to seek a solution of the problem. The most important of these is the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST; English: Landless workers' movement). Having become an influential factor in Brazil by now, the landless workers' movement regularly interferes in the country's politics and enjoys great popularity with many Brazilians. Yet extreme forms of action, such as occupying farmed estates and public buildings, a backward-looking ideology, and the vision of building a socialist society also incite resistance and justify a critical analysis.

The unequal distribution of land in Brazil goes back to the colonial era, when the land occupied by the European conquerors was divided into *capitanias hereditárias* and given to the nobility. The *regime de sesmarias* was introduced to enforce an all-encompassing colonisation which, due to the sheer size of the administered land, promoted a structure of large estates which could be utilised productively only to a small extent. While the country's first land law of 1850 did provide for the purchase of land, prices were still much too high for small farmers and freed slaves, so that the large holdings were not in serious danger. Only in Brazil's south, where European immigrants settled to secure the borders, were there fewer large estates.

The social obligations of ownership introduced in 1946 created the legal basis for a land reform. However, when President João Goulart took up the issue in 1964, announcing massive expropriations without financial compensation, he triggered a military coup. To abolish both the *latifúndios* and the *minifúndios*, the military decreed a land statute which said that, by utilising it appropriately, the land should support not only its owners but also the families of the labourers working on it. However, as the military government was especially interested in modernising Brazil's agriculture, the statute never took full effect. When the country opened up politically, the MST formed together with its opponent, the *União Democrática Ruralista* (UDR), both of them playing a key role in embedding the agrarian reform in the constitution in 1988.

The executive body of the reform is the agrarian reform authority, INCRA, which is currently subordinated to the Ministry of Rural Development founded in 2000. The task of the INCRA is to locate land which does not perform its social function, to expropriate it, and to give it to the landless to live in so-called *assentamentos*. In practice, however, the MST and other movements occupy unproductive land where they set up unauthorised *assentamentos* in order to put pressure on the state.

The MST came into being in the late seventies when, supported by the Catholic Church, agricultural workers first occupied land in Rio Grande do Sul. By 1984, the movement had established itself at the national level and only a few years later, at the time of the constituent assembly, its actions showed clearly violent features. The fact that the military police murdered several landless farmers in the mid-nineties initiated a wave of solidarity with the MST's objectives, thus putting the government under extra pressure to go ahead with the agrarian reform. However, the policy of president Cardoso, under whom the reform made considerable progress, resulted in a loss of popularity for the MST which increased further during the first years of the Lula government.

To the MST, ideology plays an important role: It regards access to land and the agrarian reform as the first steps on the path towards establishing another, socialist society which will leave the current

political system of imperfect democracy behind. The movement disapproves of the export economy, arguing that entrepreneurs will export only those things with which they can make a lot of money. Meanwhile, the enemy image has changed: While in the early stages of the movement its opponents were the *latifúndio* and the *latifúndario*, the MST is now fighting against agrobusiness, that is in more concrete terms, the IMF, the WTO, the World Bank, and the projected free trade area, ALCA.

The MST consists of three units – a political, an operative, and a legal unit. The political unit is composed of authorities and sectors: The former set the political course of the movement, while the latter are the authorities' fields of activity. Once a decision has been made, it will be implemented by the operative units, the secretariats. The associations which function as legal bodies are the ANCA at the national level, the AECAs at the state level, and the ARCAs at the regional level. At first glance, the structure of the MST appears democratic, yet none of the decision-makers is elected publicly, being appointed by established functionaries for their political loyalty and obedience. Certain sociologists take the view that, with their patronising behaviour towards the landless, the leading elites of the MST really copy the same social power balance they are pretending to fight so vehemently.

The movement's basic strategy to enforce its own interests is to occupy land. Since, despite the institutionalisation of the agrarian reform, the state does not take the initiative, almost all settlements of the landless are situated on land that was occupied by the MST, with the leadership of the movement selecting the estates. By now, this strategy has become quite radical: Occupations of public buildings, banks, and productive land occur every day.

However, there are positive aspects as well: The fact that the agrarian reform is still an issue of political discussion in the country is inarguably the biggest achievement of the MST. Moreover, it may be credited for the results the reform itself has achieved so far. Today, the rural population knows its rights and no longer lives in a lawless environment. The movement contributed to this development as much as it did to changing the rural structures by democratising the community level. Many people who were unemployed and marginalised are now active citizens who, although not rich, are able to support themselves.

It is beyond doubt that the process of agrarian reform involves difficulties which are caused by both the MST and the state: On the one hand, the agrarian reform initiated and still postulated by the movement is based on the concept of *latifúndio improdutivo*, which was developed within the context of the reform endeavours of the sixties but has by now become obsolete as the causes of unproductiveness today differ widely from those back then. On the other hand, the state which, in fact, is in charge of implementing the agrarian reform merely responds to the pressure of the movement, which does not exercise any special care in selecting either the land or the beneficiaries, thus keeping the reform from working efficiently. What should also be mentioned is that there are two competing ministries of agriculture which are in charge of a *política agrícola* and a *política agrária*. With their actions, these two ministries paralyse one another, thus rendering a holistic consideration of the problem impossible.

The current concept of the agrarian reform is problematic in several respects, so that other options are needed. An attempt at implementing a different kind of agrarian reform was launched as early as 1977 in the Programa Piloto Cédula da Terra, which was co-financed by the World Bank and provided for loans and consultation for poor farmers to contain violence and conflicts over land. Graziano da Silva suggested yet another agrarian reform, not primarily agricultural: The idea was that the beneficiaries should combine agricultural and non-agricultural activities in, for example, ecotourism, so that a farmer would be working part-time as a parking attendant or tourist guide.

And finally, Xico Graziano is striving for an agrarian reform which uses improved credit schemes to promote small farmers who already own some land, rather than the landless.

The key objective of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra is to establish a fairer society. However, a critical analysis of its action strategies is justified. The hopes of many Brazilians have become a pawn in the hands of the MST and its leading elites. The movement talks about democracy but condemns dissidents, calling them servants of neoliberalism. If the discussion about a democratic society is to bear fruit, no double standards may be applied.