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Brazil's landless movement and rights 'from below'

Recent literature has recognised the value of food sovereignty and human rights frameworks in agrarian struggles. Relatively little attention has gone toward how agrarian movements develop and apply their own rights discourses to further demands for social justice. This study considers Brazil's landless movement (MST) between 1984 and 1995, revealing three distinct rights discourses that recruited and mobilised protest by linking local issues to the movement's broader political project. The findings illustrate the value of rights, frames and ideology as analytical tools, shedding light on how movement-generated rights emerge through processes of reflexivity and in response to dynamic social-political contexts.

Key words: agrarian movements, human rights, frames, ideology, food sovereignty, neoliberalism

1. Agrarian movements and rights

In recent years, claims to food sovereignty rights and the human rights framework have been at the forefront of discussions about the role and value of rights in contemporary agrarian struggles (Wittman, 2011; Monsalve, 2013; Claeys, 2012; 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Meszaros, 2007; 2013). Scholars have highlighted the value of movement actors' resorting to the rights framework, as well as to associated legal instruments and mechanisms. These rights claims, which are intended to be applicable across jurisdictions, can provide a common language for national and transnational networking and advocacy, redraw the boundaries between what is considered just and unjust (Claeys, 2015), and help bring pressure to bear on intransigent governments through reporting mechanisms and domestic courts (Monsalve, 2013). Activists have claimed rights through political as well as legal strategies, including land occupations, demonstrations, and litigation. As characteristic features of contemporary agrarian struggles, rights have been identified as offering promise for advancing the interests of the rural poor globally (Monsalve, 2013).

Relatively little attention, however, has gone toward considering how agrarian movements develop and apply their own rights discourses to further their demands for social justice. Here, we make a distinction with frameworks of wide application, such as food sovereignty and human rights, and refer to 'rights discourses' to mean the sets of strategic, ideologically-informed *collective action frames* employed by movement leaders or 'framers' that reformulate people's issues, needs and grievances in *rights terms*, and which are then used as a basis for mobilisation and claim making. These rights discourses may be grounded in particular worldviews and ideologies, being too narrow and particular to constitute generic or globally-transferable rights 'master frames' (Benford, 2013; Snow and Benford, 1992) but sufficient for mobilising adherents around specific causes. Appeals to these rights discourses can mean that human rights and other normative frameworks such as food sovereignty may at times occupy only a peripheral place in agrarian movement activism. As set out in the following sections, this was the case for Brazil's Landless Movement (MST) over the period 1984-1995.

Many leftist movements have had an ambiguous relationship with rights. Marx famously wrote off human rights as an ideology of class rule and as a mechanism for sustaining

class power, and more recent descriptions have positioned rights and the human rights movement as companions to the neoliberal order (Moyn, 2011; 2015). The ‘emancipatory edge’ of rights also falls under the microscope when the language of rights is picked up and incorporated into the development policy and practice of international agencies like the World Bank and organisations that ‘do’ rural development. However, in recent years scholars have begun drawing on history and social and political theory to re-examine the contemporary and historical relationship between rights, social movements and activism (O’Connell, 2018; Baxi 2000; 2008; Stammers, 2003; Belden Fields, 2003; Douzinas, 2000; Filho, 1990; Santos, 2002; van Isschot, 2015). Neil Stammers (2003, 299) for instance, in re-examining several historical cases including the levellers and the diggers in England and the Haitian Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, contends that some of the important innovations in the development of human rights ‘were initially constructed and articulated as challenges to relations and structures of power.’ Rights are understood as social processes developed and made meaningful in movement activism as attempts to render power visible (Stammers, 2003; 2009). Other scholars have focused on ontological questions and conceptual linkages between rights and movements, such as Belden Fields (2003) who sees rights emerge in struggles against various forms of domination in favour of particular resources and practices as well as identities. Also notable is the work of Brazilian jurist Roberto Lyra Filho (1990; 2003; also Sousa Junior, 2011) which identified the content of law with historical struggles for emancipation – the so-called ‘law found on the street’, that became the title of a series of courses run by the University of Brasilia on themes that include health, women’s rights, and agrarian law.

Our approach to rights ‘from below’ considers the treatment of rights within the MST, in terms of the rights discourses employed by the leadership. These rights discourses informed, shaped and guided the social and political activity of movement members. We have access to these through the movement’s monthly journal, *Jornal dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (JST), which served as an important channel of communication from the leadership to movement members. As such, we take how activists, leaders, committees and intellectuals in the MST constructed rights to illustrate rights ‘from below’. We recognise, however, that while such discourses are taken to be representative of movements (Johnston 2013), movement heterogeneity and diversity in political views, social classes and identities can mean this is not always the case (Edelman and Borrás, 2016; Caldeira, 2008; Wolford, 2007; 2010; DeVore, 2015).

With this in mind, the next section examines the literature on rights, frames and ideologies. This social movement literature provides a set of conceptual tools that are useful for studies of agrarian movements like the MST. Following this, we provide a brief background to the MST and present our case study. We focus on the period 1984-1995, a time when the MST had a strong rights language but viewed the law with scepticism as a tool for social change (Meszaros, 2007). We identify the main rights claims as well as the contexts, background and circumstances in which they emerged. We also explicate the content of MST rights claims and illustrate how that content shifted over the 11-year period. By looking at how rights are discussed and developed and emerge as claims made by various actors, we can better understand the role of rights as a ‘modality of protest’ (van Isschot 2015, 14) in the politics of agrarian movements. We conclude by discussing the main findings, reflecting on the relationship between rights claims and ideology, linkages between rights and notions of ‘struggle’, and the importance of social-political context.

2. Rights, frames and ideologies

Rights may be used as a way of articulating or *framing* issues, needs and grievances for movement adherents to mobilise around (Goffman, 1974; Benford and Snow, 2000; Westby, 2002). Social movement scholars have identified an important role that social movement actors play when they ‘frame, or assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists’ (Snow and Benford, 1988, 198). As analytical tools, frames and framing have been used for the study of agrarian movements and contentious politics (Wolford, 2010; O’Brien and Lianjiang, 2006; Peña, 2016; Wittman, 2009; Mason, 2004; Caldeira, 2004; Kowalchuk, 2005; Claeys, 2012; Rothman and Oliver, 1999; Hammond, 2004). Frames identify what should be looked at, what is important and give an idea of what is going on (Johnston, 2002; Benford and Snow, 2000; Gamson, 2013; Snow, 2012). Rather than being fixed and static, frames ‘are continuously being constituted, contested, reproduced, transformed and/or replaced during the course of social movement activity’ (Benford and Snow 2000, 628).

Frames are also closely linked to movement ideology (Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow, 2004; Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Westby, 2002; Johnston and Noakes, 2005). For Benford and Snow (2000), a movement's ideology may serve as a ‘cultural resource’ for frames and framing activities. Ideologies consist of values, beliefs and goals, and collective action frames succeed where they are able to articulate and amplify these alongside events and actor's experiences (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow, 2004). Westby (2002: 291) outlines some ways in which frames and ideology interlink in practice. He advances a narrower view of ideology as the ‘dominant discourse of a movement... a relatively elaborated code or doctrine that is the charter or template defining the movement itself and which exists only in the identities of its adherents.’ He suggests a recasting of framing to one of *strategic discourse* derived from a movement's strategic priorities and movement ideology. Frames or ‘strategic discourse’ may be derivative of ideology, but they may also be suppressed or made remote by it, or may even step outside of ideological boundaries. Much like frames, movement ideology is not usually static because there are often internal struggles over ideology within movements, and collaboration between groups and movements can involve ideological variants (Westby, 2002). Moreover, there may be disagreements over aspects of ideology, and some movements may weave disparate ideological components together.

Framing a matter in terms of rights is to provide a particular angle or perspective on a problem (Oliver and Johnston, 2002; Monsalve, 2013; Claeys, 2014b). The benefits and limitations of rights framings in the context of agrarian contention has been discussed elsewhere (Monsalve, 2013; Claeys, 2014b), but some additional points are worth mentioning. As a modality of protest, rights do several things. They discursively shift people experiencing the problem from needs-bearers into rights holders, placing a justice lens over frustrated needs (Claeys, 2014b). Unmet needs are recast as forms of deprivation and non-recognition in which other actors such as the state, corporations and local powerholders are implicated. Rights usually count on some conception of solidarity, either in the form of universal claims on account of being human or more exclusive, collective claims that are grounded in the social positions of particular groups, such as ‘indigenous’, ‘peasants’ and so on. When rights are employed in movement framing they typically incentivise members and potential supporters to become active rights claimants. They confer inward duties to participate in movement activities such as signing a petition, joining a demonstration or engaging in civil disobedience. In underlining the improper,

inadequate or even non-existent actions and behaviours of other actors, movements employing rights typically advocate in favour of alternative actions and behaviours and press these ‘duties’ upon the implicated actors. Examples include demands on the state to provide more protection for environmental activists, or to reduce rural poverty through land reform.

Rights norms can form part of an overarching rights ‘master frame’ that is generic and ‘wider in scope and influence’ than everyday social movement frames, and which allow multiple meanings and interpretations to operate within them (Benford, 2013, 2; Polletta, 2000; Valocchi, 1996; Benford, 2013). Social movements employ these types of frame which are based on constitutional or global human rights norms, interpreting them in relation to the needs and circumstances of their communities and bringing them into their struggles (De Feyter, 2006; Polletta, 2000; Benford, 2013; Valocchi, 1996). Movement leaders may typically play a role in translating global – and even constitutional – norms into the local vernacular, as ‘knowledge brokers between culturally distinct social worlds’ (Merry 2006, p.38). Global norms are also sometimes appealed to in repressive contexts, or where states have a poor record in protecting rights generally (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Edelman, 2008; Tuong, 2009).

These particular studies hinge on cases where constitutional or universal human rights are employed. But what about movements which do not draw explicitly or entirely on universal rights? Claeys (2012; 2014a) borrows the master frame concept to examine how the transnational social movement La Via Campesina (LVC) has developed a global rights discourse that goes beyond universal or constitutional rights. For Claeys, study of the rights discourse of the movement points to the deployment of ‘a powerful ‘rights master frame’’ (Claeys 2014a: 2) for bringing movements across the globe together in favour of advancing new rights claims directed toward ‘fight[ing] neoliberalism and capitalism in agriculture’ (Claeys 2012: 847). In LVC, these rights figured in the evolving nature of the movement’s struggle, from its narrowly focused campaign for land reform in the 1990s and early 2000s to its broader agenda for land and territory (Edelman and Borrás, 2016; Rosset, 2013). LVC presented these rights in its ‘Declaration of Peasant Rights – Men and Women’ in 2008, and has remained engaged in efforts to have these rights recognised at the international level. Much like how human rights are adopted, adapted and brought into local struggles, national agrarian movements have incorporated the LVC claims to food sovereignty and the rights of small farmers and people living in rural areas back into their local activities. At the same time, the heterogeneity of LVC and power differentials between movement members that has meant some groups, such as Brazil’s MST, have acquired more influence than others in shaping the global rights discourse and campaigns around land, citizenship, sovereignty and so on over the course of the 1990s (Hochstetler et al., 2013; Borrás et al., 2008; Baletti et al., 2008; Edelman, 2011; 2008).

3. Case study

We consider the rights discourse of the MST over the period 1984-1995 which linked individual issues, needs and grievances to a broader, collective political project for social change. It is a period during which there was a gradual shift in the MST from a focus on localised rights claims to claims that accord more closely with LVC’s ‘master frame’ in the middle of the 1990s. During this period, the movement was still placing emphasis on collective action without the strategic resort to legal instruments or transnational rights discourses. As Meszaros (2007: 9-10) observes, the MST held a largely ‘conservative’ and ‘defensive’ position in relation to the law at this time. The class character of law and

its inability to deliver social change led it to be viewed ‘with a mixture of hostility and suspicion, or at best an afterthought’, with ‘conflict and contention’ viewed instead as the primary vehicle through which to pursue social change. The transition towards a more ‘offensive’ position involving the strategic use of legal instruments occurred gradually over the course of the 1990s and involved raising important constitutional issues such as around the legitimacy of occupation. By the end of the decade the MST was “highly conversant with a range of legal issues” (Meszaros, 2013: 162).

The movement passed through three phases between 1984-1995 (Fernandes, 2008): the ‘gestation’ phase, which refers to the organising among rural networks and groups set up in late 1970s and early 1980s with the support of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT)¹ and from which the formal movement emerged in 1984; the ‘consolidation’ phase lasting over the remainder of the 1980s during which the movement could expand in the context of democratic transition, widened political space and the forging of alliances with other civil society actors and new engagements with the state; and the ‘institutionalisation’ phase where the movement faced limits on its expansion, switching instead to focus on strengthening its presence in existing regions, improving the internal organisation of agrarian reform settlements and building its cooperative system. The institutionalisation phase occurred at the same time the country was undergoing neoliberal reform.

3.1. Methodology

The MST's rights discourse over an 11-year period was analysed, from 1984 to 1995, as it appeared in JST. The journal is an important mobilising resource through which the movement leadership communicate with members and guide activism. It is produced by MST leaders and is intended primarily for internal circulation on movement encampments and settlements, where a JST custodian (*zelador do jornal*) is supposed to read, distribute, and discuss the content with members (JST, 1986a; Fernandes, 1987).² JST summarises the month's news and stories, and it prints leadership declarations, resolutions, opinion pieces, and lines of action made during meetings and congresses. In later years JST also began publishing similar documents and articles concerning La Via Campesina and other social movements. It is also replete with interviews, many of which are made with key social movement figures and political figures.

JST was published monthly over the period 1984 to 1995, with a few exceptions in its early years. The selection of JST editions for analysis was based on a random sampling of 6 JST editions per year. An analysis of every edition for the period would have been preferable, though the amount of material analysed is satisfactory for an in-depth understanding. 1984 marks the formal creation of the movement while the second half of the 1980s covers the political-economic context of democratic transition, and, subsequently, neoliberal turn and decline of the developmental state from the 1990s onwards. In total, 66 editions were analysed for a period covering 11 years. Access to JST

¹ The CPT is an organ of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) and was formed in 1975 as a tool of the Church for promoting social justice and human rights in rural Brazil (Poletto, 2008).

² While the presence of the *zelador do jornal* is noted in the JST and Fernandes (1987), the extent to which *zeladors* were operational and effective between 1984 and 1995 remains an open and interesting research question that would merit investigation.

was provided through Armazem Memória, an organisation which makes available online digital documents that concern topics of citizenship and human rights.

Wendy Wolford (2010: 94) notes of JST that it is ‘a site where movement activists and leaders actively engage in the production of meaning and movement discourse... Many of the MST's contentions... are strategic and presented as much more simplistic than they play out in practice.’ The JST samples were read intensively in chronological order over a period of a month and were analysed qualitatively (Johnston, 1995; 2002; 2013). Articles were categorised according to type (editorials, letters, news, columns, and so on) and general themes were identified (rural violence, occupations, economy etc.). JST articles and content with explicit references to ‘rights’ were coded for values, beliefs and attitudes, with emerging codes compared with those collected from previous data. At the same time, aspects of the broader social and political environment that JST editions gave considerable attention to (elections, rising rural violence, policies, other movements etc.) were examined for whether and how they contextualised or clarified emerging codes. This led to the formulation of an elaborate chronology for the 11-year period alongside sets of categories and themes that connected to it.

4. The rights discourses of the MST

Analysis of MST discourse between 1984 and 1995 suggests the presence of at least three different rights discourses over the period. These can be categorised as: the theological, the socialist and the cosmopolitan. Land and land-related rights claims were packaged and articulated in these forms. These discourses are identified as dominant themes that rise and fall along a continuum: the period 1984-1989 is characterised by the steady decline of the theological discourse and the rise of a socialist discourse, while the period after 1989 is characterised by the emergence of a more cosmopolitan rights discourse. These three discourses are summarised in Table 1.

The theological discourse saw claims articulated in terms of divine rights, reflecting the close proximity between the movement and the Catholic Church at the beginning of the period in question. Land was described as having been given by God to his people, and the MST's struggle to reclaim and share the land was considered divine providence for the attainment of global social justice (JST, 1984a; 1985c 1987a; 1987b). Three claims directly concerned land in this early period: 1) the ‘right to land’, which posited that God had granted his people this right; 2) the ‘right to produce’, which meant those who possessed land had the right to derive sustenance from it; and 3) the ‘right to occupy’ which meant that the landless were entitled to occupy a piece of land and claim it as theirs on account of their being denied their rights to land and to produce. All three were requirements for the construction and existence of a socially-just ‘Kingdom of God’ (JST, 1987a).

The democratic transition between 1985 and 1990 constitutes the second historical-political period. In 1985 José Sarney became the first civil President of Brazil after 21 years of military dictatorship. This marked the birth of the New Republic and the beginning of a democratic transition. With widened political space and a resurgence of the political left, the MST came to engage with the state and power-holders in more confrontational terms, allying closely with urban-based labour organisations, notably the Workers' Party (PT) and the Unified Workers' Central (CUT). In this context, the struggle

of the MST was cast as a struggle for democracy and citizenship, with claims to land, to produce and to occupy increasingly defined in secular rather than divine terms. In the second half of the 1980s the theological, ideological base of the movement was supplanted by a socialist base, and the secular land and land-related claims now underpinned a new, more inclusive notion of 'agrarian citizenship' put forth by the MST.

With Brazil's neoliberal turn in the 1990s and the decline of developmental state, the struggle of the MST broadened to one that challenged the idea that neoliberalism was in society's best interest. The movement positioned itself against the powerful new agribusiness actors that were appearing in the Brazilian countryside, articulating claims to land and to produce in terms of struggles for sovereignty and national self-determination. The emergence of new needs and democratic deficits in the New Republic were identified with economic liberalisation and globalisation, and as processes which affected all of Latin America, and not just Brazil. This period can be characterised as one that marked the beginning of the movement's alignment to the La Via Campesina 'master frame'. We will look at each of these framings and their development over the 11-year period, 1984-1995.

Table 1: three rights discourses of the MST, 1984-1995.

	Theological	Socialist	Cosmopolitan
Historical-political context	'abertura', towards democratic transition (1984) and democratic transition (1985-1989)	democratic transition (1985-1989)	neoliberal turn and abandonment of developmental state (1990+)
Rights articulation	Divine, God-given rights	Secular, agrarian citizenship rights	cosmopolitan, agrarian citizenship rights
Ideological base	liberation theology	socialism	cosmopolitanism, 'counter-hegemonic globalisation'
Ideal society	'Kingdom of God'	socialist democracy	sovereign, democratic developmental state
Key movement struggles	land, agrarian reform	land, agrarian reform, democracy, citizenship	land, agrarian reform, sovereignty
Identity and agency	'God's people', landless sons and daughters of Southern farmers	citizen-worker, class struggle	cosmopolitan, peoples and nations affected by neoliberal globalisation
Main antagonists	military government and the state, large estate owners	transitional government and the state, large estate owners, UDR paramilitaries	government, state, large estate owners, industrial agriculture, multi-national corporations, international financial institutions
Movement development	'gestation', 'consolidation'	'territorialisation', 'consolidation'	'territorialisation', 'institutionalisation'

4.1. Theological: divine rights and liberation theology (1984-1989)

Early rights framings drew on the ideas liberation theology, reflecting the close proximity between the Church and rural activists in the years leading up to the MST's founding. The antecedents of the movement's theological base were located in the ideology of the progressive church, particularly the CPT, which was formed in 1975 as a tool of the Church for promoting social justice in rural Brazil. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the CPT had organised small farmers as part of the new unionism movement which sought to challenge government control of farmers' organisations (Campigoto, 2006; Poletto, 2008). The suspension of political and civil rights and the repression of rural movements during the 1960s and 1970s had reduced the political space for mobilisation and activism during the dictatorship years (1964-1985), leading rural activists to mobilise through the Church as a 'refuge for resistance' (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 6; Houtzager, 2000; 2004; Vial, 2003). The CPT encouraged participation of the poor in rural unions and strengthened unions under popular control via technical and political support in their dealings with the state and the large estates (Houtzager, 2004; Vial, 2003). Early MST leaders like João Pedro Stédile had been actively part of the CPT and its Base Ecclesiastical Communities (CEBs)³ prior to the movement's founding (Campigoto, 2006; Stédile and Fernandes, 1999).

When the MST was formed it brought over many ideas from liberation theology that would influence its rights discourse. While there were a number of variants of liberation theology on the Continent, the Brazilian movement was among the strongest and most influential, conceiving of a conversion of God's people to a sort radical political-religious identity derived from the awakening of a new consciousness and way of looking at the world (Houtzager, 2004). Rights framings of this variety are found in JST editions during this early period, and early issues of JST including a large number of interviews with and texts written by religious leaders. Movement members and the landless more generally were described as poor, hungry and destitute – sometimes as 'God's people', 'brothers and sisters', on a quest 'for the promised land' (JST, 1986b; JST, 1987b). JST defended a right to land for small and landless farmers, dismissing the capitalistic view of land as profiteering as exploitative and illegitimate (Poletto, 2008; Morissawa, 2001). The church's 'theology of land', which emphasised the non-capitalist use of land, underpinned this particular rights discourse. A statement by religious leaders published in JST (1984a) read that, 'We reaffirm once more that the land is a gift from God for all people and not merely a few privileged groups. We denounce exploitation and those who colonise.' In an interview with JST (1991), Leonardo Boff described land as, 'a gift from God' which the Church defends as a right of the people. The right to land was justified through the occupier's exercise of physical labour on that land, with the amount one should own limited to what a family could physically till. Large estate owners, land grabbers (*grileiros*), professionals, and people unaccustomed to working in agriculture were not considered the land's 'real owners' (JST, 1984b; JST, 1988a).

In respect to the 'right to occupy' and the 'right to produce', a Christmas article from

³ The CEBs were religious communities which sought to apply liberation theology principles in the real world. In Brazil they worked to promote cooperative forms of rural work and to set up organised groups that would fight for structural transformation (Poletto, 2008).

December 1987 suggested that the Son of God would side with the poor and oppressed, holding that being a landless Christian meant ‘occupying all the country’s latifundia and make mother earth produce food and life for all of its people’ (JST, 1987c). CPT phrases like ‘land for those who work on it’ and ‘Land is not earned. Land is conquered’ appear in JST articles and printed photographs throughout the period in question. A 1988 interview with two CPT priests describes the role of the landless as being one that liberates the world from sin (JST, 1988b). ‘On Judgement Day,’ one explains, ‘the big landowners will thank God for the Landless Movement because they’ll have helped free them from a huge sin: to concentrate a lot of land in the hands of a few people’ (JST, 1988b). For rural people who had never owned land, this ecclesiastical ‘moral economy’ (Poletto, 2008: 150) in the early years spoke to the rural exodus in the countryside and the difficulties accessing land, as well as the unpopular ‘colonisation’ projects of the military government that had been resettling landless farmers away from their places of origin. The right to land was a claim for landless farmers to live and work in their regions of origin.

As will be discussed below however, the theological discourse became overshadowed in the period after 1984 in the context of a rising socialist rights discourse and a wider ‘struggle’ for democracy and citizenship.

4.2. Socialist: the rise of secular rights and socialism (1985-1989)

A conservative shift within international Catholicism in the 1980s saw the Vatican move against liberation theology, and progressive Church leaders and some liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff⁴ were silenced. The conflict that had characterised the relationship between Catholic Church and the Brazilian state since the 1970s disappeared over the course of the transition, and some within the church argued the end of military rule meant they no longer needed to speak for the rural poor (Poletto, 1997; Houtzager 2004;). At the same time, the widening political space saw the Brazilian left re-emerging as an ‘organised and vigorous political force’ (Houtzager 2000, 74). The MST was no exception, becoming more overtly political in its activism and public pronouncements. It engaged with the transitional state on new terms and strengthened alliances with urban-based labour organisations, most notably the PT and CUT. Rural and urban leaders alike began to mobilise their constituencies under a banner of socialism, workers’ solidarity and common struggle in favour of a democratic socialist society. Growing ties to the movement’s urban-based allies were notable particularly where activism was organised around the country’s new constitution and direct presidential elections in 1989. Poletto (2008) notes the presence of tensions within the CPT as the MST increasingly strategised and organised itself independently of the former and in a manner that set it apart from the CPT as an independent organisation.

Over the second half of the 1980s, liberation theology gave way to socialism as the dominant ideology. In JST, references to the ‘Kingdom of God’ disappeared, and references to the ‘working class’ replaced ‘God’s people’ (JST, 1987d; 1988c; 1988d) Derived nouns like ‘landless’ and ‘tiller’ were used less frequently than ‘worker’. By the end of 1988 the ‘Church’ section had been removed from JST, marking a protracted

⁴ Leonardo Boff, a CPT member, was silenced in 1985 for one year by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith led by Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. Boff was accused by the Congregation of having preached ‘Marxist heresy’ (Poletto, 2008: 337-339).

decline in the number of articles and interviews which couched rights and movement struggle in theological terms. By the mid-1990s, most of the CPT and National Conference of Bishops for Brazil contributions to JST were irregular and made by a mere handful of contributors. Claims to land, to produce and to occupy lost their divine character and were reformulated in secular terms as citizenship rights. These claims were accompanied by new, interrelated claims that concerned social and economic conditions and sustainability of local settlements and encampments.⁵ The 'right to land' also became more inclusive as leaders described agrarian reform as a concern for rural and urban alike. The roots of the urban sprawl and urban unemployment, leaders maintained, were predominantly rural, and there appeared some parity between the rural 'right to produce' and the urban activist calls for the 'right to work'.

These secular rights were articulated by movement leaders in relation to two interrelated themes: citizenship and democracy. Early references to these themes in JST appear with the movement's February 1st National Congress in 1985, a time when the first civil President in 20 years was due to take office. The movement leadership organised the Congress around the slogan 'without land there is no democracy' (1985a; 1985b), most likely as a response to the new National Plan for Land Reform of 1985 (Whittman, 2009). Linkages between the themes were also visible in the build up to the 1986 elections for a Constituent Assembly for establishing the country's new constitution (JST, 1986c). With electoral politics restored and a democratic transition under way, movement leaders began to underscore the importance of elections and representation, identifying the PT as the ideal party of choice for genuine representation of the rural poor. A government of the PT, JST claimed, would implement a far-reaching agrarian reform programme that would 'democratise' the land and the state. JST encouraged support for the PT, explaining to its readership that voting was important and it was the duty of every landless worker to actively participate in politics to help decide the future of the country (JST, 1986c).

In the second half of the 1980s, rights claims were reformulated in terms of citizenship while agrarian reform was cast as a prerequisite for democracy. The right to land, to produce and to occupy underpinned a new notion of citizen-worker identity that the MST were advancing. It represented a radical reinterpretation of citizenship whereby citizenship in the New Republic was defined as a practice that comprised the collective struggle for land rights and the farming possibilities and new social relations that would follow successful struggle. Wittman (2009), who examined MST conceptions of citizenship between 2004 and 2006, has referred to this as 'agrarian citizenship' and we have adopted the term here. Movement leaders depicted Brazil's rural poor as citizens in law but not citizens in practice, opening up the 'right to citizenship' – or the 'right to have rights' – as right that could only be attained through a struggle for agrarian reform 'from below' (JST, 1989c). Further, the 'right to occupy' was reformulated as a collective citizenship right which could be legitimately exercised in movement 'self-defence' and in defence of democracy, when the state failed to settle landless families through agrarian reform (JST, 1989c; 1991a; 1993b; 1994a). 'The years of the MST's struggle', an article from the MST National Coordination reads, 'have taught that the workers only have their

⁵ For access to credit and technical assistance for making the agrarian reform settlements habitable and economically viable, see JST (1989a; 1989b; 1990a; 1990b). Regarding rights for health and welfare see JST (1993a) and JST (1987e). For health and education, see MST II National Congress resolutions in JST (1990b) and JST (1987e).

rights and gains guaranteed through struggle' (JST, 1990c).

The 'democratisation of land' became a significant rallying cry during the transition as the discourse attached an important role for the state in facilitating the realisation of citizenship rights. Government implementation of state-run agrarian reform programmes became the key indicator for measuring democratic progress, measured quantitatively in terms of the number of settled families, and qualitatively in terms of access to the necessary inputs and services that would allow settlers to produce. The identification of land rights with citizenship and agrarian reform with democracy gained traction over the remainder of the 1980s with repeated failures of the New Republic to meet its agrarian reform targets.⁶ With these failures and an escalation of rural conflict and violence,⁷ the executive, legislative and judiciary were denounced in JST as illegitimate, unrepresentative, and operating in the service of the large estates and the bourgeoisie (JST, 1986d; JST, 1990c). The editorial of the February 1988 edition of JST read that:

No society will ever be democratic while there are large estates concentrated in the hands of a few families [...] We discuss whether it [the estate] should be productive or not, whether the land measures 500 or 10 thousand hectares, and we forget that every estate harms society. We forget that behind every estate is the power of the exploiter; the power to make decisions over the rights of whole families, the power to destroy farms and burn houses, the power to take the lives of the workers [...] Ending with the estate does not only mean distributing the land in a better way or increasing production. It means, above all, creating conditions so that our society can progress inside of a strong, secure democracy; creating conditions so that the rural workers, free from coronelism⁸, can exercise their rights of citizenship (JST, 1988e).

4.3. The turn to cosmopolitanism (1990-1995)

Movement activism in the early 1990s was organised around frustrations with the perceived lack of democratic progress and the limited advancement in citizenship rights in practice. The year 1990 was also a significant political and economic turning point for Brazil. Fernando Collor (1990-1992) from the Party of National Reconstruction became the first directly elected President of Brazil since Jânio Quadros in 1960, promising to build a new Brazil with greater social justice and a government free from corruption (Weyland, 1993). Collor's economic programme, which was deeply unpopular with the political left, was made up of a series of reforms that included measures for currency stabilisation, commercial liberalisation and free trade, and it furthered the dismantling of

⁶ For the failure of the Sarney government (1985-1989) to meet PNRA targets, and accusations of sabotage, see JST (1988c) and Gomes da Silva (1989). For the failure of the Collor government (1990-1992) to meet agrarian reform targets see for example JST (1992a). Criticism of Itamar Franco's government (1992-1995) asks when agrarian reform will come to Brazil, JST (1993c).

⁷ In 1985, the CPT began documenting and raising the profile of rural conflict and violence in Brazil. Its findings are published in an annual report, 'Conflicts in the Countryside', and are widely recognised as the most reliable source on the topic (CPT, 2017).

⁸ Coronelism had been a political system in Brazil the early part of the twentieth century that concentrated power in the hands of a local oligarch (Leal, 1977). It still persisted in some municipalities and regions in the interior of the country by the time democratic transition was underway in the 1980s.

the developmental state in favour of a neoliberal economic model (Weyland, 1993; Wolford, 2010). The MST, alongside other movements and activists at the time, identified this neoliberal turn with the persistence of social and economic injustices that had not disappeared over the course of the democratic transition, and they identified new relations, structures and sources of marginalisation and exclusion that had emerged as a consequence (JST, 1990d; 1990e; 1994b). The withdrawal and decline of the developmental state was at odds with the leadership's view that the state should systematically intervene to support small farmers through mechanisms such as land redistribution, price controls and subsidies. At the same time, the emergence of powerful new rural actors and decision makers was depicted by leaders as the surrender of state power to foreign countries and corporations. The emergence of large new rural antagonists with access to capital, credit and machinery, was inconsistent with the movement's project for structural change which emphasised the importance of local decision making and collective farming for addressing national hunger and poverty. What the country was witnessing, according to leaders, was the emergence and consolidation of a hegemonic 'agrarian bourgeoisie' (JST, 1990e) formed through an alliance between international capital, industry and the old estate owners, stimulated by state financial incentives and geared toward producing and exporting food as a commodity. The appearance of new agricultural technologies, such as foreign-supplied seeds and patents, was also contentious. According to one JST (1992b) editorial, patents were nothing more than 'capitalism wanting to put the fence of the large estate around scientific knowledge' and an 'imperialist act against our people'.

In JST, the neoliberal turn was condemned for having produced 'false, neoliberal democracies' on the continent (JST, 1991b). It was described as an affront to democratic progress and the rights gains made in the previous decade, and required a concerted, democracy-promoting response that would reign in the wider political and economic forces undermining it. Leaders articulated land and land-related rights claims in relation to a new, national struggle for sovereignty and self-determination. The right to land, to produce and to occupy became claims for sovereignty and national self-determination: reasserting democracy and agrarian citizenship in the face of internal and external threats, and reasserting self-determination as local and national decision-making power over agriculture, production and natural resources. In the 1980s changes to the land structure had been framed as requirements for genuine democracy and citizenship, but by the middle of the 1990s leaders had reframed agrarian reform as vital to a project that safeguarded the sovereignty and self-determination of the country. All of this predated the emergence of the 'food sovereignty' concept as articulated by La Via Campesina.

The movement continued to press for state intervention with a good part of its activism in the early 1990s directed towards challenging national economic policy. It responded to the weakened domestic market and falling prices with drives to make agrarian reform settlements economically viable through the creation of agricultural cooperatives, greater mechanisation and collective work as a means of 'guaranteeing our remaining on the land' (JST, 1990f). This required organising and mobilising around claims to access to

agricultural credit, technical assistance, marketing and infrastructure from INCRA, price controls, as well as rights to basic food baskets for the hungry (JST, 1992c; 1994c).

The overwhelmingly secular-socialist character of movement rights was maintained in the 1990s, but we use the term 'cosmopolitan' here to refer to a particular rights framing that was much less rigid than previously and which could incorporate into it a broader range of constituencies, ideologies and interpretations. The term 'cosmopolitan' is borrowed from Santos (2002) who used it for denoting a form of 'counter-hegemonic globalisation' that is characterised by coalitions of different movements and groups opposed to neoliberalism and globalisation. While socialism remained the dominant movement ideology post-1990 and continued to organise and underpin the MST as an 'imagined community' (Wolford, 2010), the tying of neoliberalism to Brazil's land problem saw recognition of other groups and constituencies who were differentially marginalised and excluded, such as indigenous and black minorities. JST articles drew parallels between the MST's land struggle and the 'struggles' and 'resistance' of other groups that shared a common experience of land dispossession and colonialism and capitalism. Beyond the national level, new solidarities were being forged at the regional level as the movement had begun participating in campaigns organised around common regional issues, such as external debt, agricultural policies and indigenous peoples' rights. These campaigns laid some of the groundwork for the formation of other regional organisations and movements, such as the Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organisations (CLOC) and La Via Campesina. (Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2010; JST, 1989d; 1991c) and were framed as responses to 'cultural genocide', neoliberalism and 'neocolonialism' that were disrupting the social fabric of rural communities. JST (1992d) reported in 1992 that the 12 October had been declared the 'day of continental dignity, sovereignty and self-determination' by the organisations belonging to the 'Self-discovery of America, 500 years of indigenous and peasant resistance' campaign', of which the MST was a part (1989e).

5. Discussion

The above analysis has sought to explore how the MST developed and applied rights discourses, using the analytical tools of frames and ideology to unpack the relationship between rights and the agrarian movement. Westby (2002) suggests that frames are best understood as strategic discourse, mobilising activists by drawing on movement ideology (the 'dominant discourse') to provide a focus on contemporary strategic priorities. The case study supports this view. Framing, while employed as a strategic imperative, did not amount merely to leadership decisions about which frames were more or less conducive to mobilisation. Rights were also anchored in and shaped by the particular ideas and worldviews about the nature of social and material life held by framers and which characterised the movement at certain moments. In this sense, the rights framings identified in the case were derivative of ideology: divine rights were anchored in and shaped by liberation theology and were espoused by religious leaders, while secular agrarian citizenship rights were upheld by those inclined to socialism. Cosmopolitan

rights, which could accommodate a range of constituencies, ideologies and interpretations, were themselves grounded in ideas about diversity, recognition and solidarity. What was nevertheless shared across each of these cases were similar viewpoints on the material social relations and circumstances that characterised rural life, and which we might loosely categorise as belonging to the Brazilian left. We suggest, then, that the relation between ideology and rights discourses (that is, collective action frames) indicates that the rights framings were as much matters of values and beliefs as they were matters of strategy and instrumental rationality in leadership decision making. Consistent with Westby (2002), we find that ideologies comprised values and beliefs, and played a constitutive role in the emergence and development of movement rights. Yet a strategic element inevitably remains, and these ideologies shaped (without necessarily determining) the way rights claims were strategically advanced in practice at particular moments.

These synergies between strategy, framing and ideology underline the significance of rights to movement 'struggle'. As noted, for some the historiography of rights and institutional rights approaches suggests antagonisms between rights and movement activism. Yet for framers within the MST, rights discourse was used to mobilise aspirational and defensive struggles, echoing more Stammers' reading of the history of human rights as 'challenges to relations and structures of power' (2003: 299) than suggestions of complicity in the neoliberal project (Jones, 2005; Bakker, 2007). Movement 'struggles for' concerned a variety of ends and conditions for overcoming land and land-related problems, while 'struggles against' targeted a growing number of antagonists considered responsible in different ways. Together with their associated rights claims, these formed a discourse of 'rights-based struggle' which sought to shape, guide and give meaning to participants' intervention in the world. One such intervention was land occupations, when occupiers face the risk of eviction and harassment from police and hired guards. And another in the context of settlement, when settlers are encouraged to remain socially and politically active following successful land occupation. The continued involvement of settlers was considered necessary for assisting other landless farmers in the midst of occupation and for contributing to the movement's broader political project. These interventions in the world, the various 'struggles', symbolised collective efforts to modify or improve some aspect of the status quo. Their grounding in the language of rights meant infusing what they did with ideas of justice and rightness when such actions could be met with opposition – sometimes violent – from various quarters such as the police, paramilitaries, national courts, the government and local power holders.

The application of frames and ideologies, and acknowledgement of their dynamic nature, helps fill out this narrative of rights-based struggle. Context is relevant, and the case allows us to see how the problems framed through rights shift over time. Rights were developed and employed by the movement for addressing the consequences of historical land injustices, and they were also responsive to ongoing developments in the present. As perceived sources of oppression shifted, so too did the content of movement rights.

Rights, as social constructions, emerge through reflexive processes on the part of movement framers, with their focus shifting in accord with changes in the wider political and economic context. Equally, the MST offers an example of where rights have been developed and employed in the context of movement struggle, as an expression of concrete economic and political ends and about ‘the construction, articulation and legitimization of norms, values, identities and lifestyles’ (Stammers, 2003, 299). At the time theological rights discourses were on the wane, Brazil’s military government was ending and the Catholic Church was in the midst of its conservative turn. The theological rights discourse, which had been elaborated in Brazil over many years in an authoritarian context with little political space for civil society movements to organise, began to disappear in favour of secular agrarian citizenship rights in the context of democratisation. Cosmopolitan rights surfaced shortly after in the context of economic liberalisation and developing ties between movements across the continent. In this way, the case reveals how frames and ideology help to expose why context matters to rights. Frames capture problematic situations associated with particular contexts while ideologies, which are more complex than frames, do much of the interpretive work about why problematic situations exist, how they came to be and how they can or should be overcome.

The shift toward a cosmopolitan rights discourse in the 1990s, that emphasised other social categories besides class, is notable for the way it was scaffolded by new local-global relationships and modes of organising in campaigns around land, citizenship, sovereignty and so on. These went on to form part of the transnational architecture through which new notions of peasant rights and food sovereignty emerged in the 1990s. At the same time, the MST was playing a key role in constituting these processes. It was one of three Brazil-based groups at the launch of the prominent ‘500 years of resistance’ campaign in 1989, alongside CUT and the Union of Indigenous Nations, and it was regional representative for the five-person coordinating commission for LVC when it was founded in 1993 (Desmarais, 2007).⁹ While the local-global dynamic in the constitution of the MST’s and LVC’s rights discourses is not the focus of this study, the MST’s rights discourse in relation to land reform in the early 1990s can be seen to intersect with the evolution of the broader, global food sovereignty movement. For example, the Managua Declaration of 1992 and the Mons Declaration a year later, which led to the founding of LVC, both emphasise political and economic democratisation and country ownership over agricultural policies; external debt; participation of farmers and rural organisations in policy formulation, such as around pricing; and the right to organise and pursue a living in the countryside under increasingly difficult conditions.

Stepping back, the analytical approach helps understand how framers within the MST responded to the changing world and reframed rights as a response to it. What it does not do is help us get behind the discourse. For that reason we caution against assuming

⁹ In a 1996 interview published in JST with a prominent LVC activist, the movement’s founding in 1993 is traced directly to the 500 years of resistance campaign (JST, 1996).

complete resonance of movement discourses and ideologies with all movement members. A number of studies of the MST have highlighted where these have been resisted or challenged from within by the membership (Wolford, 2007; 2010; Caldeira, 2008; DeVore, 2015). Caldeira's study of relations between MST leaders and settlers reveals the presence of framing conflicts that hinge on the different life experiences and cultural understandings of each, while movement leaders' ideas about community and social change have been shown to be sometimes at odds with the opinions and priorities of settlers (Wolford, 2010; Caldeira, 2008) provoking forms of everyday resistance as well as more outright confrontation with leaders. While our focus here has been on rights 'from below' existing apart from formal institutional or legal frameworks, these findings may also serve as a useful entry point for further empirical work into the MST's 'rights-based struggle'. This would involve drawing on different methods and tools and to explore possible tensions and disjunctures around ideologies, political persuasions, and identities within the movement.

6. Conclusion

Though a history is yet to be written of the different contributions brought by national agrarian movements to LVC in Latin America, as well as the debates, agreements, and conflicts, the MST has been one of LVC's larger members with considerable prestige and influence. This study has shone light onto some of the MST's rights claims, originating ideas and ideologies that underpinned the first 11 years of struggle in Brazil. In so doing, it has illustrated the value of rights, frames and ideologies as analytical tools with which to understand the dynamics of the politics of agrarian change. Movements employ rights discourses to frame problematic situations in terms that transform the disenfranchised into rights holders and expose structures and relations of power. While the human rights and food sovereignty frameworks have garnered most attention in discussions of rights and contemporary agrarian struggles, movements also advance their own rights claims independently of these frameworks. These rights become important features of movement activism, claimed first and foremost through political and social rather than purely legal processes. The case study of the MST reveals the presence of multiple rights discourses that interlinked with movement ideologies and discourses on struggle and which emerged through processes of reflexivity and in response to the changing historical-political context. Such, we suggest, is the nature of rights 'from below'.

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