Rightful resistance em movimentos sociais de reforma agrária: uma análise das razões de o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) ter evitado radicalização.

Juliana Belino[1]

Resumo

Embora os processos de faccionalização e radicalização sejam identificados pela literatura no campo de confronto político como mecanismos que frequentemente ocorrem durante a trajetória de movimentos de contestação política, o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) conservou sua estratégia não violenta de resistência legítima (*rightful resistance*) desde sua emergência como movimento social até o presente momento. O objetivo desse artigo é identificar e analisar criticamente as explicações para esse fenômeno oferecidas pela literatura anterior, propondo então uma hipótese complementar aos argumentos anteriores. A literatura anterior estabelece que as características do Estado brasileiro e o fato de que medidas violentas alienam potenciais apoiadores são os motivos de o MST ter consistentemente adotado estratégias não violentas; e os fatos de que esse movimento é independente de partidos políticos, é organizado e coeso, atingiu um certo nível de sucesso, e sua identidade baseada em status socioeconômico são os motivos de se ter evitado a radicalização. Esse artigo critica os argumentos da literatura anterior, posto que tais autonomia e coesão não se observam empiricamente, e conclui propondo uma hipótese que destaca o papel da cultura e da ideologia do movimento, especialmente seu foco em educação libertária. A metodologia adotada por esse artigo envolve a revisão da literatura anterior relevante nos campos de Confronto Político e Movimentos Sociais relacionada ao tópico desse estudo, e a coleta de dados secundários a partir de estudos prévios e do website do MST.

Palavras-chave: Movimentos Sociais; Radicalização; Resistência Legítima; Reforma Agrária; Estudos Pós-Coloniais

Rightful resistance in land reform social movements: an analysis of the reasons that prevented the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers (MST) from getting radicalized.

[1] Doutoranda em Estudos Globais e mestre em Estudos Internacionais pela Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS – Japão).

Abstract

Even though the processes of factionalization and radicalization are identified by the literature on Contentious Politics as mechanisms that often occur during the trajectory of contentious movements, the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) has conserved its non-violent rightful resistance strategy since its emergence until now. This paper intends to first identify and critically analyze the explanations for this phenomenon provided by the previous literature, and then porpose a hypothesis to complement the previous explanations. Previous studies argue that the characteristic of Brazilian State in terms of democracy and capacity level and the fact that violent measures would alienate potential supporters are the reasons why this movement has consistently adopted a non-violent strategy; and the facts that it is independent from political parties, its identity is based on socioeconomic status, it is organized and cohesive, and it has achieved a certain level of success, the reasons why it has avoided radicalization. This paper criticizes the arguments of previous studies, arguing that autonomy and cohesiveness cannot be empirically observed, and concludes by proposing a hypothesis that highlights the role of the movement's ideology and culture, especially its focus on libertarian education. The methodology adopted in this paper involves reviewing relevant previous literature in the field of Contentious Politics and Social Movements and more specifically about the MST and collecting secondary data from previous studies and the MST's website.

Key words: Social movements; Radicalization; Rightful Resistance; Land Reform; Post-Colonial Studies

Rightful resistance en los movimientos sociales por la reforma agraria: un análisis de las razones por las que el Movimiento de los Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra (MST) ha evitado la radicalización.

Resumen

Aunque la literatura en el campo del enfrentamiento político identifica la faccionalización y la radicalización como mecanismos que ocurren con frecuencia durante la trayectoria de los movimientos de protesta política, el Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) ha mantenido su estrategia no violenta de resistencia legítima (rightful resistance) desde su surgimiento como movimiento social hasta la actualidad. El objetivo de este artículo es identificar y analizar críticamente las explicaciones de este fenómeno ofrecidas por la literatura anterior, proponiendo una hipótesis complementaria a los argumentos previos. La literatura anterior establece que las características del Estado brasileño y el hecho de que las medidas violentas alejan a los posibles simpatizantes son las razones por las que el MST ha adoptado consistentemente estrategias no violentas; y que la independencia de los partidos políticos, la

298

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

organización y cohesión, el éxito alcanzado y su identidad basada en el estatus socioeconómico son las razones por las que se ha evitado la radicalización. Este artículo critica los argumentos de la literatura anterior, ya que la autonomía y cohesión no se observan empíricamente, y concluye proponiendo una hipótesis que destaca el papel de la cultura y la ideología del movimiento, especialmente su enfoque en la educación libertaria. La metodología adoptada por este artículo implica la revisión de la literatura anterior relevante en los campos de Política Contenciosa y Movimientos Sociales relacionados con el tema de este estudio, y la recopilación de datos secundarios a partir de estudios previos y del sitio web del MST.

Palabras clave: Movimientos Sociales; Radicalización; Resistencia Legítima; Reforma Agraria; Estudios Postcoloniales

299

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

Introduction

The MST is one of the most relevant contemporary rightful resistance social movements in Latin America, leading the struggle against Neoliberal policies in the agrarian sector and advocating for agrarian reform. Although it might be argued that defensive violence and eventual attacks on public or private property puts the contentious episodes coordinated by the MST in a somewhat grey zone between violence and nonviolence, it seems to be a consensus that their strategies and repertoire of contention are essentially nonviolent. For almost 40 years now, since its emergence, the MST has managed to prevent internal conflicts to cause fragmentation into subgroups and radicalization. This phenomenon is worth investigating, since the previous literature on Contentious Politics argues that contentious movements, including revolutions, social movements, and other forms of contention, tend to go through the processes of factionalization and radicalization during their trajectories (SCHOCK 2012; SCHOCK 2015; McADAM et al 2003).

This paper intends to address this phenomenon by first providing a literature review on this topic aiming to critically discuss the explanations provided by previous studies. Next, a hypothesis will be provided, suggesting that the previous literature neglected the role of culture and ideology, especially the role of libertarian education, in preventing radicalization and factionalization. As a background for the literature review and for elaborating the hypothesis, this introduction relies on previous studies to briefly describe the characteristics of the MST, the cause they advocate for and its role in Brazilian society. The next sections will present the arguments and the findings of this study.

To discuss the nonviolent nature of the MST, it is relevant to understand the characteristics and the context behind this social movement. It emerged from the mobilization of actors that suffer from the high level of inequality in land distribution in Brazil, a reality that is rooted in the colonial period and is a major hindrance to development (KAY, 2002). Similarly to other land reform contentious movements, the MST advocates for food sovereignty and sustainable development achieved through land reform. This same

300

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

framing is adopted by several other land reform social movements in the Global South and are enforced by the international institution La Via Campesina. Thus, the MST has an important role locally, as it struggles to reduce social inequality and promote sustainable development in Brazil, and internationally, since it is one of the main representants of a transnational contentious trend.

The historical process that led to the structural problems addressed by the MST is not particular to Brazil, being repeated in Latin America as a whole and in other countries of the Global South. Although this process is complex and occurred differently in each country, it is possible to identify some common characteristics of the colonial legacy that led to land distribution inequality and prevented the implementation of an effective agrarian reform. These characteristics are the adoption of economic policies focused on the external market, exporting non-industrialized products to supply the needs of the industry of developed countries; the formation of a landowning class that holds economic and political power; the formation of post-colonial States that are weak and highly politically dependent on the country's economic elite and on external governments of geopolitically influential States (GALEANO, 2000; KAY, 2002).

It is possible to identify two trends of land alienation of smallholders in Brazilian history. The first one occurred during the colonial period and included the genocide, displacement and enslavement of indigenous people that previously lived in what is today the Brazilian territory. Land was distributed by Portugal to Portuguese settlers through a scheme named *sesmarias*, dividing the Brazilian territory among a small group of individuals who started producing large-scale monocultures to supply the needs of the European market using slaves as workforce. The first statute regarding land ownership was established in 1850 and merely turned the previous *sesmarias* into private properties. Since Brazil became an independent state, the same landowning elite that was favored by the Portuguese colonizers still benefits from political alliances that allow them to maintain the status quo of the power relations in the agrarian sector and influence the government to prevent the implementation of an effective land reform (KAY, 2002). With this landowning elite fighting

301

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

against land reform, supported by consecutive national and external governments, little was changed and land distribution in Brazil is still largely a colonial legacy. The influence of the landowners and landlords in formulating and implementing public policies has prevented or reverted an effective land reform in Latin American countries (KAY, 2002; GALEANO, 2000), resulting in an agrarian sector composed by latifundia, which creates a fragile and non-sustainable agribusiness focused on producing monocultures for the external market. This large property model of production resulted in land concentration and displacement of smallholders (CALDEIRA, 2008).

While the first trend of land disposition of smallholders in favor of latifundia is a result of colonial and imperialist practices, the second finds its justification in Neoliberal developmentalist ideas. After the independence, land alienation of smallholders was conservated as a state policy, this time based on Neoliberal developmentalist policies that favor national and, especially, foreign corporations with the excuse of investing in market-led development (TEUBAL, 2009; GALEANO, 2000). One egregious example of a case of land alienation in the name of developmentalism is the project of building a binational hydroelectric dam, Itaipu, which expropriated more than 42 thousand smallholders, including peasants and indigenous people (GERMANI, 2003).

The MST emerged as smallholders mobilized to resist the threat of land disposition by the state and attributed opportunity to the legal provisions of the Brazilian constitution to reacquire expropriated land. Many social movements aiming for land reform were active in the 80's and 90's in Brazil, after the strong repression of peasant movements by the military regime from 1964 to 1985 was lifted. In 1984, the MST emerged as a collective contentious movement that mobilized landless rural workers through a brokerage process that united actors with the same grievances that were previously disconnected, such as peasants and indigenous people, under an identity constructed based on socioeconomic characteristics. This process of mobilization united leaders of various smaller landless movements struggling against power structures that prevented land

302

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

reform, and the MST was officialized as a social movement during a national meeting held in Cascavel, Paraná (CALDEIRA, 2008).

The MST was supported by the Catholic Church (Pastoral Commission on Land), and was initially a coalition of rural workers, indigenous people and Marxist activists. From its emergence, the MST has expanded horizontally, becoming active in 24 of the Brazilian states, and vertically, attracting supporters from a variety of legal and political backgrounds. Since its emergence, it is essentially a grassroots movement, but it also counts with legal assistance and is supported by a network of NGOs and international organizations. According to the MST's official website, four hundred thousand families were successfully accommodated in previously idle land until now (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, 2023).

Now, it is important to highlight that the contentious activities performed by the MST are strictly based on the provisions of the Brazilian Constitution, which states that land should fulfill a social function. Thus, their objective is to address a gap between state's laws and their implementation through local policies, which usually disregards the legal provisions to benefit the landowning elite, influencing the State's decisions due to the abovementioned reasons. In view of the above, the MST might be categorized as a rightful resistance movement, defined as a "... grassroots collective action that occurs outside of regulated political channels to promote change within institutional politics. In rightful resistance the legitimacy of laws and core values of the state are not challenged; instead the gap between central government directives and local policies is highlighted." (SCHOCK, 2012).

Over the years, this movement has conquered remarkable victories by winning legal disputes and turning lands that were previously idle into productive agricultural settlements. It became a major political agent in Brazilian politics and history. After about 38 years of history, the MST currently has more than one million members.

Throughout its history, the MST has organized several contentious episodes, and oftentimes its members were brutally repressed by the Brazilian military forces and by paramilitary groups or individuals hired by landowners (HAMMOND, 1999). Also, since this movement's

303

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

struggles go directly against the interests of the most powerful elite in Brazil, the landowners, several attempts were made to categorize MST's activities as terrorism both in the legal sphere and via mainstream news media. However, the movement's strategy, as it will be discussed later in this paper, is to avoid conflict and perform activities that call attention to their demands without using violence, even though the State's and landowner's violent repression is brutal and begins as soon as the MST starts a new land occupation. The movement's actions are still strictly based on the provisions of the Brazilian Constitution, although adopting illegal approaches such as occupation of private property.

Considering the facts that: the MST is a social movement that was able to reach millions of members throughout its 38 years of history; there are strong group dynamics inside the settlements that give coherence to the groups; and their occupations are usually violently repressed not only by the State police, but also by hired guns serving the landowners, some questions are raised. Firstly, since it is common that social movements advocating for social change that started as nonviolent became divided into factions, some of them adopting extreme methods (McADAM et al, 2003), what are the factors that allowed this movement to stay as a single force until now, without splitting into divergent subgroups? Secondly, what has influenced it to consistently adopt a nonviolent approach, instead of getting radicalized? The previous literature argues that the MST has conserved its nonviolent nature because: Brazil is a high-capacity State with a strong military force; violent actions would alienate potential supporters; it is autonomous from political parties; the members identity is based on socioeconomic status; it is organized and cohesive; and it has achieved success (SCHOCK, 2012; SCHOCK, 2015).

This paper aims to criticize the abovementioned arguments. First, the claim that the strategy adopted by the MST is shaped by the characteristics of the Brazilian State is questionable, since the MST has been active in municipalities and regions with different subnational political regimes and its trajectory is parallel to governments that represented significant changes in the characteristics of the national political regime. Also, as it will be

304

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

addressed further in this study, the autonomy and cohesiveness are only apparent and not empirically proven. This study proposes that previous studies on the topic have neglected the role of the MST's ideology and culture in preventing the movement from getting violent, institutionalized, and radicalized.

The MST's ideology has been described in the literature as a mix of liberation theology, Marxism, and class conflict (SCHOCK, 2012; SCHOCK, 2015). However, this paper considers that this definition is incomplete, since it disregards the influence of critical education, which is strongly based on Paulo Freire's educational theory. Not only Paulo Freire's theory has influenced the movement to adopt a non–hierarchical structure, but also worked as a guide for the movement, teaching the members that their objective is not to physically fight to gain land, but to build a movement that will be able to change social structures, including resisting social inequalities and providing sustainable solutions for agriculture. Therefore, this paper proposes that the educational approach adopted by the MST, which is heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's work, is one of the pillars of this movement's ideology and, thus, a major influence in preventing radicalization and the adoption of violent strategies.

In terms of methodology, firstly a literature review of relevant books and papers will be used to identify the arguments provided by previous studies addressing this topic, aiming to identify a list of elements suggested by previous studies as the reasons why a social movement might avoid factionalization and radicalization. The studies used for this literature review are relevant works in the fields of Contentious Politics and Social Movements. The arguments identified in the previous literature will be critically analyzed, compared to possible competing perspectives and the resulting satisfactory arguments will be mapped. Secondly, this paper will propose a complementary argument to explain why the MST has avoided the abovementioned processes that has been generally neglected by previous studies: the role of the ideology behind the education process to which all members of the movement are exposed, which is based on Paulo Freire's libertarian education.

305

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

This paper is majorly a literature review work, aiming to identify the arguments of major previous studies and check to what extent they are sustained in view of the MST's trajectory, additionally providing a hypothesis to add to previous explanations.

It is important to highlight that the vocabulary used here is based on concepts established in the academic subfields of Contentious Politics (McADAM et al, 1996, McADAM et al, 2003; TILLY, TARROW, 2015) and Political Regime studies (TILLY, 2006; TARLAU, 2015). This research relies on this theoretical framework to refer to mechanisms of contentious action, such as mobilization, attribution of threat and opportunity, framing, construction of identity, brokerage, radicalization and classification of political regimes.

Radicalization, political environment, success and autonomy

The 1988 Brazilian Constitution and its following amendments state that property is a fundamental right and land must observe its social function (Brazil, 1988), the social function being described as: rational and adequate use; adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment; compliance with the provisions that regulate labor relations; exploitation that favors the well-being of the owners and laborers." (Brazil, 1988) It also provides for agrarian reform: "It is within the power of the Union to expropriate on account of social interest, for purposes of agrarian reform, the rural property which is not performing its social function" (Brazil, 1988).

Even though the rights to property and land reform are guaranteed in the Brazilian Constitution, public policies hardly implement them. Landowners establish alliances with politicians and are often involved in politics themselves. In the congress, a well-organized right-wing ruralist lobby (*bancada ruralista*) is responsible for representing the interests of landowners. The MST's activities are categorized as rightful resistance because they address this gap between legal provisions and real-life implementations thereof.

The MST has been categorized as either a rightful resistance or a radical rightful resistance social movement. While some scholars

306

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

argue that radical social movements can be either violent or nonviolent (BARLETT, MILLER, 2012), others argue that the only three possible outcomes to radicalization are extremism, terrorism, or both (REIDY, 2018). Before investigating why the MST has avoided radicalization, it is necessary to properly define if the MST has completely avoided radicalization, thus connecting radicalization to the use of violence, or if the MST is a nonviolent radical movement that has avoided violent radicalization. The lack of this differentiation might lead to contradictory arguments, such as in Schock (2012). Schock claims that the MST has avoided radicalization. However, at the same time the author proposes that the ideology adopted by said movement is of rightful radical resistance (SCHOCK, 2012), arguing that the rightful resistance label is insufficient, requiring the addition of the adjective "radical". This argument is based on the fact that the MST's contention activities go beyond rightful resistance, counting with a complex, horizontally and vertically scaled network, sustained claims, as opposed to episodic ones, are openly critical to the Brazilian government, and are counter hegemonic, relying on transgressive nonviolent direct action. The use of the term "radical" here is arguable: even if the intention is to find a proper characterization for the MST which encompasses the fact that their activities go beyond rightful resistance, the use of the adjective "radical" is associated with radicalization. Therefore, it is not clear if Schock intends to categorize the MST as a radical nonviolent movement which has avoided violent radicalization, or as a nonviolent movement which has avoided radicalization, thus dissociating the adjective "radical" from radicalization.

In this paper, as opposed to Schock's definition, the MST will be referred to as a rightful resistance movement, since this category of social movements might be defined as "a kind of partially sanctioned resistance that uses influential advocates and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to some professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure" (O'BRIEN, 1996). O'Brien defines a rightful resistance movement as a popular social movement which fulfills three categories:

(1) operates near the boundary of an authorized channel, (2) employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political or economic power, and (3) hinges on locating and exploiting divisions among the powerful. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy "disloyal" political and economic elites (O'BRIEN, 1996).

Therefore, since the definition of "rightful resistance" is not limiting and fits the activities carried out by the MST, Schock's comment on the need of fitting said movement in a different category to differentiate it from other rightful resistance movement will be dismissed by this paper. The MST will be referred to as a nonviolent rightful resistance movement which has avoided factionalization and radicalization.

So far, the categorization of the MST as a non-radicalized rightful resistance movement has been addressed. Now, the previous literature also offers arguments related to the strategic choice of nonviolent strategies over violent ones. Lee (2017) claims that nonviolent movements depend on human resources and violent movements depend on physical resources. Also, by addressing social movement's trajectories, this author claims that a movement can conserve a strategy if it achieves success, and to achieve success it is necessary to represent a threat greater than the cost of policy change. Therefore, for a movement to stay committed to a nonviolent strategy, it is necessary that this movement presents a threat great enough to promote change without using violence. Again, Schock (2015) also claims that achieving success is essential for a movement to avoid the use of violence, since high levels of dissatisfaction lead to radicalization. On the same line, through the analysis of the radicalization of black movements, Santoro and Fitzpatrick (2015) identify as a reason that leads to institutionalization, radicalization and the adoption of violent strategies, the feeling of disappointment with the social movement – the feeling of failure. Therefore, movements that have avoided radicalization, institutionalization and violence have achieved a certain level of progress in their efforts to change public policies. On the macro level, the authors claim that government concessions and repression

308

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

shape the trajectory of a social movement (SANTORO; FITZPATRICK, 2015). Ryckman (2019) also identifies the lack of progress as a major cause for the shift to violent approaches. In less than 20 years, 20 million acres were redistributed to 350 thousand families due to actions organized by the MST (SCHOCK 2015, p. 500). The positive results, even among several failed attempts, provides a level of satisfaction and hope for the members, as opposed to dissatisfaction, which usually leads to radicalization. This can be identified as the first argument towards solving the puzzled addressed in this study: the MST has achieved a relatively high level of success, which prevented dissatisfaction with the strategies adopted by the movement and consequent factionalization in groups with different proposals and radicalization of dissatisfied subgroups.

According to Schock (2015) another of the points that has prevented the MST from becoming violent is the capacity of the Brazilian State and its repressive power. This connection between characteristics of a political regime and the strategies adopted by contentious actors has been explored in the previous literature on Contentious Politics (PETRAS, 1988; TILLY, 2006; McADAM et al 1996; McADAM et al 2003; TARLAU, 2015; SCHOCK 2012; SCHOCK 2015). This argument is questionable, because the MST has been active since 1984: its trajectory encompasses one year of military dictatorship, when Brazil was a low-capacity nondemocratic state; a re-democratization period, and several governments in which the level of state capacity has varied. Another aspect that is overlooked by this argument are the subnational variations in state capacity and democracy in Brazil. Petras (1988) calls attention to the role of the capacity of State institutions such as the State military: "The rapidity and violence of eviction often discourages landless workers from attempting new occupations until a new more favorable correlation of forces is in place" (PETRAS, 1988). However, as observed by Tarlau (2015), the MST has consistently employed nonviolent strategies in subnational regimes with different levels of repression. The argument of the influence of the political environment and characteristics of the Brazilian State in conditioning

309

the adoption of nonviolent strategies, thus, is questionable, and does not seem to be empirically verifiable.

Finally, the autonomy of the MST has been used as an explanation to why the MST has remained coherent and avoided institutionalization, which would lead to the division of the group in an institutionalized subgroup and a possibly radicalized autonomous subgroup (SCHOCK, 2015). Kröger, however, argues that social movements in Latin America suffer from what he defines as a "fetishism of autonomy" (2011, p. 438–439). According to this author, Latin American social movements are relatively autonomous, but still embedded in the State. Representing a different perspective in this debate, Schock claims that peasant movements are inherently autonomous from political parties and from the state (2015, p. 493). This author also argues that the MST has remained coherent and avoided institutionalization in part due to its autonomy (2015, p. 504). This statement cannot be confirmed empirically, since it disregards the fact that there are internal conflicts inside this movement (CALDEIRA, 2008) and it overlooks the role of state engagement and the connections between the MST and political parties (KROGER, 2011). Moreover, this perspective ignores that one of the mechanisms that is often present in contentious movements is competition for power (McADAM et al, 2004, p. 68), including disputes on how to frame certain claims. The rhetoric of autonomy adopted by the movement is not empirically observed, but a resource employed as part of a framing process

In this section, three arguments offered by the previous literature as explanations for the reason why the MST has avoided radicalization and factionalization: the characteristics of the Brazilian State, including the political environment and the capability of repressive institutions; the level of success achieved; and its autonomy from the State and political parties. The first and the last arguments, as discussed above, are arguably not empirically verifiable, while the second one seems to be satisfactory. Thus, the first argument that incorporates the set of explanations mapped by this study is that the MST's high level of success has prevented factionalization and radicalization due to dissatisfaction.

310

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

Cohesion, identity framing, supporters

This section addresses another part of the debate, including the debates related to: the internal cohesion of the MST and the surprising fact that radicalization through groupthink has been avoided; the framing of the members identity; and the possibility of alienation of members if violence is used.

By comparing nonviolent and violent groups, trying to identify what differentiates them, Bartlett and Miller (2012) observed a series of in-group dynamics that are present in violent groups but absent in nonviolent groups, or are present in both but in different ways. For example, it is a given that cohesive groups establish a clear concept of "we" and "they", but violent radical groups focus on dehumanizing people who are not part of the group and teaching members how to identify outsiders. This argument is relevant to the case study of the MST. There is a clear difference between "we" and "they" inside this movement: "we" are landless workers and "they" are landowning elites, the oppressors. However, this differentiation is based on a Marxist perspective and essentially socioeconomic – it intends to create awareness of the "other" as an oppressor, not dehumanize them or characterize them as enemies which should be exterminated. Demetriou (2020) also states that the switch from nonviolent to violent tactics of contention are related to race, ethnicity, and nationalism. In other words, the elements that provide group identification for the members are also responsible for establishing possibilities for the movement's trajectory. This is corroborated by Schock, who claims that the fact that the MST membership is based on socioeconomic status, as opposed to race or religions, is one of the reasons why it has avoided radicalization (SCHOCK, 2012).

According to Wolford (2003), the MST attempts to create 'imagined communities' to ensure high engagement of its members. Symbols, slogans and rituals help to create a sense of belonging to the community. In this sense, what differentiates the MST from other agrarian reform movements that failed in the past is that the members who successfully conquer stay mobilized and engaged

311

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

with the movement even after reaching success. The movement's achievements also encourage more people to become members:

The example of successful occupations inspires and encourages other landless families to take the road of direct action. The example of increased production, higher living standards, and greater opportunities for educating and providing a healthy diet for their children as well as a stable family life which characterize successful cooperatives resulting from occupations has stimulated landless rural workers to join the MST's land occupation movements. (PETRAS, 1988)

During the occupations, the members are exposed to educational projects that aim to develop class consciousness. As mentioned above, the members' identity is framed based on socioeconomic status: the members are marginalized landless rural workers or rural workers who received their land with the help of the MST, who are against an economic and political elite of landowners. Even after they achieve success, they still feel connected to the movement, providing food for occupation camps and often joining new occupations to support other members (WOLFORD, 2003). Since this movement has succeeded in promoting brokerage among members from diverse backgrounds, encompassing people with different levels of scholarity, different religions, different ethnicities and even different nationalities, the main element that provides self-identification as a group is their social class, resulting from rural poverty (HAMMOND, 1999). In other words, what unites this varied group are grievances against unequal distribution of land (CALDEIRA, 2008).

Currently, in the MST's website, they claim that the contemporary model of the movement understands itself as a popular movement, encompassing not only landless rural workers, but "the 80% of the population that lives by their own work and that needs a new model of organization of the economy, with income and employment for all." (translated from the MST official website). It is possible to observe that the movement is seeking to expand the framing of the member's identity from "landless rural workers" to a more general working class.

312

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

The process through which this sense of belonging to a community, of group membership, is developed occurs during the land occupation. During the setting operations, several group activities are performed to create a sense of cohesiveness among the members. Courses are offered to the community, group discussions and debates are encouraged, and a solidarity network is established inside the group. Different roles, such as roles in health or education, are also attributed to the members, and they are instructed to perform said roles on different levels, that is, base unit, brigade, state, national, transnational levels (KROGER, 2011). It is possible to observe that said activities are what Taylor defined as communities of practice:

Communities of practice refer to shared and emergent sociocultural practices when people with common goals interact towards achieving those goals. It is a form of collective learning that frequently has informal as well as formal qualities. Joint activities, discussions, and common agendas are features that relate to effective communities of practice, and which can generate behavior change. (TAYLOR, 2010)

The MST has been successful in maintaining cohesion in a movement that encompasses more than one million members who are divided in small settlements: even if the members do not personally know all the other members, they still share a sense of belonging to the same community. However, Caldeira (2008) highlights that this movement is not totally free of internal conflict: movement leaders and settlers have different understandings on topics such as community and land, which creates tension inside the movement. The leaders offer an idyllic version of life in the countryside, ignoring the settlers' accounts of harshness and struggle to survive. Acquiring land, for the leaders, equals the objective of building an idyllic rural community, whereas for the settlers it means food security and individual independence: a disagreement on the framing of the movement's struggle. However, even in view of such disagreements and internal conflicts, the members up until this point have not diverged from the movement into factions or radicalized subdivisions.

This description offers a basis to address the three arguments referred to in the beginning of this section: that the fact that the MST is organized and cohesive and the framing of the members identity is not based on race, ethnicity or nationalism, but on socioeconomic status are elements that have prevented the MST from getting radicalized, while violence is also avoided because it would alienate possible supporters (SCHOCK 2012; SCHOCK 2015). The role of identity framing is clear, and it is also a convincing argument that since the MST's support basis is very diverse, adopting violent approaches would be a bad strategy, since the movement could possibly lose part of its supporters. The role of cohesiveness, however, seems to be overstated by the previous literature, since it overlooks internal disputes. Thus, two other arguments are added to the set of explanations: the movement's identity framing and consequent diverse membership, segments of which would possibly stop supporting the movement if violent methods were adopted.

MST's ideology and culture

The movement's leadership is organized in a non-hierarchical manner, remaining a grassroots movement in which each settlement (comprising 10 to 15 families) chooses their own representatives. According to Hammond, the combination of internal discipline and external legality allows the movement to achieve victories (HAMMOND, 1999, p. 478). This non-hierarchical organization of the movement is also a reason why it is non-violent, since it avoids fragmentation.

The review of the relevant literature has provided a list of three convincing explanations to why the MST has avoided fragmentation and radicalization: it has achieved a relatively high level of success; its identity is based on socioeconomic factors; and it is formed by a diverse base of supporters, part of which would potentially stop supporting the movement if violent strategies were adopted. Now, this paper argues that while these three arguments are convincing, it is clear that a major factor has been neglected: the movement's ideological basis, which is based on libertarian education and focus the struggle against power structures that create inequality and

oppression, and not against the oppressors themselves; and on a cohesive element referred to as *mística*, which is based on liberation theology, that in turn is one of the influences of Paulo Freire's method.

As mentioned above, the Catholic Church played an important role in the foundation of the MST. Christian Based Communities (CEBs) are Catholic institutions that were actively involved in supporting and guiding the movement (CALDEIRA, 2008, p. 151). Therefore, one of the bases of MST's ideology, largely discussed in the previous literature (SCHOCK, 2012; SCHOCK, 2015) is the theology of liberation. This theology is the basis for what is referred to as the movement's *mistica*, which is "an expressive performance, mainly nonverbal, that incorporates themes central to the goals of the movement and affirms confidence in the achievability of those goals" (HAMMOND, 2014). This performance expresses the core principles and goals of the movement and encourages members to stay engaged in achieving those goals, claiming that the movement has a mystical unity. It enhances the sense of solidarity and identity in the members. The liberation theology that originated this *mistica* emerged in some branches of the Catholic Church, which named themselves the "popular Church", and was popular in Latin America between the 1960s and 1970s. According to this theology, Christians should establish as a priority helping the poor aiming to achieve social change, including agrarian reform (HAMMOND, 2014). Also, this theology adopted as an ideal the principles of popular education, theorized and popularized by Paulo Freire. The *mistica* is an important way of implementing Freire's educational theory.

It should be noted that although the Catholic Church influenced the MST's ideology, it is not a religious movement. As discussed hereinafter, the Catholic Church is one among other agents that formed the movement's ideology. As mentioned above, the only factor which offers group identification to the members is their socioeconomic status, and members come from different religions, including atheists. Liberation theology was responsible for popularizing the urge to resist social inequality and provided a mystical sense of unity to the movement, but its influence does not go beyond that.

315

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

Before discussing the role of education, it is also important to highlight the role of Marxism and class struggle notion for the movement's ideology. As mentioned before, the Marxist approach is used by the MST to describe the inequality in land distribution in Brazil and its social consequences, referring to the class struggle between peasants and landowners. Moreover, they understand that a conflict between the peasantry and the landowners is natural due to structural reasons: grievances against unequal land distribution. This Marxist ideology provides cohesion for a group of people that otherwise would not have any unifying characteristic: socioeconomic characteristics unify them. Moreover, the MST adopted as icons to inspire the movement revolutionary figures such as Che Guevara, Zumbi dos Palmares, and Antonio Conselheiro (BRANDFORD, 2002). Moreover, although the MST is non-institutionalized and is not explicitly affiliated to any party, the Brazilian Communist Party was also responsible for organizing and supporting the MST. Other left-wing parties, such as the Workers Party (PT) also showed support to the movement due to converging ideologies.

Schock (2015, p. 504) lists as elements that integrate MST's ideology the Liberation Theology, Marxism, and Class Conflict. While all said elements are relevant, the role of Paulo Freire's educational theory should also be highligted. In their official website, the MST claims that

Education is one of the priority areas of action of the MST, which since its inception has developed educational processes and included as a priority the struggle for universalization of the right to a public school of social quality, from childhood to university. Understanding that access and permanence is essential to insert the entire social base in the construction of a new rural project and for socialist transformations. (Translated from the MST's official website)

Paulo Freire supported the movement until his death in 1997, and his education theory is still one of the pillars of MST's ideology. Freire's educational philosophy focused on educating poor, marginalized and uneducated people, aiming to promote literacy through a process of raising awareness of social issues. One of the means to achieve this is by promoting political engagement. Therefore, the

316

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

teaching materials are not regular textbooks, but are extracted from the real life of the learners, and involves engaging the students in performative activities, which goes beyond regular passive classroom activities. For example, pamphlets are produced and circulated among the members of the movement using simple language to explain the movement's goals, the history of peasant struggles, and why capitalism is the source of inequality, poverty and the structural problems against which the MST struggles (HAMMOND, 1999).

The objective of this approach is making the members aware of the structural causes of their poverty, as opposed to a deterministic, alienated view that is naturally imposed to them. (HAMMOND, 2014). Moreover, there is no hierarchy between teachers and students, and both are usually members of the same community. Freire claimed that education involves noncognitive elements instead of purely intellectual activity, and that education for oppressed people should promote independent and critical thinking, thus promoting liberation. More than educational, Freire's education model is deeply political (HAMMOND, 2014). While describing the effects of this pedagogical approach, Freire argues that this method of building critical skills during the educational process prevents fanatism, since it results in the insertion of the oppressed subjects in the historical process, using the skills acquired to seek for validation and express their dissatisfaction (FREIRE, 2005, p. 32). Freire also highlights that the aim of libertarian education is that the oppressed will build and recover their humanity by becoming conscious of their condition, and the process of fighting against oppression and inequality aims to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor, instead of turning the oppressed into the oppressor. This perspective has influenced the MST's framing of their struggle and identity: "we" are the oppressed and "they" are the oppressors, and the aim is not to defeat and subjugate the oppressors, but to work towards promoting social change that will humanize both the oppressed and the oppressors. Thus, the Freirian education method includes the steps of first helping the oppressed to recognize their situation and next struggling towards changing the structure that allows this oppression to happen, liberating themselves and the oppressors as

317

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

well. This ideology seems to be essential in molding the MST's nonviolent approach, since although the members of the movement have a clear notion of "we" and "they", their struggle is not against "they", but against the oppressive structure itself. Instead of dehumanizing and attacking who they recognize as the other, the oppressor, the Freirian framework leads the MST members to recognize that "they", the oppressors, are the result of an unfair structure, and changing this structure will liberate both "we" and "they". The act of rebelling against the power structures that create oppression is not based on hate, but on love and humanity (FREIRE, 2005, p. 59).

Since the MST's emergence, education is a central pillar and a major commitment. Tends are built inside the land occupations to serve as schools, and the community members are educated about social problems, politics, and learn to think critically, from children to adults. In their website, the MST describes their traveling schools as "a school that is aimed at the entire camped population, the itinerant school shack is built before the housing shack and also has the function of becoming a meeting center for the entire encamped community" (Translated from the MST's official website). Moreover, children and teenagers who are raised in those land occupations are encouraged to pursue specialized higher education. In their official website, the MST mentions that two thousand schools were built inside, ensuring free education for two hundred thousand kids, teenagers and adults. It is also mentioned that the movement has developed more than one hundred graduate courses in partnership with state universities.

Due to this framework, most activities in the movement gain a symbolic meaning of which all the members are aware. For example, the act of occupying a piece of land (cutting the wire) is not only pragmatic, but also symbolic: "The act of occupation becomes the fuse for a profound process of personal and political transformation" (BRANFORD, 2002). It is a way of challenging power structures. The members are taught that the only way of achieving change is through gaining knowledge and using it against the landowners and their political allies.

318

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

The elements that compose the MST's ideology are interconnected and complement each other. The Catholic liberation theology is influenced by Marxist class struggle and supports an inclusive education for the poor, which promotes critical thinking, as proposed by Paulo Freire. It only brings this context of fighting against social inequalities to a religious, mystic perspective. Marxism is the very essence behind the ideological base for the movement, and it provides to the MST member a notion of group membership based on social class. Freire's libertarian education makes Marxist theory accessible to the members, who are usually illiterate peasants. The Freirian approach intends to promote social change by promoting critical education to oppressed people. The members become aware not only of social problems, but also ecological issues arising from a Capitalist model of production and Neoliberal policies.

The MST's method of relying on the existing legislation, claiming for compliance, is also taught to all members. They learn that they have a legitimate right to land, which most of them did not know before. Therefore, adopting a violent approach seems to be off the radar of this movement so far not only due to the fact that they are able to achieve success with a rightful resistance strategy, but also because the Freirian educational approach informs the members that the way to achieve social change is not using guns or violence, but learning critical thinking through a process of de–alienation and humanization (FREIRE, 2005), learning about their rights, occupying new spaces (such as universities), and promoting a bottom–up social change.

Conclusion

The previous literature in the field of Contentious Politics identified six main elements that influence a nonviolent contentious movement to avoid the processes of factionalization and radicalization: 1. the influence of the characteristics of the political environment and political regime; 2. the level of success achieved; 3. the level of autonomy; 4. the level of organization and cohesiveness; 5. the framing of the members identity; and 6. the fact that the adoption of violent measures could be strategically counterintuitive since it

319

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

would alienate supporters. While the influence of 2, 5, and 6 are verifiable in the case of the MST, the relevance of 1, 3, and 4 are debatable. In the case of 1, it is not accurate since the MST has been active in different national and subnational political regimes, and still consistently adopted nonviolent strategies. I the case of 3 and 4, the history of the MST shows that autonomy and cohesiveness cannot be generalized and are often overestimated by the literature. Thus, three main explanatory elements are left: the facts that the MST has achieved a relatively high level of success, its members identity is based on socioeconomic status, and part of its diverse base would be against the use of violent measures are reasons why the MST has remained a largely nonviolent social movement.

This paper proposes that the role played by the MST's ideology should be added to this list, especially considering the role of the Freirean emancipatory and empowering education philosophy in preventing radicalization. The Marxist education creates an understanding that all members of the movement belong to the same social class, that is, it promotes group identification, providing unity and cohesion and preventing fragmentation, which would be a first step towards radicalization of subgroups. The *mística*, originated from the Catholic liberation theology, also provides to the members an impression that the movement is unified by a mystical force, even if not strictly religious. Moreover, even if group membership is an important element of the MST, and successfully creating an identification of "us" and "them" is one of the reasons why the movement has succeeded until now, the movement is not under the risk of becoming radicalized through groupthink or group behavior shaping since critical thinking and emancipatory education are core principles of the movement. The Freirian framework instructs the struggle promoted by the oppressed will be beneficial to everyone, as it liberates both the oppressed ("we") and the oppressors ("they"). Also, the fact that the movement adopts a non-hierarchical structure, also based in Paulo Freire's theory, prevents a situation where a leader with violent ideals would change the movement's non-violent strategy and ideology.

320

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

Among the three elements that compose the MST's ideology, namely, liberation theology, Marxism, and libertarian education, the last offers the framework which is responsible for an understanding for the members of this social movement that education is the key to social change, and learning about their rights gives them more power than engaging in violent activities. It frames the ultimate enemy as the oppressive social structure, from which the oppressors are byproducts. The fact that their worries are also related to ecological sustainability also gives the members a broader perspective: the rightfulness of the movement is important for the members, since it gives them leverage to achieve bigger goals, which go beyond land acquisition. This shared understanding is only possible through an intense effort to educate the members in social, political and ecological issues in a way that they will understand and apply to real world situations.

321

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

REFERENCES

BARTLETT, Jamie; MILLER, Carl. The edge of violence: Towards telling the difference between violent and non-violent radicalization. **Terrorism and Political Violence,** 24.1, 1–21, 2012.

BRASIL. [Constituição (1988)]. Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil. Brasília, DF: Senado Federal, 2016.

BRANDFORD, Sue; ROCHA, Jan. **Cutting the wire: The story of the landless movement in Brazil.** Londres: Latin America Bureau, 305, 2002.

CALDEIRA, Rute. 'My land, your social transformation': Conflicts within the landless people movement (MST). Rio de Janeiro: **Journal of Rural Studies,** 24.2: 150–160, 2008

DELLA PORTA, Donatella. Radicalization: A relational perspective. **Annual Review of Political Science.** 21, 461–474, 2018.

FREIRE, Paulo. **Pedagogia do Oprimido.** Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 42, 2005.

GALEANO, E. **As veias abertas da América Latina.** Tradução de Galeno de Freitas. 39ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2000. Título original: Las venas abiertas de America Latina. (Coleção Estudos Latino-Americanos, v.12).

GERMANI, Guiomar. **Expropriados: terra e água: o conflito de Itaipu.** Canoas: Editora da ULBRA, 2003.

HAMMOND, John L. Law and disorder: the Brazilian landless farmworkers' movement. **Bulletin of Latin American Research.** 18.4, 469–489, 1999.

HAMMOND, John L. Míst018ica, meaning and popular education in the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement. **Interface: a journal for and about social movements** 6.1, 372–391, 2014.

322

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

KAY, C. Why East Asia overtook Latin America: agrarian reform, industrialisation and development. **Third world quarterly**, 23(6), 1073–1102, 2002.

KROGER, Markus. Promotion of contentious agency as a rewarding movement strategy: evidence from the MST–paper industry conflicts in Brazil. **The Journal of Peasant Studies**, 38.2, 435–458, 2011.

McADAM, D., TARROW, S.; TILLY, C. To map contentious politics. **Mobilization: An International Quarterly**, 1(1), 17–34, 1996.

McADAM, Doug; TARROW, Sidney; TILLY, Charles. **Dynamics of contention.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

MEEK, David. Learning as territoriality: The political ecology of education in the Brazilian landless workers' movement. **The Journal of Peasant Studies**, 42.6, 1179–1200, 2015.

MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES RURAIS SEM TERRA: Quem Somos – MST. Acesso em 19 Jan, 2023. https://mst.org.br/quem-somos/

O'BRIEN, Kevin J. Rightful resistance. **World Politics**, 49.1, 31–55, 1996.

PETRAS, James. The political and social basis of regional variation in land occupations in Brazil. **The Journal of Peasant Studies** 25.4, 124–133, 1998.

SCHOCK, Kurt. Rightful radical resistance: Mass mobilization and land struggles in India and Brazil. **Mobilization: An International Quarterly**. 20.4, 493–515, 2015.

SCHOCK, Kurt. Land struggles in the global south: Strategic innovations in Brazil and India. **Strategies for social change**: 221–244, 2012.

TAYLOR, Max. Is terrorism a group phenomenon?. **Aggression and Violent Behavior**, 15.2, 121–129, 2010.

TEUBAL, M. Agrarian reform and social movements in the age of globalization: Latin America at the dawn of the twenty–first century. **Latin American Perspectives**, 36(4), 9–20, 2009.

TILLY, Charles; TARROW; Sidney G. **Contentious politics**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

323

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).

WOLFORD, Wendy. Producing community: the MST and land reform settlements in Brazil. **Journal of Agrarian Change** 3.4, 500–520, 2003.

324

CSOnline – Revista Eletrônica de Ciências Sociais, Juiz de Fora, n. 36 (2022).