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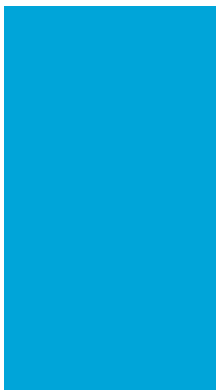
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**Coalitional Choices and  
Strategic Challenges:**

The Landless Movement in Brazil, 1970–2005

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The dramatic emergence of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST), in Brazil—involving hundreds of thousands of families—is a remarkable political phenomenon. As of August 2003, the MST boasted roughly one million members and had gained over five million hectares of land for approximately 350,000 families (Wright and Wolford 2003). However, the number of rural workers in Latin America has been declining over the past 40 years, and migration from rural to urban areas has increased during this same period. Under these conditions, one would not expect peasants to engage in sustained collective action pressing the boundaries of social and political change, yet the MST has been doing exactly that since the early 1980s. At the same time, the movement has charted a distinctive course in terms of its coalitional choices. Originally a staunch ally of the Catholic Church, the MST later eschewed all external associations and became fiercely independent, only to reach out to a wide range of international allies ten years later. This raises the question: what are some of the steps involved as social movements make transitions from dependence to autonomy and back again?

In this paper, I explore some of the dimensions, impacts, and challenges of coalitional choice, an area that has not, until recently, attracted much interest within social movement theory. In *Activists Beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink (1998) were among the first to articulate the relationship between social movements and their allies in the international arena. The “boomerang effect” model of transnational activism—in which domestic organizations seek out international allies who in turn pressure the state—offers a vivid and incisive example of the benefits that transnational alliances bring to social movements. Keck and Sikkink briefly note that these relationships “can produce considerable tensions,” (1998:13) yet what, exactly, these tensions entail is somewhat less clear.

This paper contributes to the literature on contentious politics by advancing a more nuanced discussion of the risks and trade-offs inherent in the coalitional choices that social movements make. Forming external alliances entails risk, and alliance partners are not all alike. Moreover, a

coalitional choice that was optimal at one moment in a movement's lifespan might lead to greater difficulties later on. In short, there are costs and benefits associated with different coalitional patterns, and changes in these patterns can both precipitate and resolve movement difficulties.

In the first section, I discuss the risks and trade-offs that accompany particular coalitional choices and introduce a typology of different alliance patterns that social movements might form. I then illustrate this argument using the MST as a case study, tracing the specific alliance patterns that have emerged throughout the movement's history in Brazil. Finally, relying on interviews with MST activists within the leadership structure as well as at the grassroots level, I discuss how recent changes within the movement's membership base might affect their future strategic choices and attendant alliance patterns.<sup>1</sup>

## COALITIONAL CHOICE IN THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The social movement literature is replete with theories that explain collective action, yet little attention has been given to systematizing their respective elements. In the classic model it is assumed that individuals mobilize due to the psychological intensity of their grievances which have their roots in structural factors (Kornhauser 1959; Smelser 1962; Davies 1962). In contrast, resource mobilization theory posits that since discontent is relatively constant over time, collective action is explained through the availability of resources, such as funding, leaders, and networks (Olson 1965; Gamson 1975; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Building on the resource mobilization model, political process theorists incorporated the importance of political opportunity structures and a persuasive shared ideology among movement participants (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1998). More recently, "new social movement" approaches concentrated their attention on why actors mobilize around particular collective identities in the first place (Offe 1985; Touraine 1981; Melluci 1996). This has brought some theorists full-circle to addressing the psychological forces, or grievances, that give rise to collective identities.

Most scholars recognize that these models are not mutually exclusive, and calls for synthesis are commonplace. Yet while much current research draws from all of these approaches,

it is necessary to consider how these elements may interact within existing and growing social movements. These organizations make many decisions in the process of aggregating their demands and articulating them within the political sphere, and to understand their choices, it is beneficial to consider them within a dynamic context. One useful way in which to do so can be found by framing grievances and resources within the context of coalitional choice—the extent to which a movement forms alliances with other organizations or pursues an autonomous course.

## ALLIANCE PATTERNS AND STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

### UNIVERSAL TRADE-OFFS

Social movements confront many strategic predicaments over the course of their lifespan, and the question of coalitional choice is one of the most salient and commonplace. This predicament arises as movements consider strategies and tactics; in other words, what they should actually do in order to achieve their desired ends. One important strategic dimension involves coalitional choice—a recurring, long-term predicament that social movements face both at their formative stages and throughout their life cycle.

As a concept, “autonomy” can suggest various meanings, ranging from a more restrictive definition (a movement that eschews affiliations with all external organizations) to one that is more inclusive; for example, a movement that maintains coalitional partners, but remains independent from their influence. In this paper, I consider a movement to be autonomous if it meets the latter definition: when the individuals involved in the movement exercise primary control over the movement’s strategies and goals. The key aspect of an autonomous social movement is that its members are free to determine the movement’s agenda and priorities without undue external influence. A movement that lacks external associations is clearly in this position, but a movement with a high degree of internal resources may also fall into this category.

There are significant benefits associated with “going it alone.” Most notably, an autonomous social movement enjoys sufficient freedom to choose its own strategy independent from the



ideology and tactics of others. Without allies to appease, the movement has the opportunity to craft its own agenda and select whichever course of action seems best suited to achieving its goals.

However, if there are many competing grievances within the movement itself, it can be difficult for members to decide which direction to take. Without external assistance in focusing the movements' goals, participants may compete internally for resources to implement their individual projects. As a result, the movement may risk dissolving into numerous factions with none able to engage in sustained resistance.

An autonomous social movement is also solely dependent on its own resources to organize and implement collective action. Developing alliances can be attractive to social movements for many reasons, most notably for the infusion of resources they can provide. Organizational assistance of this sort is often especially welcome during the process of movement formation, when internal resources are likely to be scarce. And as movements evolve, continued internal capacity-building is integral to their ability to remain autonomous. A movement lacking adequate internal resources—and the allies that can provide them—may lose the ability to engage in collective action, thereby risking dissolution. Grassroots movements comprised primarily of poor and working-class individuals regularly find that the networks, skilled leadership, and financial assistance provided by alliance partners can help the movement address its goals more effectively. Another advantage of securing alliances is that external organizations may lend a degree of legitimacy to the movement's goals and actions. Social movements that advance an agenda outside of the ideological mainstream may be considered less radical if existing, respected organizations outwardly support the movement.

For many social movements, especially in their formative stages, the advantages of forming alliances—namely for the resources and credibility they can provide—often outweigh potential risks. In a coalitional strategy based on alliances, a social movement forms partnerships with outside actors in order to combine resources, knowledge, and capabilities to achieve a common

purpose. These outside actors may be domestic organizations, such as unions, political parties, and local nonprofit organizations, or international organizations and transnational advocacy networks, or both, depending on the type and extent of alliances pursued by the movement.

However, external organizations often have their own interests and agendas in mind. Groups that contribute resources may believe that doing so gives them authority to drive the local movement's ideological and tactical agendas.<sup>2</sup> On the part of the ally, this can be a rational decision: if an associated movement engages in controversial actions, it may reflect unfavorably on the alliance partner as well as the movement, so allies have a practical incentive to influence movement activities to at least some degree. If the divergence between the movement's grievances and their allies' agenda is small, it is not a significant drawback. When a large discrepancy exists, however, grassroots members might be excluded from leadership and decision-making roles.

What is more, a disjuncture between a movement and its allies in terms of the agenda to be advanced may threaten movement unity. Mobilization is more likely when all members of a movement share common goals, because as grievances multiply, resources used in the struggle for their redress must be spread more thinly (Burdick 1992: 183). If a movement's goals do not closely match those of their allies, at best it may ultimately take longer for the movement to address its own unique goals. More realistically, when resources are insufficient to cover all competing agenda items, the local movement may find that it needs to fit its priorities to the interests of its allies, which can be destabilizing at the grassroots level. If activists are encouraged to advance causes that are not truly their own, local-level interest and participation in movement activities may dramatically decline.

#### PARTICULAR STRENGTHS AND SHORTCOMINGS

While all alliances share the benefits and drawbacks discussed above, there also exist patterns within these parameters that are localized to particular kinds of alliances. Once an alliance has been made, the nature and degree of the trade-offs often differ with respect to the coalitional

partners in question. To highlight the specialized risks associated with different alliance partners, Table 1 below illustrates some possible implications of forming alliances with four common partners: political parties, unions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the Catholic Church.

**Table 1: Specialized Costs and Benefits of Common Social Movement Allies**

	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Risks</b>
<b>Political Parties</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can craft and implement public policy favorable to the movement</li> <li>● Can foster changes within the government to meet some of the movement's goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Might pressure the movement to curtail illegal tactics or actions that offend voters</li> <li>● Movement members may have different political ideologies; this could truncate the range of potential movement members</li> <li>● No guarantee that once in power, a party will respond to the movement's needs</li> </ul>
<b>Unions</b>	Can advocate on behalf of the movement in the workplace	Preferencing demands of union members may not benefit movement members working outside the formal sector
<b>NGOs</b>	Can influence domestic policymakers by applying pressure in the international arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Might pressure the movement to curtail illegal tactics or actions that offend donors</li> <li>● Policy priorities in the international context may be different from those in the local context</li> </ul>
<b>Catholic Church</b>	Can provide the movement with moral legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Might pressure the movement to curtail actions perceived as immoral</li> <li>● Hierarchical Church structure enables support to be withdrawn relatively quickly</li> </ul>

### *Political Parties*

In some respects, political parties are natural allies for social movements. Sartori conceived of parties as vehicles that organize the chaotic public will, as diverse interests are channeled into a specific set of demands and policies (Sartori 1971: 25–28). Yet when parties are insufficient in expressing the voice of the citizens within the political arena, community associations and

social movements often arise to fill this need. As alliance partners, political parties offer a notable advantage to social movements: when in power, parties can craft and implement public policy that is favorable to the movement's interests. This is a significant benefit, as social movements lack the ability to engage directly in democratic interest intermediation. By joining forces with a political party, movements can influence the direction of public policy, changing the system from within to advance their interests. In turn, parties are often eager to engage the support of social movements, as they represent an organized membership base that can be easily mobilized in support of the party on election day.

Yet while the potential for reward is great, the risks of allying with political parties are also quite significant. First, the movement may be encouraged to curtail particular tactics—especially extralegal activities—in order to retain party support. If a movement engages in radical actions, mainstream citizens may associate the party with the movement, and the votes gained from movement members may be insufficient to offset votes lost from more moderate citizens. As the party has an incentive to gain and retain power, this constant pressure will almost certainly serve to moderate social movement tactics.

In addition, movement members may hold various political ideologies, and a formal alliance with one particular party might truncate the range of potential movement members, and/or foster internal discontent. What is more, even if a social movement accepts these limitations as a reasonable trade-off for the chance to directly influence public policy, there is no guarantee that, once in power, a party will actually respond to the movement's needs. Governing parties often find that, irrespective of their particular ideological perspective, they must operate within a political and economic context that curtails their ability to enact public policy. Social movements may discover that political parties prove to be “fair weather” allies.

### *Unions*

Union support has enabled many grassroots social movements to flourish worldwide. Most recently, many social movements have emerged in opposition to the working conditions

engendered by the neoliberal economic model. Pressures for flexibility are falling squarely on workers themselves, as production units become smaller and seasonal, piece-work employment leads to greater levels of worker insecurity. However, unions find that they enjoy relatively less bargaining power than they did in previous decades. A union–movement alliance has the potential to give citizens a greater collective voice in pressuring both employers and the state for labor reform.

However, as structures of interest intermediation, unions fall short for much the same reason that social movements do: both lack the ability to directly craft public policy. Short of a revolutionary shift in state power, movements and parties can only advocate on behalf of their specific constituencies—they cannot enact or implement concrete changes within the existing political arena. What is more, while labor rights are often an important issue for social movements, they are rarely the only issue at hand. A movement that preferences the demands of union members may lose support from movement activists who are employed outside the formal labor sector.

### *NGOs*

Because the range of NGOs that exist both domestically and internationally is extremely diverse, it is often difficult to draw any concrete generalizations regarding their activities. Yet in terms of their alliances with social movements, some common benefits and drawbacks emerge. Most notably, as independent organizations that are unaffiliated with any particular political party, NGOs provide a nonpartisan voice when they advocate on behalf of a given social movement. Their formal support can provide social movements with legitimacy; for example, a movement that is relatively unknown and/or perceived as outside the mainstream can gain respectability almost overnight through association with a widely known NGO. In addition, international NGOs can influence domestic policymakers on behalf of a particular movement by applying pressure in the international arena. As discussed above, Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) “boomerang pattern” illustrates the power that transnational organizations regularly wield in this arena.

Finally, NGOs often cultivate networks of activists, providing fertile ground for an isolated social movement to expand its store of social capital.

Nevertheless, there are some risks for a social movement in forming an alliance with an NGO. Like political parties, NGOs would be expected to pressure social movements to refrain from overly radical or illegal tactics. As nonpartisan organizations, NGOs have no practical need to retain the support of voters, so they do not risk losing power in the same manner that political parties do. From that perspective, they may have more flexibility to tolerate a wider range of non-mainstream social movement activity. Yet instead of losing the support of voters, NGOs risk losing the support of their members—and more significantly, their donor base—both domestically and internationally. Consequently, there is reason to expect that NGOs would apply the same moderating pressures on social movement activity that political parties exert.

At the same time, policy priorities in the international arena may be different from those within the local context of the social movement. Issues that are broadly salient to both movements and NGOs, such as human rights or environmental protection, may not be understood in quite the same way with respect to concrete actions. For example, both an international NGO and a social movement organized around indigenous land rights might share a general interest in environmental protection, yet diverge when translating this goal into a practical objective; i.e., should the indigenous group retain the right to use a given plot of land as it sees fit, or should the land be preserved as an ecological park? Issues such as these might put the interests of NGOs in conflict with those of a local social movement, even though they may appear highly complementary at first glance.

### *The Catholic Church*

As an organization, the Catholic Church has an interest in evangelization—proclaiming and promoting their faith worldwide. At times, this interest may intersect with lending support to social movements that share the vision of social justice as articulated by the Church. In practice, this support is rarely institutionalized from the top-down; more realistically, individual bishops

and priests connect with local movement activists. However, the institutional structure of which Catholic religious leaders are a part can provide channels of communication, access to networks of like-minded individuals, meeting spaces, an organizational framework, and significant financial support. Other types of allies offer these material and social resources to a greater or lesser degree, but if it chooses to do so, the Catholic Church can provide a fledgling social movement with virtually all of these organizational resources at once.

#### THE MST CASE: NAVIGATING THE DILEMMAS OF COALITIONAL CHOICE

Much has already been written about the history of the MST as well as its spectacular ability to gain land for its members.<sup>3</sup> However, making appropriate coalitional choices has arguably been crucial to these successes. The MST is an ideal vehicle for studying the dilemmas brought about through coalitional choice because the movement has repeatedly confronted this predicament over the course of its lifespan. As different combinations of grievances and resources have posed challenges for the movement, changes in alliance patterns have both precipitated and resolved these difficulties. From the movement's perspective, particular coalitional choices and alliance patterns allowed the MST to address particular threats, but each strategic choice brought its own opportunities and risks in turn.

#### MOVEMENT FORMATION: THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL HOSTS

##### *Rural Modernization and Its Unintended Consequences*

Like most Latin American countries, highly unequal patterns of land tenure have existed in Brazil since colonial times, and small farmers have faced significant obstacles in terms of access to credit, capital, and markets for their agricultural products. However, the MST's original grievances were unintentionally created through a program of agricultural modernization instituted by the Brazilian military government during the 1970s.

To encourage the production of export crops, abundant subsidized credit was provided to plantation owners and cattle ranchers, while small producers were slowly crowded out of the

market. As agribusinesses expanded into settled areas in southern Brazil, farmers found that high land prices and production costs combined with plummeting prices for domestic crops resulted in an inability to invest in land for their children as had been traditionally done (Carter 2002: 132–133; Rone 1992: 3–5). As land prices skyrocketed beyond their means, the children of small homesteaders found themselves landless as adults, thus fragmenting tens of thousands of small-scale farmers (Wright 2003). Cattle ranches and farms relying on export crops, such as wheat and soybeans, also required far less peasant labor than was previously needed. For example, efficient (and costly) new machinery, fertilizers, and chemical pesticides rendered soybean and wheat production capital- rather than labor-intensive enterprises, leading to a sharp decrease in the amount of rural labor required for agricultural production. Many landless peasants who had been surviving on income earned as day laborers quickly faced a shortage of jobs and declining wages.<sup>4</sup>

As land increased in value, a corresponding interest in land speculation also spread throughout the country, and both domestic and foreign agribusinesses raced to purchase land, then allowed it to lie fallow to facilitate a quick resale (Rone 1992: 3). Government tax incentives also gave opportunists a way to turn a quick profit: for generations, many peasants had farmed the land without holding an official land title, and this enabled *grileiros*, or “land-grabbers,” to purchase an official title to the land, evict the residents, and then sell the land for a higher price (Sallinger-McBride and Roberts 1998).

At the same time, hydroelectric dams and reservoirs were also constructed to provide sufficient water and energy to the plantations, but in many cases the government misinformed—or simply failed to inform—small landowners regarding areas that were to be flooded in the process. Once the former owners had been unexpectedly displaced, government promises of resettlement often went unfulfilled (Scherer-Warren 1988: 245). What is more, while the government encouraged migration to the Amazon as a solution to rural displacement, promoting the region as “a land without people for a people without land,” new arrivals found that much of



the area was in fact occupied by indigenous peoples, land speculators, and large ranch owners, all of whom resisted the influx of settlers (Wright 2003).

*Combination of Grievances and Resources*

Agricultural modernization and its attendant economic strains provided the initial grievances of many rural workers, but their demands were highly fragmented. Those displaced due to hydroelectric projects had been promised land to replace what they had recently lost and wanted to reclaim arable land within their home states. In contrast, the homesteaders who were unable to buy land on the open market wanted more affordable credit lines, along with higher prices for domestic food crops, so that they could purchase land for their children as their parents had done for them. Finally, the group of peasants that had been surviving as wage-workers wanted wages restored to their former levels as well as increased opportunities for agricultural employment. All were struggling, yet while each group held intensely salient grievances, little consensus existed on how to resolve the situation to the satisfaction of all actors. Moreover, although these different grievances were extremely complementary, they were not readily recognized as such by the peasants involved.

At the same time, Brazilian peasants possessed few resources with which to collectively resist. In 1970, 73 percent of all rural households were below the poverty line, and over half (58 percent) of these were classified as indigent (CEPAL 1995). Rural illiteracy was widespread, communities had been displaced over large distances, and peasant networks were virtually nonexistent. Landless wage-workers especially suffered from a lack of resources, as they represented “the poorest of the poor in the Brazilian countryside” (Navarro 2000: 37).

What is more, the various groups of landless workers did not share a collective identity, and social capital was scarce as well. Isolated acts of resistance were evident throughout Brazil during the 1970s as some newly landless peasants spontaneously occupied unproductive, government-owned land (Carter 2002: 117–18) and others who had been displaced by dams sabotaged the construction of hydroelectric projects in various ways (Scherer-Warren 1988).

While highly salient grievances propelled each of these groups to engage in isolated acts of protest, each lacked sufficient resources for sustained collective action. Given the lack of networks through which to communicate plans and coordinate activity, widespread resistance was inordinately difficult to organize.

*The Catholic Church as an Institutional Host*

With fragmented grievances and extremely low resources, Brazilian peasants were unlikely to form a social movement independently. It was at this point that the involvement of the Catholic Church proved essential. The Church was not always on the side of the rural poor in Brazil; it had traditionally aligned with elite interests and encouraged peasants to focus on spiritual rewards in the next life, not the hardships of the present day. However, inspired by Vatican II and the reformist social doctrine of liberation theology, the Church slowly became a voice of resistance and an advocate for the poor.<sup>5</sup> This, combined with the simultaneous organization of Christian Base Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, or CEBs), provided fertile ground for the growth of the MST.

In the 1970s, the Catholic Church was facing two institutional challenges worldwide: the increasing shortage of priests and the encroachment of Evangelical Protestant churches upon their mass base.<sup>6</sup> In response, CEBs were created to rejuvenate the spiritual life of the community, while at the same time allowing members to undertake services that had previously been provided by priests (Houtzager 1997:98; Sallinger-McBride and Roberts 1998). However, as liberation theology ushered in a radical new way of framing the problem of poverty through a “preferential option for the poor,” Brazilian priests—who had experienced firsthand the devastation that agricultural modernization had wrought upon rural communities—galvanized CEB members to take action for agrarian reform.<sup>7</sup>

The Catholic Church was an ideal institutional host for the incipient landless workers’ movement. Within the CEBs, landless peasants met regularly to discuss the relevance of liberation theology to their problems and, with the assistance of religious leaders, to devise ways

of solving them. These opportunities allowed CEB members to develop leadership, decision-making, and organizational skills—resources which are essential to initiate and sustain collective action. At the same time, each individual CEB not only provided services to the rural poor within its vicinity but was also linked to other CEBs through a wide-ranging verbal communication network (Rothman and Oliver 1999). At the local level, individual Catholic parishes provided financial and organizational support to the CEBs, yet each parish was linked to others at the regional and national level through the Church hierarchy. The Church also created a new organization, the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra* or CPT), to address agrarian reform in Brazil by fostering the growth of rural activism. The CPT advised rural workers of their legal rights, helped them bring and defend violations of these rights in court, and built a network of community organizations throughout the country working for land reform (Houtzager 1997: 99).

It is clear that the Catholic Church, motivated by religious convictions, sought out fragmented groups of landless peasants and helped them coalesce into a social movement. As comprehensive land reform became intertwined with the Church's efforts to reduce rural poverty, the network of CEBs not only served as ideal training grounds for social movement activists but also enabled different groups of landless peasants to communicate and thereby recognize that their grievances, though distinct, were highly complementary. In this way, the financial and organizational support provided by the Church was crucial in fostering the emergence of coordinated collective action among the landless in Brazil.

#### *The Church as an Ally: Risks and Trade-Offs*

While the benefits of an alliance with the Church were numerous, there were risks associated with this coalitional position. Entering into such a strong association with one large, powerful organization meant that the risk of eventual co-optation was high; in fact, given that the Church was the movement's institutional host, one could argue that the movement had been co-opted from its very beginning. As the dominant partner, the Catholic Church controlled positions of

power, chose movement priorities, directed the decision-making process, and vetoed tactics they perceived as inappropriate or threatening. Moreover, it is likely that incipient peasant leaders would have been prone to view themselves as subordinate to the priests and bishops who held definitive positions of authority within the established Church hierarchy. In this sense, the emerging landless movement lacked independence as it was created and sustained by the Catholic Church.

Yet the benefits provided by the Church were pivotal in creating the landless workers' movement. As the above discussion of grievances and resources has illustrated, it was clear that a social movement was unlikely to coalesce without some form of external assistance. In addition, although landless activists were subject to the strategy and tactics chosen by Church leaders, at this point there was a great deal of concordance between the Church's agenda and the landless workers' grievances. While this is due in part to the Church's instrumental role in providing the movement with a common ideological frame, the fact remains that as the movement took shape, its priorities closely mirrored those of the Church. For these reasons, the benefits gained from this coalitional choice far outweighed the risks at this point in the landless movement's development; indeed, without this powerful coalitional partner, a formal movement might not have emerged.

#### RECASTING ALLIANCES: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE MST

Under the auspices and guidance of the Church, the movement began to engage in sustained collective action, and the initial successes of the landless workers' movement in Brazil have been widely documented. The movement's primary tactic—setting up encampments on privately held but unproductive land—proved effective in winning land titles for encampment members, and in turn, this selective benefit was instrumental in attracting additional activists to the cause. As land occupations steadily increased, their successes inspired the landless movement to formally organize on a national level.

Towards this end, the CPT sponsored gatherings among different landless groups from July 1982 until December 1983 to discuss forming a national social movement organization to press for agrarian reform. Ultimately, however, the delegates decided to organize a meeting independently, which took place in January 1984. Landless worker representatives from thirteen states gathered at Cascavel for four days to sketch the outlines of a nationwide organization, thereafter known as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or “Landless Rural Workers’ Movement.” Among the issues they debated was the question of coalitional choice: whether or not to continue their close association with the Catholic Church.

*First Coalitional Choice: Autonomy*

Clearly, the Church had brought the movement to life by providing a common ideological frame and infusing it with needed resources. Yet the CEBs had been ideal activist “training grounds,” and as landless peasants became accustomed to taking on leadership roles as well as enjoying the success of their efforts, the coordinating activity of the Church was no longer perceived as essential. Branford and Rocha (2002) vividly illustrate the discussions that ensued at Cascavel regarding the trade-offs involved if the movement were to continue under the auspices of the Church. Some movement members believed that the priests were taking an increasingly “paternalistic” position towards the landless population. Others denied this was so, yet wanted to leave the new movement organization free to craft its own unique character and identity apart from the influence of the Church. In addition, some Catholic bishops supported an autonomous course because “if the movement learns to walk on its own feet, it will go much further” (Branford and Rocha 2002: 22).

The delegates at Cascavel also explored the possibility of forming alliances with two other potential partners: unions and the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT). During the 1970s, a new generation of union leaders in Brazil had attempted to break free from the restrictive corporatist union framework that had held sway for decades. These leaders—including Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—pressed for union autonomy from the state, worker participation, and

democratization. Their ideology and organizational strength made them an attractive coalitional partner. However, the corporatist relationships between Brazilian unions and the state that still endured, combined with allegations of corruption, rendered unions a troubling coalitional partner in some respects. What is more, some rural unions actively opposed the redistribution of land to individuals and families, which was antithetical to the emerging agenda of the landless workers (Wright 2003). Some delegates also argued that membership in the new organization should be available to anyone and that a union affiliation would give the organization a restrictive identity, since unions by definition limit membership to those affiliated with a particular trade.

The delegates also debated the value of forming alliances with existing political parties, or possibly forming a party of their own. The newly formed PT was a natural partner in many respects; Catholic activists had been instrumental in helping the PT coalesce as an organization, and many of the individuals who were active in the landless workers' movement were also members of the PT. The PT's ideology also paralleled that of the emerging MST: as a party of "social action," the PT aimed to link the demands of workers and social movements together in order to advance them within the political arena.

However, some of the same arguments against forming alliances with unions held with respect to political parties; delegates wanted the movement to be open to everyone regardless of political ideology or affiliation. At the same time, some analysts claim that among the peasantry, parties were generally "regarded as obsolete formulas of political organization, or worse still, as instigators of violence, corruption, and abuse of power" (Fals Borda 1992: 306). Representatives from groups that had been displaced by dams were especially wary of forming links with political parties since they had attempted this association in the past and found that their interests had not been sufficiently emphasized (Scherer-Warren 1988).

What is more, one attendee whom I interviewed stated that if the movement were affiliated with a political party or formed a party of its own, it would implicitly commit the movement to operating *dentro da lei*, or "within the boundaries of the law." Given the increasing levels of

violence against landless activists, retaining the option to employ extralegal means if necessary was important to many delegates. The freedom to choose their own tactics, regardless of legality, was one of the issues that had brought the movement into conflict with the Church, which had staunchly opposed meeting violence with violence. Some delegates were wary of entering into an alliance with another coalitional partner that would in any way restrict the movement's ability to direct their own operational affairs.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, the movement was in a position where a true coalitional choice could be made. Church support had facilitated the development of social capital and collective identity, and the various landless groups had been able to unify their grievances under a common ideological frame. From this position of relative strength, the delegates adopted a formal resolution of autonomy with respect to all other institutions.

*Autonomy: Risks and Trade-offs*

There were significant risks associated with this coalitional position, namely the loss of the considerable financial and organizational resources that the Church had provided. As the MST's own material resources were fairly limited at this point, there was the realistic possibility that future actions might not be sustainable over the long term. If this outcome materialized, the movement could dissolve due to a lack of means through which to advance its goals. However, in spite of this possible outcome, the MST was eager to find its own voice as a social movement. By choosing a coalitional position based on autonomy, the MST was able to gain full control over the movement's future strategy, direction, and tactics.

To counteract these risks, the MST prioritized increasing the movement's level of material resources. Once an MST encampment gained a title to the land, cooperative farming settlements were created to provide residents with food and a source of income. However, a small percentage of the proceeds from each cooperative (1–3 percent) were directed toward the regional and national level organization to support the administrative needs of the movement (Meszaros 2000; Flavio and Ruiz 2000).<sup>9</sup> Literacy programs for both adults and children were provided

in virtually every settlement, and peasants with higher-level skills were trained in teaching and cooperative administration (Flavio and Ruiz 2000). Once trained and experienced, the most effective leaders from one region were “transplanted” to more difficult areas in order to organize and mobilize the landless population there. As new leaders were recruited, some left in turn to spearhead occupations in another area, yet remained in contact with their home communities (Petras 1998). These actions expanded the movement’s organizing activities away from the CEBs and created an independent network of support and communication for the MST throughout the country. Combined with the increase in funding from the cooperative farms, the MST was able to successfully sustain their organization as an independent social movement.

#### MOVEMENT EXPANSION: CONFRONTING NEW COALITIONAL CHOICES IN THE WAKE OF INITIAL SUCCESS

The MST had been interested in widespread agricultural reform from their earliest days, and the movement had pursued this goal almost exclusively through occupying land and demanding its expropriation. Yet over time, it became clear that piecemeal land redistribution would not solve the complex problems of rural poverty at the heart of the movement’s grievances.

Three pivotal examples illustrate the inadequacy of the status quo. First, the 1988 Constitution was insufficient in its treatment of the agrarian issue. Expectations had been high that the new constitution would affirm the legality of land redistribution, yet the influence of large landowners resulted in language that tried to balance property rights with the “social function” of land and resulted in confusing the matter further.<sup>10</sup> Also, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, president after president had promised comprehensive agrarian reform yet failed to deliver.<sup>11</sup> During this same period, the federal agency responsible for land reform in Brazil—the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA)—had an extremely limited budget, sufficient to meet only a third of the administration’s goals of land redistribution. What is more, 40 percent of the budget for land reform was later frozen due to Brazil’s ensuing economic troubles. These events conveyed the message that the government wanted to create the appearance of pursuing agrarian reform without actually implementing changes.



In an effort to reframe the movement's goals toward addressing the roots of rural poverty, the MST revised their mission statement during their Third National Congress in July 1995 to reflect these expanded goals. At the time of the movement's founding, their goals emphasized attaining land, ending the exploitation of rural workers, and preserving their autonomy as a social movement (Branford and Rocha 2002: 30). However, ten years later, the movement's goals became more general: land for the landless, overall agrarian reform, and creating a "more just society" (Cadji 2000: 34). This last item included guaranteed labor for all, opposition to any kind of discrimination, and equality of economic, political, social, and cultural rights.

As the movement's grievances expanded to reflect the broader goals of widespread socio-economic reform, leaders soon recognized that they lacked sufficient resources to address them. This was evident in the violent backlash against MST activities that ensued as activists redoubled their efforts to pressure the government. In August of 1995, ten landless workers in an encampment at Corumbiara were assassinated by the state police, and just seven months later, the police again murdered nineteen individuals occupying land in Eldorado dos Carajás. The second massacre not only shocked the country, it was a visceral reminder that no one had yet been indicted for the first one. In response, the MST organized a national march to Brasília to protest the attackers' impunity and demand further agrarian reform.

#### *Second Coalitional Choice: International NGO Alliances*

At this point, the movement had reason to revisit its coalitional position. Autonomy had allowed the MST to develop along its own trajectory as an independent organization, and the group's material and organizational resource base had expanded to a point where the government was under significant pressure to enact land reform. What is more, the overwhelming majority of Brazilians—over 94 percent of the population—supported the MST's demands as articulated during the march to Brasília (Branford and Rocha 2002: 200). In response, President Cardoso's economic advisors constructed a plan for agrarian reform. This could be considered a monumental success for the MST: their demands had been heard at the national level, and Cardoso's attempt at land reform was more far-reaching than that of any previous administration.

However, MST leaders soon realized that Cardoso's plan was designed to work within the scope of existing market mechanisms and, in light of the movement's expanded goals, a narrow solution was considered inadequate. The process appeared to favor the landowners, in that they began initiating the process in order to unload unproductive land and receive a much greater profit than they would have earned on the open market.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the rural worker was an unequal partner in the negotiation process for land; while the landowner had no special incentives to compromise, a peasant living in poverty was more likely to accept higher prices and take on larger amounts of debt. In addition, those peasants who were eligible to participate in the program were selected by local political bosses, fostering an atmosphere of clientelism and closing the process off to those without access to power (Domingos 2002).

The *Banco da Terra* (Land Bank), although essentially the only mechanism through which landless workers could legally acquire land, did little to alleviate the structural problems that gave rise to landlessness in the first place. From the perspective of the MST, market-based land reform appeared not as a solution to rural poverty but as merely another attempt to pacify the countryside.

#### *International Alliances: Risks and Trade-offs*

Although the movement's material and organizational resources had increased dramatically, its members had insufficient leverage to press for broader social and political change. What is more, as human rights abuses against rural activists continued and intensified, the MST found that they were unable to convince the Brazilian government to take action on these issues through their own efforts. For these reasons, forming alliances appeared to be an attractive coalitional strategy that would allow the MST to expand its resource base and thereby address its broader goals. However, the movement remained wary of entering into alliances due to the same accompanying risks identified at Cascavel ten years earlier. Domestic structures of interest intermediation, such as political parties and unions, operated within a highly corporatist system and eventual co-optation was a realistic possibility.

Instead, the MST chose to minimize this potential outcome by favoring alliances with international NGOs that were part of wide transnational advocacy networks.<sup>13</sup> Keck and Sikkink (1998) observe that when the state has had the dominant voice in determining domestic policy, transnational advocacy networks (TANs) can call attention to other subordinate voices. Following the “boomerang” pattern that Keck and Sikkink describe, if a state violates the rights of a group within its borders, TANs may act as powerful third-party advocates for the affected population in international forums, and the state is in turn pressured to change its policies and/or actions. The emergence of TANs provided social movements with a relatively new way to pressure the state, and MST leaders were among the first to capitalize on this new opportunity.

The risk of co-optation in forming alliances with international organizations was present as well and, in a sense, the possibility that international organizations would develop, in Jelin’s terms, an “authoritarian technocracy on behalf of the poor” in dealing with the MST was arguably greater, due to the fact that the movement was primarily comprised of impoverished peasants in a developing country (Jelin 1998: 412). Yet since international NGOs were generally physically remote, the MST would likely be able to retain a good deal of control over their own local actions. In addition, unlike the situation that existed at the movement’s formation, by this point the MST had developed many resources under their own direct control, which would allow them to resist co-optation. By choosing a new coalitional position based on multiple alliances, the MST drew international attention to their cause and tapped into a worldwide network of activists. The movement intended to pressure the Brazilian government to not only continue implementing land redistribution but also to enact widespread social and economic reform. The resources that international NGOs could provide were precisely the sort that the MST needed to address their expanded grievances in the late 1990s.

#### MOVEMENT SUSTAINABILITY: UNVEILING CURRENT COALITIONAL TRENDS

From its beginnings as an auxiliary of the Catholic Church, the MST has taken two distinct coalitional paths: first, breaking away from the Church and developing organizational autonomy,

then later forming alliances with a wide range of international partners. At present, the movement's primary coalitional strategy is based on partnerships with international NGOs that have a progressive orientation.<sup>14</sup> Movement leaders at national, regional, and municipal levels state that since challenging the worldwide neoliberal economic model has risen to the forefront of their agenda, international partners have become crucial to the movement's success.

#### CHALLENGING THE NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC MODEL

In virtually every interview that I conducted in July and August 2003, MST activists at all organizational levels identified neoliberalism as a primary cause of the inequality and injustice that exists within Brazil. One MST director stated that the movement resists widespread cultivation of cash crops for export not because they object to agribusinesses making a profit but because economic gains from trade do not reach the Brazilian people. Therefore, domestic consumption needs should be satisfied first and any excess land could then be given over to producing export crops.<sup>15</sup> These sentiments are shared by some Brazilian economists; Francisco Menezes, a member of Brazil's National Council on Nutrition and Food Policy, has stated that food and nutritional security is a human right, and the state has an obligation to ensure that this right is protected as far as resources allow.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the MST's rhetoric connects social strain with notions of fairness and justice that have been violated by neoliberal economic policies. The fundamental question posed by one of the MST's most recent publications for its members is: "What should we do to reorganize Brazilian agriculture so that it serves the interests of the Brazilian people and not just those of capital?" (MST 2003: 42). Social problems are considered an outcome of economic distortions; when the economy cannot satisfy the basic needs of the people, injustice and its attendant social dislocations are the inevitable result. MST leaders stress that the movement is fighting not just for agrarian reform but for a complete restructuring of the current economic system because it is morally unacceptable.

*Strong Transnational Alliances*

These broad goals have been largely translated into two concrete agenda items for MST activists on the ground in Brazil: supporting the international campaign against genetically modified foods as well as the regional effort opposing the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas. In pursuing these goals, which necessarily entail broader systemic change than piecemeal land reform, international NGOs have proven to be valuable allies for the MST.

Many new links were forged in 2000, as planned celebrations of the 500 years of Portuguese settlement since Pedro Cabral's "discovery" of the Brazilian coast inspired the MST, as well as indigenous rights groups throughout the Americas, to undertake protest marches and organize other acts of resistance. Through these events, the MST developed strong ties with transnational peasant organizations such as the Confederation of Latin American Rural Organizations (CLOC) and Vía Campesina. The peasant movements involved in these networks share resources and skilled personnel and conduct joint mobilizations on the international and national levels. For example, I spoke with one MST activist who was technically a paid employee of Vía Campesina but who has been working with the MST for the past five years. This individual was not only a leader of a major encampment but also organized land invasions throughout the region, trained other activists in leadership roles, and coordinated joint MST-Vía Campesina actions against genetically modified foods.<sup>17</sup>

Additional connections with transnational advocacy networks challenging the neoliberal economic model were made through the creation of the first World Social Forum in 2001 and its continuing annual meetings thereafter.<sup>18</sup> The MST, along with the PT in Brazil, was one of the founding members of the World Social Forum, and the MST's Director of International Relations in São Paulo argues that it has allowed the movement to develop and strengthen ties with TANs that share the movement's expanded goals.<sup>19</sup> Various MST leaders at the regional and national levels stated that, to the extent the movement receives financial assistance from outside

organizations, the majority is donated by international NGOs that have also participated in the World Social Forum.<sup>20</sup>

Along these same lines, the MST Director for the state of Bahia stressed that the movement is eager for Brazil to expand alliances with international NGOs in emerging Southern power centers such as South Africa, India, and China. If social movements in these countries can encourage their governments to develop trade relationships with each other instead of relying primarily on the developed world, these “relationships among equals” would allow the majority of Brazilians to realize gains from trade.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, expanding the MST’s network of alliance partners to NGOs in these areas would facilitate an exchange of ideas, technology, and information to improve agricultural production within the MST’s cooperative settlements.

While the MST still organizes many land occupations, recent actions have also reflected the agenda of their international partners: in April 2001, seven hundred women MST activists occupied a McDonald’s restaurant in Porto Alegre and burned flags bearing the corporate “golden arches” symbol (“Women Unite and Fight,” 2001); MST members protested genetically engineered seeds by destroying an “experimental” crop of GMO soybeans that had been planted in Rio Grande do Sul; a contingent of MST activists traveled to the U.S. to join the “March of the Americas,” framing poverty as an international human rights violation (Plummer and Ranum 2002). Events such as these are aligned with the movement’s expanded ideological goals and call the Brazilian government’s attention to questions of social and economic justice.

In short, alliances with international NGOs have provided the MST with some additional funding, but more importantly, they have inspired local activists with the confidence that individuals around the world—and especially within more economically powerful states—share their concerns and support their efforts. Keck and Sikkink’s “boomerang pattern” is also somewhat evident: as the MST organizes actions, international NGO partners disseminate information through their network of activists, who pressure their home governments to exert

influence on the Brazilian state. As the voices of landless peasants are amplified throughout the international arena, the Brazilian government is finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the MST's concerns.

*Weak Domestic Partnerships*

At present, national institutions such as political parties and unions do not appear to be significant coalitional partners for the MST. Although it might appear that the MST and the PT have strong ties, officials stress their mutual autonomy. One MST leader at the national level explained that, since political parties gain and lose power over time, it is in the best interest of the MST to remain outside of partisan politics, supporting any candidate whose views are in accordance with the movement's agenda.<sup>22</sup> Echoing a similar sentiment from an opposite perspective, a PT official stated that during Lula's presidential campaign, the party leadership feared that an overt association with the MST would lend the impression that a PT administration would terminate private property rights. Therefore, the PT quietly distanced itself from the MST during the campaign, although they welcomed the MST's grassroots support in getting out the vote for PT candidates.<sup>23</sup>

However, informal ties certainly exist between the PT and the MST, as well as other leftist political parties and some union organizations. One MST encampment leader stated that the MST will often go out into the local communities on election day and use their resources, both social and material, to mobilize electoral support for PT candidates, sometimes even taking people to the polls to vote in MST-owned trucks.<sup>24</sup> The benefits to this are clear: since most conflicts over land take place at the municipal and state level, their resolution depends in large part on the actions—or inactions—of mayors and governors that may or may not belong to a political party that sympathizes with the movement's goals. With the power to either facilitate MST projects or increase bureaucratic red tape surrounding them, to casually overlook or violently destroy MST

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encampments, it is evident that informal linkages with individual party officials on the local level are crucial for the movement's success.

Informal relationships with Brazil's main unions are also evident. Most MST members who work in the formal sector of the economy are also union members, and it is not uncommon for local unions to participate alongside MST members when a protest march or rally is held. In some areas, unions provide more than just ideological support; one MST municipal organization that I visited shares office space and secretarial personnel with a local union branch office.<sup>25</sup> However, while unions and leftist political parties occasionally mobilize in conjunction with the MST, their activities are organizationally separate. MST officials at the regional and national levels uniformly stressed the movement's formal autonomy from these potential allies.

#### NEW MST MEMBERS: A GROWING CHALLENGE

Twenty years ago, the MST was principally composed of rural workers and family farmers who had lost their land and/or their jobs due to agricultural modernization. Many of these individuals—and their children, who are some of the movement's most outspoken and ideologically committed activists—still play a vital role within the movement. However, in recent years—and especially during the months following Lula's election—a new group of actors has been joining the MST in exponential numbers: poor urban residents.

What is most striking about many of the more recent entrants to MST encampments is that they express motivations for joining that are very different from what movement leaders, as well as more traditional MST activists, have generally envisioned. For these urban workers, neither political nor ideological concerns seem to figure prominently in their decision to join an MST encampment. On the contrary, they enter the movement as rational actors seeking to maximize their own welfare within the constraints of the market. Table 2 compares the origins, motivations, and goals of these newer members with those of more traditional MST activists.



**Table 2: Typology of MST Membership**

	<b>Diminishing Core</b>	<b>New Recruits</b>
<b>Origin</b>	Rural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Parents were generally displaced from their land and joined the MST</li> <li>● Might live in an MST settlement or might remain in encampments, organizing others</li> </ul>	Urban <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If there is a family history of rural displacement, tends to go back two or more generations</li> <li>● Retain dwellings in both a nearby city and an MST encampment</li> </ul>
<b>Method of Joining</b>	Grew up with the MST as children	Recruited into the MST as adults
<b>Motivation</b>	Ideological <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support the MST's expanded goals of social and economic reform</li> <li>● View land acquisition as just one part of an overall program of systemic change</li> </ul>	Material <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support delimited change: gaining a personal land title is most important</li> <li>● May support the MST's expanded goals as long as they do not conflict with gaining land</li> </ul>
<b>Goal</b>	Systemic Change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work for broad social and economic change in Brazil</li> </ul>	Delimited Change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work for an improved individual economic situation</li> </ul>

Regardless of whether or not these new movement entrants suffer severe economic hardship, and many of them do, they tend to view the MST's encampments as a way to better their own family's welfare, not as a solution to overall economic injustice. Among this group, many used the phrase "*dono de seu proprio*," or the "desire to be one's own boss," to describe the reason why they joined the MST.<sup>26</sup> A new pattern seems to be emerging, especially within encampments that are located near an urban center: adult children in a family join the MST and build a *barraca*, a bamboo-and-tarpaulin tent, within the encampment. Then, the adults in the family take turns living in the *barraca*, all the while retaining their city dwellings and jobs. If the encampment wins land titles from the state and becomes a settlement, the family receives an individual title to the land as well. Some families choose to move onto their newly-gained

land in the settlement, often with members of their extended family who were not part of the original encampment—but they are also free to sell the land title, thus turning a substantial profit. However, if the encampment does not gain a land title, very little is lost save for a few nights a week sleeping under the stars in the barraca. As one woman stated when asked to discuss why she joined the MST, she did not mention particular economic hardship or moral concerns; instead she claimed it was “better to live here [in the encampment], with some hope of getting land, than in the city where it’s just as tough due to the gangs and drugs, and there’s no hope of ever owning your own piece of land.”<sup>27</sup>

Are these newer entrants “opportunists,” as some older MST members have claimed, or are they simply motivated by a different set of forces than other activists? In many respects, their decision to join the MST calls to mind Samuel Popkin’s *The Rational Peasant* (1979), in which he argues that peasants will seek to maximize their individual welfare just as other actors do within any society. Yet many of these newer MST members cannot realistically be called “peasants” as they have lived in urban areas for generations. Many are not “landless” either in the sense of having been recently displaced from their land, or in the sense of being homeless, since the majority of urban entrants to the MST continue to rent houses or apartments in nearby cities. These newer members do not appear to be particularly motivated by concerns for social justice or a desire to check the expansion of the capitalist market. Instead, they seem to be responding to the market economy by finding a way to turn a profit within it, and these motivations are radically different from any the movement leaders have yet encountered.

#### INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES AND NEW URBAN MEMBERS: A POTENTIAL DISCONNECT?

One of the MST’s main challenges throughout their history has been pressuring the government to implement agricultural reform. Within the past decade, the movement’s goals have broadened to encompass overall social and economic justice and their attendant international alliances reflect these changes. However, there is a potential disconnect between the MST’s international partners and local grassroots activists that increasingly include an urban component. Therefore,

one of the most important challenges for the MST is making their broader ideological concerns relevant to these new actors, whose primary goal remains obtaining land for themselves and their families.

One way in which the movement is attempting to address these conflicting priorities is by infusing new members with a collectivist orientation that connects abstract ideology to their practical concerns. These ideas are primarily translated from the movement leadership to the newest members through “political education” classes. All new MST members are required to attend these sessions, usually lasting for two months, in which they are presented with the history of the MST, and of Brazil, as seen through the movement’s ideological lens.<sup>28</sup> In every encampment, the story that leaders tell is the same: injustice has always existed in Brazil, but it has become much worse with the expansion of neoliberal economic policies. As the Brazilian government has become complicit with the interests of foreign capital, traditional Brazilian culture and values are being destroyed. The interests of national elites and foreign capital have taken precedence over the needs of the Brazilian people, and their “justice” means protecting the interests of private property, not ensuring that all Brazilians can meet their basic needs.

MST leaders hope that through these consciousness-raising classes, new members will understand that the movement is fighting not just for agrarian reform but for a complete restructuring of the current economic system which they consider to be morally unacceptable. Yet whether or not new urban members will internalize this message remains to be seen. On the contrary, some MST leaders acknowledge that the biggest challenge facing the movement today is keeping members actively involved in the struggle for social justice after they have received a land title. Specifically, while those who participated in the encampments are often very willing to contribute toward future collective farming projects, their extended family members who join them in the settlement are often less enthusiastic. Moreover, MST members sometimes decide that a rural lifestyle really isn’t for them. If this happens after they have received a land title, they can sell the structures on their property, and the buyers may or may not be inclined to participate in the collective life of the settlement.

At the same time, the MST is having some difficulty differentiating itself from other, more radical movements for land reform. In São Paulo state alone, there are about 40 leftist organizations, some of which engage in violent protest under the banner of agrarian reform. When the media does not carefully distinguish between these groups and the MST—which is often the case—their reputation as a radical organization grows. Public opinion remains firmly in support of the MST's original grievances regarding agricultural reform, but if this support begins to erode, the movement's ability to pressure the government through mass demonstrations may diminish as well.

#### REVISITING ALLIANCE PATTERNS

It appears that infusing new actors with a collectivist orientation and making fairly abstract ideology relevant to their practical concerns are some of the MST's most pressing challenges. Continued land reform is necessary to meet the interests of new members, but actions that pressure the government for land reform, such as more frequent land invasions, may simultaneously alienate more moderate factions within Brazilian society. These factors combined with public confusion over the instigators of increasingly radical land invasions seem to be pushing the MST to the threshold of significant change.

If the MST continues to make coalitional choices along the same lines as they have in the past, there is reason to expect that the movement leadership might revisit their current coalitional position. Alliances with international NGOs remain crucial to achieving the movement's broader goals of social and economic reform, but these goals are somewhat at odds with those of the movement's newest members. What is more, although international NGOs can exert pressure on the Brazilian government, this is not equivalent to possessing the power to introduce and implement concrete policy changes within Brazil. For these reasons, it may be time for the MST to supplement their international alliances with domestic ones that facilitate greater institutionalization within the political system.

One option might be to formalize the MST's relationship with the PT by identifying the party as the official representative of the movements' interests within the political sphere. Alternatively, the MST could form a party of their own that would function as an independent political branch of the movement, similar to the relationship that now exists between the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* or CONAIE) and Pachakutik Plurinational United Movement–New Country (*Movimiento Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik–Nuevo País* or MUPP–NP), its political arm in the legislature. Since the MST is currently not part of the government's institutional structure, their ability to craft public policy is limited. By developing an alliance with the PT or forming an independent political party, the movement would be able to bargain with the PT on an equal footing in the legislative arena while maintaining its ability to mobilize support from the grassroots and to pressure the government from outside the system.

The MST is, at present, also challenged with making its goals relevant to its newest members. With a concrete voice in the political arena, the movement may be able to play a larger role in crafting proposals for agricultural reform that would meet the interests of the movement's pragmatic urban members, thus retaining their support over the long term. As a political party, or with formal ties to one, the MST might be able to balance the competing demands of a more diverse membership base. What is more, the movement would gain a formal mechanism through which to channel its members' political participation and work for real policy change within the legislature. Overall systemic reform is outside the scope of what a social movement can expect to achieve short of revolution, and if the MST aims to advance the interests of its members, the movement needs a way to articulate these interests within the political sphere. Given the movement's history of responding to challenges through adjusting their alliance patterns, there may be reason to predict that MST leaders may choose a new coalitional strategy that incorporates greater institutionalization.

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## CONCLUSION

Social movements are dynamic and complex, and the challenge of understanding their evolution is of both practical and academic interest. One way to understand the choices movements make is to identify patterns in the way they develop, and a common predicament that all face is that of coalitional choice. As this paper has discussed, different alliance patterns present both risks and opportunities. A particular coalitional position might resolve a present problem, but that choice is also associated with certain challenges that may pose difficulties as the movement evolves.

From the perspective of its coalitional choices, we can gain additional insight into how and why the MST formed and developed into the largest, and arguably most effective, social movement in Latin America. From scattered groups of newly landless peasants with diverse grievances and few resources, it was unlikely that a movement would have formed without the Catholic Church's intervention as an institutional host. However, as the growing movement built its own reserves of social capital and unified its grievances under a common ideological frame, the risks of this alliance gradually outweighed the benefits. Because the movement's members wanted to chart their own course, the MST officially chose a coalitional position of complete autonomy at their formative meeting. Yet over time, as MST grievances expanded from land redistribution to broader social and economic reform, alliances with international NGOs proved to be most beneficial in struggling against Brazil's neoliberal economic model.

The MST has maintained and strengthened this coalitional pattern to the present day; however, it may be challenged by the rapid influx of new urban members who are motivated primarily by the opportunity to acquire land titles rather than by collective social and economic goals. The incipient disjuncture between the goals of new members and those of the MST's international allies might suggest that the movement is about to take new coalitional direction—possibly by expanding alliances within domestic political institutions.

Coalitional choices have allowed the MST to capitalize on opportunities, but each choice brought its own risks. One of the keys to the MST's survival is that the movement has

acknowledged the inherent trade-offs attendant to each potential alliance partner and has adjusted its strategy to mitigate these risks. As MST leaders continue this pattern going forward, the movement will likely remain a significant force pressing the boundaries of social and political change. More broadly, however, considering the dynamics of change within social movements from the perspective of their coalitional choices is a useful way to gain insight into the strategic choices that movements make as they evolve.

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## ENDNOTES

1 This project was supported in part by a summer field research grant from the UC Berkeley Center for Latin American Studies.

2 An example of this dynamic in action is found in Cynthia Hewitt's research on the rural union movement in Pernambuco, Brazil, during the 1960s. Because the agenda of the movement's allies was different from those of the peasants, one rural worker stated: "We don't know what to do. One becomes crazy: One [person] says [we] must pay the landlord, the other [says we] must pay the judge, the third [says] not to pay it at all because land reform is coming and everyone will have some land....It does not matter if we pay rent or work one day a week, but we'd like to have a solution" (Hewitt 1969: 386).

3 For a comprehensive and engaging history of the MST, see Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (Food First Books, 2003), as well as Sue Branford and Jan Rocha, *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil* (Latin America Bureau, 2002).

4 From 1970 to 1980, the 50 percent of rural residents with the lowest income saw their income decline from 24 percent to 18 percent of the total in the region. At the same time, the 10 percent with the highest earnings increased their income from 35 percent to 48 percent of the total (Grzybowski 1990: 21).

5 For a comprehensive history of liberation theology and a summary of its doctrine, see Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

6 In 1962, the ratio of Brazilian Catholics to priests was 6591:1; by 1971 it had increased to 7397:1; and in 1987, it had reached 10,449:1 (Houtzager 1997: 95; Carter 2002: 123, footnote 159).

7 Houtzager explains that within this frame, sin is understood not just as an individual condition, but also as a collective and institutional one. Since the unjust social order is an expression of collective sin, Catholics have a duty to liberate the poor from these structures by working for social and economic reform. In this way, political action becomes an appropriate—even necessary—way to put one's faith into practice. Specifically, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops declared in 1980 that the peasants' right to work land for subsistence supercedes claims of those who would use it for speculative investment purposes; therefore the church has a duty to pressure the government for agrarian reform (Houtzager 1997: 94).

8 Personal interview, 31 July 2003, Brasília.

9 It is estimated that proceeds from the co-ops, combined with individual donations from members, probably contribute at least 30 percent of the organization's operating budget on an annual basis. However, statistics on MST revenue vary widely; estimates of the percent of the MST's budget that is derived from in-country sources range from 29 percent to 85 percent. Compare de Kadt (1997) with Sallinger-McBride and Roberts (1998).

10 Pang states that delegates to the convention filed over 10,000 proposals, and "without any ideological glue to hold together partisan loyalties and to reinforce personal followings, the Constituent Assembly appeared at times an institution of absurdities and a place of political bargaining for the personal gain of the delegates and special interest groups" (Pang 1998: 22).

11 President José Sarney announced in 1985 that 450,000 families would receive land during his term, but by January 1998, only 5 percent had actually acquired any (Pang 1988). The following president, Fernando Collor de Mello, claimed that his administration would settle 500,000 landless families by January 1992. His administration distributed land titles, but without actually expropriating any new land for the holders of those titles (Rone 1992: 22–23).

12 Plummer and Ranum describe the shortcomings of the plan: "large landowners would sell land to the World Bank at its market value, and the World Bank would in turn grant loans to landless farmers, with which they would purchase these same lands. The catch? The 'invisible hand' of the market gives powerful landowners incentive to sell only the most marginal territories—rocky, hilly land which is difficult to cultivate or otherwise develop" (Plummer and Ranum 2002).

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13 As defined by Keck and Sikkink (1998), transnational advocacy networks promote specific issues and advocate for policy changes across national borders. They are often comprised of organizations such as international and domestic NGOs, churches, trade unions, the media, foundations, and consumer organizations.

14 Much of the analysis in the following section is drawn from interviews carried out in Brazil from July–August 2003. During that period, I conducted semi-structured interviews with MST leaders at the national, regional, and local levels. Interspersed with these administrative interviews were visits to MST encampments and settlements in the states of São Paulo, Brasília, and Bahia. I was invited to live with a local family at each location and became involved in the activities of the community as a participant observer. I also had the opportunity to attend part of a meeting for State and Regional MST Directors from the state of Bahia.

15 Personal interview, 28 July 2003, Brasília.

16 Statement given at the Rio Branco Forum on Brazil, “Lula’s Brazil: A Challenge to Neoliberalism?” 31 October 2003.

17 Personal Interview 28, July 2003.

18 At the World Social Forum in 2001, over 500 national and international organisations from more than 100 countries gathered in Porto Alegre to coordinate resistance efforts against neoliberalism and capitalist globalization.

19 Wanusa Perieira Dos Santos, MST Director of International Relations, personal interview, São Paulo National Secretariat, 22 July 2003.

20 Almost all MST leaders interviewed were reluctant to identify specific donor organizations and amounts of funding provided. However, seven countries were commonly mentioned as housing organizations that had supported the MST financially in the past: Argentina, Canada, Chile, France, Italy, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

21 Oronildo Costa, MST Director from the state of Bahia, personal interview, 8 August 2003.

22 Personal interview, 31 July 2003, Brasília.

23 Personal interview, 24 July 2003, São Paulo.

24 Personal Interview, 7 August 2003, Bahia.

25 Personal Interview, 7 August 2003, Bahia.

26 Personal interviews in São Paulo State, 28 July 2003.

27 Personal interview, 5 Aug 2003, Bahia.

28 Information about the MST’s political education courses was gained through the author’s personal interview with André Carlos, the MST’s Director of Political Education, Brasília, 31 July 2003.

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