



Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in the Digital Front: mystique as performative practice and insurgent form of political struggle

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ABSTRACT – Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in the Digital Front: mystique as performative practice and insurgent form of political struggle – This research gathered theoretical and methodological subsidies to understand the political organization of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), not only through its classic forms of struggle – occupation of land and marches –, but also through the *mystique* with dramatizations and performances forming this scenario. The performative practices presented during the 6th National Conference (2014) were studied by searching the database available in different repositories on the Internet and using digital ethnography. In general, the resistance spaces created by social movements in their struggle for emancipation in the 21st century were analyzed.

Keywords: **MST. Performative Practices. Digital Technologies. Land Reform. Mystique.**

RÉSUMÉ – Le MST sur le Front Numérique: la mystique en tant que pratique performative et forme de lutte politique insurgée – La présente recherche visait à rassembler des subventions théoriques et méthodologiques pour comprendre l'organisation politique du Mouvement des Travailleurs Ruraux Sans Terre (MST), pas seulement à travers ses formes classiques de lutte – occupations et marches – mais aussi à travers la “mystique”, avec des dramatisations et performances constitutives de ce scénario. Les pratiques performatives présentées lors du 6^e Congrès National (2014) ont été étudiées en collectant des données disponibles dans différents référentiels sur Internet et en utilisant l'ethnographie numérique. De manière générale, les espaces de résistance créés par les mouvements sociaux dans leur lutte pour l'émancipation au 21^e siècle ont été analysés.

Mots-clés: **MST. Pratiques Performatives. Technologies Numériques. Réforme Agraire. Mystique.**

RESUMO – O MST no Front Digital: a mística como prática performativa e forma insurgente de luta política – A investigação apresentada buscou reunir subsídios teóricos e metodológicos para compreender a organização política do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), não somente por intermédio de suas clássicas formas de luta –ocupações e marchas –, mas através da *mística*, com dramatizações e performances constituintes desse cenário. As práticas performativas apresentadas durante o VI Congresso Nacional (2014) foram estudadas pelo levantamento de dados disponibilizados em diferentes repositórios na internet e pelo uso da etnografia digital. Em linhas gerais, foram analisados os espaços de resistência criados pelos movimentos sociais em sua luta por emancipação no século XXI.

Palavras-chave: **MST. Práticas Performativas. Tecnologias Digitais. Reforma Agrária. Mística.**

Performance in the Social Movements Battlefield: MST's mystique in the struggle for Grassroots Land Reform

In the 21st century context, societies continue to experience a complex set of consequences of the Third Industrial Revolution that can be identified at various levels of our social, economic, political, and cultural structure. As a result:

This technological system, in which we are fully immersed at the dawn of the 21st century, emerged in the 1970s. Because of the significance of specific historical contexts of technological trajectories and the particular form of interaction between technology and society, [...] All of them have something essential in common: although mainly based on previously existing knowledge and developed as an expansion of key technologies, they represented a qualitative leap forward in the massive diffusion of technology in commercial and civil applications due to their accessibility and their decreasing cost with increasing quality. Thus, the microprocessor, the key device in spreading micro-electronics, was invented in 1971 and began to diffuse by the mid-1970s (Castells, 1999, p. 91)¹.

It is obvious to imagine that the impact of this set of structural transformations is also observed in the forms of mobilization and action of social movements, while having equivalent repercussions in the academic field. According to Gohn (2010), the field of social movements is tinted with different explanatory paradigms. However, it is up to the researchers to choose their theoretical-conceptual affinities to understand such complexity. Analytically, the author highlights the categories of participation, experience, rights, citizenship, social exclusion, and collective identity.

The theoretical approach adopted by the present article points to a triad of analytical categories. In the sense attributed by Gramsci (2000; 2002; 2004; 2005) in his studies on the relationship between state and civil society, *participation* is deemed capable of creating a dialogue with the conception of popular democracy. In turn, the category of *experience* articulates with the concept of class as stated by Thompson (1984). It relates to the material conditions of existence and engenders a motivating force for action. Finally, the centrality of *social exclusion* constitutes itself as the fulcrum of historical struggles and as forms of resistance of social

movements (Scherer-Warren, 2006; Gohn, 1996). The conception of social movements adopted throughout the research highlights the sense of *grassroots*, revealed by the theoretical approach that considers the historicity of analytical categories and situates performance as the very field and space of struggle inherent to social movements constituted within the Latin-American reality.

This article aims to contribute to an approach still underdeveloped in the field of social movement studies in Brazil: the analysis of the role of digital technologies in the forms of protest developed in the *society of the spectacle* (Debord, 1997). From the specificities and developments related to the Brazilian case, the work situates the Free Pass Movement (*Movimento do Passe Livre*, MPL, in Portuguese)² and its project of political emancipation – like the Free Transport Fare (*Tarifa Zero*, in Portuguese), as the movement that originally led the protests of 2013, the so-called June Journeys. For some authors, such as Dowbor and Szwako (2013), the MPL would enhance the sense of performance, especially by using *dramaturgical metaphors* in their protests against increases in transport fares and the right to urban mobility. Therefore, for both authors:

In this competition for audience interpretation and positive public reaction, the performance of the movements aims to transform what has always been a virtual audience (be it state authorities, the public opinion, or any other civil society character) into a regular audience, an ally. For such persuasion and buy-in, movements dramatize actions, they forge or lend stages and showcases, and stage acts that depend on the cooperation between their protagonists (the militants) and their effort to perfect each part of their spectacle (scenography, soundtrack, costumes) (Dowbor; Szwako, 2013, p. 44-45)³.

The article sought to use the *performance* category as an instrument to understand a broader and more diverse range of social movements, having as a reference a set of authors and theoretical formulations. Performance⁴ appears as an instrument of *political mobilization*⁵ capable of producing a potentiating force for the militants' actions in the sense of the mobilization of bodies for the formation of political activism.

In view of this scenario, we consider the June Journeys as social body performances, as anti-art performances, as an urgent action in society through the mobilization of bodies supported by new media and having

goals in which art and life connect not to produce an object or work, but to provoke political agency, even if momentarily (Fornaciari, 2016, p. 37)⁶.

Therefore, the challenge of understanding the complexity of the field of social movements could be faced by a heterodox theoretical approach composed of analytical categories present in the field of *interactionism* and *critical theory*. However, since they remain under academic rigor, they give grounds for the researcher's incessant movement to access deep levels of unveiled reality.

The process of selecting the object of this article took into consideration the need to understand the relationship of social movements in the fight for land against the State. These movements were established amid the contradictions between the struggle for public policies and the struggle for emancipation – so they experienced pendulum swings between advances and setbacks, between gaining and losing rights. Consequently, a militant mystique was conceived and designed in the spaces of struggle of the 21st century, which heralds new forms of political action.

The research work sought grounds to understand the possibilities and contradictions in the field of peasant struggles. Therefore, David Harvey's (2014) propositions, which point to the expansion of the notion of spatiality, were developed by using the category of *permeable fights*.

The clear distinction that once existed between urban and rural was gradually disappearing, giving way to permeable spaces [...] under the hegemonic domain of capital and the State. [...] It is well known that a large and diverse number of urban struggles and social movements are already underway (in the broadest sense of the term, i.e., one that also includes movements in rural areas) (Harvey, 2014, p. 55- 65)⁷.

The choice of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) as an object of study is justified by its expressiveness as a social movement and above all by the centrality of the mystique in its political organization, especially in the struggle for land and land reform. It is an emblematic case to develop studies of the performative practices with the forms of struggle of the social movements, in which the rural and the urban struggles appear as integrated for the emancipation of the workers and the popular classes.

The mystique brings an originally religious sense of rites that celebrate the mystery of faith and announce themselves as capable of rewiring body

and soul, producing deep motivations in the spirit. The religious feeling of a deep, intense, and rooted spirituality could also take on a political meaning. The peasant sociability embodies this mediation between religious experience and political organization – and the very path of constitution of the MST would mark such bond.

The story of the emergence of the MST in 1984 involves an earlier process of mobilization of peasants during the civil-military dictatorship⁸. The occupation of Encruzilhada Natalino (1981), carried out by about 600 families, can be considered a symbolic landmark of the struggle for land in Brazil, the resistance against authoritarianism, and the organization of these workers around the re-democratization of the country. In this context, Gaiger (1987) describes the emergence of mystique, instituted by the relationship between religious agents originating from the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT, in Portuguese) and the occupiers.

The studies performed by Coelho (2017)⁹ indicate that the first publications (MST, 1991, p. 2) on the MST's mystique only appeared in 1991 and were intended to problematize ideas and fundamental values of the Movement. The author reflects about the meaning of the mystique found in some other internal texts – known as *Cadernos Vermelhos* (Red Notebooks). A research done at the *Armazém da Memória* (Memory Warehouse) website (1998) with online search tools revealed another important document: *Caderno de Formação* (Training Notebook) (27), entitled *Mística: uma necessidade no trabalho popular e organizativo* (Mystique, a necessity in popular and organizational work) – with texts by authors such as Boff, Bogo, and Peloso.

If social movements have been and are spaces used to organize emancipatory fights and to form the subjects of this transformation, performance then synthesizes the field and the space of struggle itself. In the case of the MST, the mystique may express the fight in its multiplicity of dimensions, and is marked by the radicality that seeks to universalize the struggle for Grassroots Land Reform – in the camps and settlements, in marches and occupations, in the countryside and in the cities, on the streets and in social networks. In all the spaces where the political subjectivities of its activism are formed.

Methodological Aspects of the Research: Digital Ethnography and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

In the field of Social Sciences, the ethnographic method represents the researcher's most obvious choice for understanding performance. Based on the debates promoted by a specific digital publication¹⁰, I propose we discuss MST's mystique in the field of *studies of performance culture* and *political dramaturgical action related to politics*.

The guiding thread came from anchoring the mystique outside its present expression, as the research analyzed the narrative represented in the official video of the 6th National MST Conference¹¹. The audiovisual material allowed us to reflect about the Movement's mystique and its relationship with political mobilization, considering the set of performance actions highlighted in the video. The approach adopted demonstrated the potential of the Internet as a memory repository and as a privileged source of data – especially for the study of performative expressions that are distant from the manifestation of synchronicity with the researcher.

In the field of Social Sciences, especially Anthropology, *participant observation* was widely used as a methodological tool for the study of rites. Given the mismatch of temporality between mystique and the research, it was necessary to start from the general conception of *netnography* (Kozinets, 2014) as a special type of ethnography performed by computer mediation. In Brazil, researchers (Fragoso; Recuero; Amaral, 2011) often adopt the term *digital ethnography* (Hine, 2009) – a research conducted in the virtual environment –, but they take into consideration the more general protocols of the original ethnographic technique. Thus, the exercise of observation and description of the mystique represented in the video sought to capture the sense of formation of political subjectivities.

However, in the video little could be seen of *the backstage*¹², especially since the preparation for such an event usually happens long in advance¹³. As it is known to be the product of image editing, the creation of the *stage-showcase* structure itself acquired other contours. In analyzing material with these characteristics, the researcher must recognize the intricate relationship between virtual and direct interaction. This fact has implications for the political meanings produced by these subjects in the construction of their

story and, at the same time, it indicates political bias of the object in the construction of the video's narrative.

The event's stage *assembled* by the video editing cannot be seen and understood in essence as exactly the same as that experienced by the militants and guests present at the time. Even for those present, the stage could have taken the form of a showcase of values and principles related to the event's central issue: discussing Grassroots Land Reform.

Data collection for the work was carried out in two specific spaces of the MST. On the official website, specifically in the item *Nossa História* (Our History) (MST, 2014b); and on the MST's YouTube channel, considering the audiovisual material of the 6th National MST Conference¹⁴ (2014c). As for the methodology, we sought information about the event in open data format¹⁵ available in the virtual spaces of political sociability of the Movement. The choice of the National MST Conference as a privileged analytical substratum was precisely due to the fact that it symbolized an emblematic moment of a collective nature, and it was the last major event that brought together militants from various parts of Brazil and the world. In this case, it was also to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the movement. In order to guide the political bias of the Movement and to consolidate the political position for the following period, we could conclude that the performative practices instituted in these spaces synthesize values and principles contained in the MST's daily organization and political struggle.

The *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough, 2001) was an important methodological tool to denote the role of language in the unveiling of the social changes taking place. The work used the following categories proposed by the author: *key entity*, *positioning of social subjects* and *historical change*. Therefore, after analyzing the expressions of mystique through the video, identifying the constructive effects of language – in the identitarian, relational, and ideational senses –, has become an unquestionable choice. To the author, the discourse contributes to “[...] shape social identities, build and negotiate social relations, and create systems of knowledge and belief” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 92).

Along the same lines, discourse is understood as *a political practice* that establishes internal and external power relations, in addition to communicating a political project for social change – such as the Grassroots

Land Reform project. Thus, the discourse as a social practice, also present in the mystique, reveals a hegemonic struggle with various levels of fight and confrontation. Tactical alliances are reinforced within the assumptions of building mobilization and action networks in the intricate game of composing and structuring grassroots power.

On the website, the MST assumes a self-referential and peculiar way of reconstructing its own story (MST, 2014a), and highlights some temporal and conjunctural milestones in the struggle for land and construction of land reform in Brazil. The *defense of democracy* appears as a fundamental value that relates to the criticism against *dictatorship*. It brings back the memory of *historical moments of struggle*¹⁶ and *massacre*¹⁷.

Analyzing Mystique Elements in the 6th National MST Conference Video

The theoretical approach to mystique came from a triad of analytical categories – participation, experience, and social exclusion –, used to understand the meaning of performative practices in shaping political sociability. In the same vein, Caldart (2001; 2004) and Bogo (1999; 2008; 2011), two prominent organic intellectuals linked to the MST addressed the struggle against social exclusion as a striking feature of the history of MST's formation. So, the historical subjects of social transformation used confrontation as the main tactic of their struggle – out of academic scope, Bogo himself presented such perspective in the lyrics of the MST anthem written by him.

The analysis of the mystique has allowed the recovery of the great symbolic importance of collective actions, precisely because it is able to externalize political and ideological conceptions of the MST. Thus, the potent relationship between mystique and political mobilization created a consistent thread for research. The use of performance represented a key reading of the Movement's mystique in order to understand the *mobilization of bodies for the formation of political activism* and for the action of social movements.

The strategies used to mobilize the audience in the 6th MST Conference video (Figure 1) intersect in different formats. Thus, the work sought to systematize information and describe and analyze reality in three conjugated levels by: a) pointing out the main types found, such as

enactments and dramatizations, choral recitations, music, poetry, legislation, statistical data, panels, large murals, and posters; b) presenting aspects of the mystique and its relation to the political mobilization of militants; c) correlating them with testimonies of the Movement's leaders¹⁸.

The fight for rights was a central and recurring theme on the website and in the video. It appeared as heir to the issue of re-democratization – precisely because it represents a value that is confused with the very origin of the MST. Therefore, the approach found in the material is diversified within this thematic line and even assumes different formats, even though they are discursively complementary.



Figure 1 – Image of the main panel of the 6th MST Conference (2014). Source: MST (2014c).

Taking the main panel of the Conference as its main theme, the video highlights a sequence of images to problematize the destruction of the Forest Code and the Constitution, emphasizing the predatory performance of some corporations against the set of documents that support the struggle for land in the Democratic Rule of Law. The camera feature triggered by the image editing – *in a panoramic perspective* for detail – is intended to highlight the direct relationship between the agriculture project of certain agribusiness companies – Monsanto, Cargill, Bunge, Syngenta, Bayer, Dow AgroSciences, and the destruction of the Brazilian legislation (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Detail of the video showing the action of agribusiness corporations. Source: MST (2014c).

In the opening mystique, several militants occupied the center of the gym with their black T-shirts bearing the following sentence by Thiago de Mello: “It’s dark, but I sing because the dawn will come”¹⁹ (Figure 3). In fact, the excerpt is from a poem called *Madrugada camponesa* (Peasant dawn), written in 1965 in the midst of the civil-military dictatorship. The verses discuss vivid suffering in the Brazilian dark years, but without losing sight of the utopia of transforming the world.

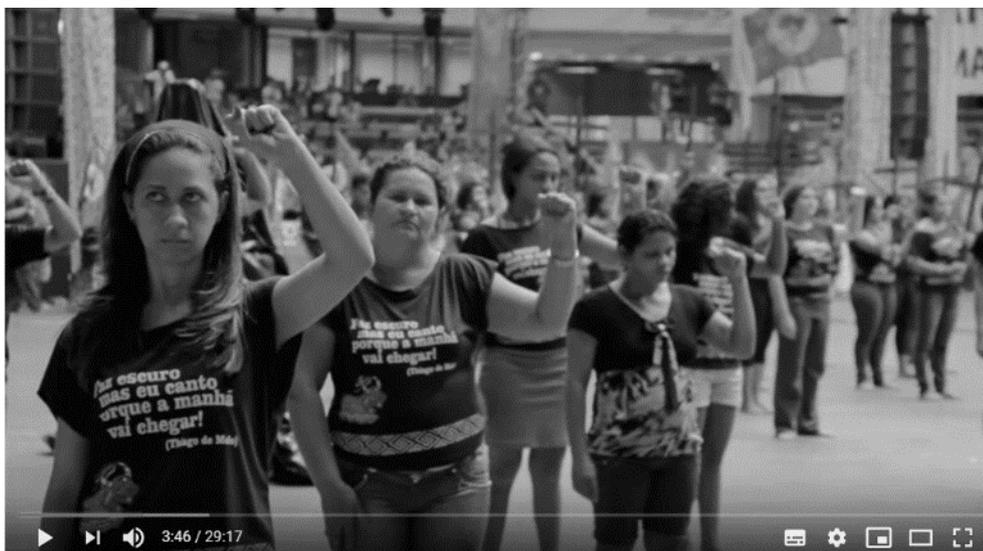


Figure 3 – Image of the opening mystique. Source: MST (2014c).

Beyond the matter of social rights and freedom, reading the poem also indicates a principle that is characteristic of the social movements: network organization. In the field of academic studies that involve the theme, Gohn

(2010) contributed to map the networked social movements and to understand the construction of *mobilization networks* – civil associations, NGOs, forums, plenary sessions, national and transnational articulations. In turn, Scherer-Warren (2006) reflected on the *mediation spheres* allocated in the movement networks, which were created to manage the tension constantly experienced by social movements in their relationship with the State.

Going back to social reality under the category of “mobilization networks” (Gohn, 2010, p. 39), the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT)²⁰ composes a group with a manifest ideological proximity to the MST. In its origin, MST’s mystique was constituted by religious elements such as the bible and the cross. However, in the text of the official website, the symbolism of the MST’s mystique today finds its strength in symbols of resistance and struggle: the anthem and the flag, in addition to the black tents. In some way, the relationship between religion and politics emerges in both groups, and the mystique itself is originally the result of this intricate combination. To Coelho (2017), the mystique fuses references of religious-revolutionary and intellectual-militant nature.

An internet search with search engines revealed some organicity between the MST and the CPT. The affinity is expressed by the ideological alignment of the events promoted by the two organizations in 2014, including using the same work by Thiago de Mello. The CPT organized its 4th Conference, whose theme was *Memory, Rebellion, and Hope of the Rural Poor*. Very poignantly, the poetry present in MST’s mystique was also the motto of the meeting organized by the Pastoral Land Commission, in addition to showing on the cover and at the end of the Newsletter²¹ that advertised the event. In the same publication, besides topics present in the daily debate of the MST – such as the murder of rural workers, cases of contemporary slave labor, organic and agroecological production, as well as widespread agrarian conflicts –, we also found an article about the 30th anniversary of the MST.

Beyond the religious component, the mystique is expressed in different languages: a combination of theatrical choral recitation and statistical data. A pair of militants begin a dramatized reading with certain depiction of time – of a mythical past of guerrillas and battles, involving

suffering and impunity. The marches, as emblematic forms of struggle of the MST, shape the militant bodies that, with their words and ideas, organize the struggles of the present and prepare for victories in a future with full rights and freedom.

Then there is a past and a present. And our future lies in the fight! All of those who died fighting remained alive in our memories. All the shouts that broke the silence of impunity and echoed from the top of the guerrilla are our songs of freedom today. All the bodies that filled the battlefields became the pillars of our struggle. The exiled words became the paths of our ideas. [...] Resting is only allowed when the fight of those who died is won completely rather than partially (Débora, MST-AL, in the official video of the 6th National MST Conference) (MST, 2014c)²².

After that, some data referring to the year 2013 are presented on the screen: the exacerbated use of pesticides; the monopoly of agricultural production and trade by 30 transnational corporations; favoring agribusiness over peasant agriculture; as well as land ownership concentration.

The dramatic nature of the mystique intensifies when a clash between coercive police forces and peasants is performed. The tension of the background music sets the mood of the moment, in which some images of repression are interspersed with the representation of the conflict. The following scenes include a concrete confrontation that occurred during the event itself. In the clash between the militants and the police, some banners say: *1600 peasants murdered! Where's justice? – Fight and Build the Grassroots Land Reform*. To end the dramatization, a couple steps in with a baby covered in blood.

By mixing theatricalization with statistical data, subjectivity embodies the experience of inequality and exploitation and creates a dialogue with actual information and data about the number of peasants murdered. By using scenes from a march promoted during the 2014 Conference, the video integrates the mystique's temporality with the concrete struggles of the MST in public spaces for social justice. The banner announces the situation of violence in the countryside and at the same time it sediments central points for the Grassroots Land Reform project: the denouncement of the exaggerated use of pesticides and lack of a project to foster rural education²³.

Going back to the dramatized speech by the young couple, it is worth highlighting the symbolic reinforcement of the narrative of *bodies marked by screaming and bleeding*. The prerogative of a *whole struggle* serves to nourish the spirits of an organized struggle. It fits the fight for recognition of rights for all. Therefore, *one is only allowed to rest when the fight of those who died is won completely rather than partially*.

The temporality of the struggle between past and present recovers the discursiveness of the body. The utopia of the battlefields is seeking to conquer freedom in order to catalyze a march towards victory against oppression and exploitation. Even the mystical sense of religiosity resurfaces through the hybridized idea of body and blood – a conception often constituted in the organization of the religious rite and in the organization of political struggle.

As already pointed out, authors like Dowbor and Szwako²⁴ (2013) emphasize two important aspects in the configuration of the struggle of social movements: the *dramatization* and the *victimization* performed by militants as a strategy to have their rights recognized.

At the base of the showcase-stage continuum, a gradient of violence operates, which ranges from only tacit dynamics of tension to open forms of physical conflict. [...] bringing out its capacity to articulate diverse and numerous actors [...] [The] dramatic work of martyrization and [...] the dramatized violence demands victims, so that the power of this dramatization depends on how it is communicated and enacted [...] [T]he use of violence is not in itself a strategy of this movement: it is actually a mode of interaction through which and from which the militants represent themselves as ‘victim’ characters, that is, victimized and antagonized by ‘villains’ (Dowbor; Szwako, 2013, p. 50-54)²⁵.

Through this analytical bias, violence announces itself as a form of sociability that is triggered to enhance the sense of martyrdom of the militants and the Movement, which thus gain collective strength to face their opponents (Figure 4). The representation of an excerpt of poetry written by Pedro Terra turned out to be one of the densest moments of the mystique, especially due to its emotionally charged tone. *Pedagogy of Steels*²⁶ was written precisely to denounce the massacre of landless workers in Eldorado dos Carajás²⁷ (1996). So, the punctual and precise excerpt “*If keep*

*quiet, the stones will cry out*²⁸ reinforces the memory and social identity of the militants' cause and calls for collective struggle.



Figure 4 – Representation of conflicts and struggles in the mystique. Source: MST (2014c).

Given the strategic importance of the MST in conducting the struggle of social movements in Latin America, the date of the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre (April 17) was eventually indicated by Via Campesina²⁹ as the International Day of Peasant Struggle. The Eldorado dos Carajás, the Corumbiara, and the Felisburgo massacres represent emblematic chapters in the history of the Movement. On the MST's website³⁰ and in the video analyzed herein there are points that characterize a dramatic narrative of such violent episodes as martyrdom.

The emphasis on the MST massacres as the narrative line to tell their story seems to be best understood when applying the “dramatic principle of martyrdom” described by Dowbor and Szwako (2013, p. 54). The authors highlight the dynamics of the social structure that establishes a conflicting relationship between social movements and coercive forces, which act as an element that weaves the collective identity. The collective memory of a militant past is revived by stories of struggle recovered to fuel the present and rekindle the flame of the struggle – inspiring mobilization around broader political causes.

The symbology built along this trajectory – present in the marches, occupations, and other forms of direct action inherent to the context of the MST's struggle –, also ends up being experienced in the daily life of camps

and settlements and in other spaces of broader social interaction of the Movement. At the interface between politics and religion, the MST reconstructs its memory through mystique, placing itself as heir to historical struggles, prefiguring a *historical truth* (Fernandes; Stédile, 2005) or even creating a messianic and sacralized vision, a *mythic density* (Chaves, 2000).

The practice of the mystique has followed the organization of the MST since its first mobilizations, and its main motivators were the 'religious agents' who supported and advised the Movement. The mystique is a 'kind' of ritual and celebration that happens in different ways and with various meanings and senses. Its practice takes place in different places, such as camps, settlements, meetings, conferences, and the various manifestations that the MST undertakes. In general, it is practiced in the form of theater, containing music, poetry, and many symbolic elements (Coelho, 2017, p. 120)³¹.

The MST's mystique fulfills such role in the different spaces – camps and settlements, in direct actions and virtual mobilizations, occupations and vigils, meetings and conferences –, and constitutes and nurtures the relationship between bodies and knowledge, which are triggered together in situations of conflict and fight. The flag and the anthem represent elements that originate from the struggle for land, holding values and principles with a visual and symbolic identity that permeates various moments. Both appear as mobilizing instruments of peasant militant struggle in the formation of collective identity and political sociability.

While the flag protects the symbols of the struggle, the anthem calls for the base of militants to build grassroots power. According to the website's narrative, the mystique also includes the black tent as a distinctive element in building the identity of the landless rural worker. It characterizes the tent as a rite of passage between the condition of camped to that of settled; in the daily struggle against landlordism, exploitation, and inequality; and in the struggle for land reform, including the change in the model of agriculture and society.

In its complexity, the mystique appears at the same time as a cultural act of representation of the struggles and hopes of the landless workers; a way of encouraging the militants, who are worn out by repression, oppression, and exclusion; and rescue of the purpose of the struggle for land and the legacy of the dead militants and leaders.

However, motivating the fight also means identifying the opponent. For much of the MST's trajectory, landlordism incarnated the main enemy, especially due to the historical prevalence of the structure of land concentration in Brazil. More recently, there has been a significant shift in the discourse and rhetoric of identifying the opponent: transfigured into international capital, agribusiness, the bourgeois state, and the mainstream media. The following statement reinforces this leadership view with impacts on the militants' cause.

We face the power of a capital that has no homeland, no people, and that easily resorts to denationalization. The international capital and the agribusiness. The bourgeois and oligarchic state. A bourgeois and prejudiced media. However, we also had victories in the last 30 years. With the experience of the past and the hope for a free future. On behalf of the landless workers of this country, we open the 6th National MST Conference (Diego MST-PR, in the official video of the 6th National MST Conference) (MST, 2014c)³².

The video exhibition script provides support for deepening this debate by discussing the social relationships that permeate the atmosphere of dispute regarding an agricultural project for the Brazilian countryside. During the dramatizations, capitalism is described as the *largest train in the world* – seen as this huge machine (Figure 5) capable of destroying lives and dreams.



Figure 5 – Representation of Capitalism in the MST's mystique. Source: MST (2014c).

The narrator states that it is “the biggest train in the world with its gears [that] subtracts time, childhood, and life... With a lot of misery and

destruction... There goes the biggest train and one day it will not come back”³³. With axes in their hands, they repeat over and over: “shuddering strike”. Later in the video, some characters dressed as peasants appear lying in the center of the gym while listening to the same sentence over and over, “strikes shudder”³⁴. The train’s materiality and movement are created by a row of people with equally black clothes and umbrellas that they turn to power the mechanisms of the *world’s largest train*.

The dramatic reading takes on a dramatic tone in pointing to the most perverse effects of the capitalist system – misery, destruction, and death. Devastating effects that function as a way of producing blood and pain and that impact the body. Thus, the body can be understood as the more intimate and collective sphere of the militants in their struggle to have their rights recognized. As a result of these harmful effects, the agribusiness model of agriculture emerges with the use of pesticides and transgenic seeds to increase productivity within a context of profit and exploitation.

In the *mystique of harvest and planting*, the values of the Grassroots Land Reform emerge to contrast the model of the big capital. In the representation, a rural scene is reproduced with the presence of several MST militants dressed in their red T-shirts and caps (Figure 6). The musical background is the following chant: “Love the field when planting. Not to poison the field is to purify the bread. By loving the land and planting seeds, we cultivate the land and it cultivates us”.



Figure 6 – Harvest and planting mystique. Source: MST (2014c).

Even though capitalism continues to inhabit narratives as the major opponent, there is a discursive resignification that points to the most direct opponent: agribusiness. It seems evident to think of the organicity between the capitalist model of production in combination with the agribusiness model of production, inspired by the Green Revolution, as the main enemies to be faced by the MST's Grassroots Land Reform project.

The essence of land reform is to start by sharing the land. However, the land reform that we advocate for has another pillar beyond the land itself: healthy food production. That is the ideological change, because in the past having land was enough for the peasants to work. Now the peasants want land to produce healthy food for everyone. That is the ideological change that defines the popular character of our land reform: the Grassroots Land Reform (João Pedro, MST, in the official video of the 6th National MST Conference) (MST, 2014c)³⁵.

Thus, the Grassroots Land Reform project is based on principles of agroecology and healthy food production and proposes food sovereignty for the population. The sense of ideological change is related to the confrontation against agribusiness and capitalism through Socialism and Grassroots Power.

Agroecology is within our project. Our project towards socialism. A project of social transformation. An important alternative for peasants with the aim of producing healthy food, but also as a challenge to the agribusiness model, a perverse kind of agriculture that is being put in place funded by the State and governments (Antonio, MST-TO, in the official video of the 6th National MST Conference) (MST, 2014c)³⁶.

The Grassroots Land Reform represents a moment of ideological change and organization of production through agroecology as the way to food sovereignty. It represents a project for self-determination and politicization of those subjugated, including the active consensus for social subjectivity and collective struggle.

Final Remarks Concerning the Critical Discourse Analysis

In the case of the MST, the *mystique* represents a significant part of mobilization and action practices. It aggregates classic forms of struggle to an emblematic dual model: *occupation-march*. In general terms, new forms of solidarity and valorization of life emerge as substrates for political sociability and militant formation. Thus, the performances staged by the

militants trigger symbolic values of the peasant identity construction through the mediation of rites, songs and anthems, calls, and slogans.

The analysis of the discourse³⁷ of some militants and leaders reveals that the MST's struggle is not against landlordism, but against the financial sector and the banks, the transnational companies, and the big media. Capitalism is transformed and takes on the identity of the agribusiness with its forms of domination and exploitation. In the struggle against these opponents, representatives of capitalist hegemony, the struggle for land brings together the transcendence of private property, the strengthening of popular education, and a sense of international solidarity.

The emancipation of workers involves then a two-fold process: the destruction of structures for the political formation of subjects; and conformation, so that a new project of society may be developed. In this way, performance appears as an instrument of political mobilization, capable of producing a mobilizing force for the *subjectivation* of political action in the militants' action. Starting from the Conference motto³⁸, the Grassroots Land Reform represents the *key entity* to structure the MST's political discourse – consisting of food sovereignty, agroecology, organic foods, and family farming. At the same time, it reveals the *position of social subjects* fighting against the agribusiness due to the use of transgenic seeds and pesticides; and unveils the meaning of *historical change*: the Popular Democracy as a resignified form of Socialism.

Emancipation would result from the construction of a new political, economic, and cultural hegemony by workers historically excluded from socially produced wealth. The performance brought about in the mystique acts so as to prefigure and set the grounds for quite a characteristic type of subjectivity described by Semeraro (2006). An ethical-political subjectivity, both individual and collective, capable of instituting the *action of new sociopolitical subjects*. The author believes a deeper level of discourse analysis should be combined with the use of specific categories dialectically related to political and ideological changes.

Firstly, at the level of *historical change* together with *scientific and technological advances*. The proposed structural changes within the Grassroots Land Reform project gain significance at the heart of a complex movement: through the restoration and updating of the MST's political struggle legacy

and defense of peasant culture; through the organization of the working class in their mass struggle, which aggregates the countryside and the city; through agroecological production; through the emphasis on social rights, such as health and education; through the fight against landlordism, currently represented by the agribusiness; and through conformation to a socialist political alternative embodied in the form of Grassroots Power.

Secondly, in the correlation between *fronts of struggle in their multiplicity* as well as the *State in its complex activity*. The organized struggle, in its *class* bias, constituted around the fight against the current capitalist structure – the agribusiness, the bankers and rentiers, the transnational companies, and the communication oligopolies. Discursively, the MST points to the confrontation of a refined set of structures and entities that maintain bourgeois hegemony, especially by forming an internationalist front of workers.

The mystique appears to mobilize the Grassroots Land Reform project as a social practice under construction. It is deeply connected with the democratization of social structures and the emancipation of rural and city workers. Especially in a political situation with many setbacks, the mobilization of bodies for political organization and collective struggle plays a crucial role in tackling the disintegration of social rights and guarantees in the countryside. In the nearest horizon, we see the upcoming Social Security Reform and the Labor Reform (2017). Damage by large corporations and transnational capital to public health and education. The violent deaths not only of struggling landless workers, but also of women, black and indigenous people, *quilombolas* [hinterland settlers from African origin in Brazil], the LGBT population, trade unionists, human rights advocates, residents of peripheries, among other persecuted and marginalized groups in society.

The scenario becomes even more evident and challenging due to the threat of conservative groups, backed by powerful parliamentary representatives, to typify the actions of social movements as *terrorism*. The formation of a complex of fascism-inspired collective subjects responsible for alarming intimidation – together with the relaxation of the Disarmament Act and the free movement of militias by the established State power without proper coercion by the controlling structures, such as

the police forces and the judiciary branch – needs to be met with courage and resistance by progressive sectors, scholars, and social movements.

The analysis of the meaning and depth of the changes instrumentalized by the MST in more than three decades of struggle reveals the emancipatory potential of its mystique from the perspective of the transcendence of the structural processes of domination and alienation. Hence a performative practice understood as an insurgent form of political struggle. In this scenario, the verses of the MST anthem announce the purpose of social change: *forged in the struggle of a free, working, and peasant homeland*⁹. This is the great challenge of the MST and the grassroots and progressive forces: to bring about a historic change anchored in the radicalization of democracy by the Grassroots Power.

Notes

- ¹ In the original: “Esse sistema tecnológico, em que estamos totalmente imersos na aurora do século XXI, surgiu nos anos 70. Devido à importância de contextos históricos específicos das trajetórias tecnológicas e do modo particular de interação entre a tecnologia e a sociedade, [...] Todos têm algo de essencial em comum: embora baseadas principalmente nos conhecimentos já existentes e desenvolvidas como uma extensão das tecnologias mais importantes, essas tecnologias representaram um salto qualitativo na difusão maciça da tecnologia em aplicações comerciais e civis, devido a sua acessibilidade e custo cada vez menor, com qualidade cada vez maior. Assim, o microprocessador, o principal dispositivo de difusão da microeletrônica, foi inventado em 1971 e começou a ser difundido em meados dos anos 70” (Castells, 1999, p. 91).
- ² The MPL defines itself and is characterized by the following principles: autonomy, independence, horizontality, non-partisanship, and federalism (MPL, 2013).
- ³ In the original: “Nessa competição pela interpretação da plateia e por uma reação positiva do público, a performance dos movimentos visa transformar aquilo que é uma plateia desde sempre virtual (seja ela as autoridades estatais, a opinião pública ou quaisquer outras personagens da sociedade civil) em um público espectador cativo, um aliado. Para esse trabalho de convencimento e adesão, os movimentos dramatizam ações, forjando ou emprestando palcos e vitrines e encenando atos que dependem da cooperação entre seus protagonistas (os militantes) e do esforço

deles para a perfeição de cada parte do seu espetáculo (a cenografia, a trilha sonora, o figurino)” (Dowbor; Szwako, 2013, p. 44-45).

- ⁴ The proposition uses as a reference the contributions of Dowbor and Szwako (2013). In turn, the theoretical matrix adopted by the authors uses Erving Goffman’s interactionism to understand the action of social movements, especially through the categories of *backstage*, *stage*, and *showcase*
- ⁵ In Brazil, authors such as Chaia (2007) and Fornaciari (2016) highlight the importance of performance as an instrument of political mobilization. Chaia identifies the origin of artistic and cultural activism in the historical episodes related to counterculture movements, especially the struggle for civil rights in the US and against the Vietnam War. Fornaciari addresses performances of the social body in the space of political mobilization.
- ⁶ In the original: “É, portanto, diante deste cenário, que consideramos as Jornadas de Junho como performances do corpo social, como performances de anti-arte, como ação urgente na sociedade através de mobilização de corpos, amparados pelo suporte das novas mídias e com objetivos em que arte e vida se conectam, longe da produção de um objeto ou obra, mas no sentido de provocar agenciamentos políticos, ainda que momentâneos” (Fornaciari, 2016, p. 37).
- ⁷ In the original: “A clara distinção outrora existente entre o urbano e o rural estava desaparecendo aos poucos, dando lugar a espaços permeáveis [...] sob o domínio hegemônico do capital e do Estado. [...] É de conhecimento geral que já está em andamento um grande e diversificado número de lutas e movimentos sociais urbanos (no sentido mais amplo do termo, isto é, aquele que também inclui os movimentos nas zonas rurais)” (Harvey, 2014, p. 55-65).
- ⁸ For this characterization of the Brazilian dictatorship: “[...] there was a coup d’état in 1964, which was the result of a broad civil-military, conservative, and anti-reformist coalition, the origins of which lie far beyond reactions to Jango’s hits and misses” (Napolitano, 2014, p. 11).
- ⁹ In this study, the author also discusses important publications to understand the history of the MST and its mystique: Silva (2004); Fernandes and Stédile (2005); Branford and Rocha (2004), among others.
- ¹⁰ Two researchers from Duke University – Diana Taylor and Mark Steuernagel – produced a website titled *O que são estudos da performance? (What Are Performance Studies?)* with essays, articles, and interviews on the topic in question. The essay and interview motivated academic inspirations for the present article. In the essay

Performance, política e protesto, (Performance, Politics and Protest), the author Marcela Fuentes reflects on the composition of the field of study, points out theoretical frameworks, and makes methodological remarks about performance studies. In the *interview with Rossana Reguillo*, the matters of methodological nature are dealt with in an original way. See reference links at the end of the article (O que são os Estudos da Performance, 2011; 2015).

- ¹¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=25&v=mcPhrGPktJc>. Accessed on: March 4, 2019 (MST, 2014c).
- ¹² Something close to this can be seen, such as people arriving from different parts and being accredited, the assembly of the event's structures, the preparation of meals, the broadcasts made by Rádio Brasil em Movimento, among other aspects.
- ¹³ According to the video, around two years.
- ¹⁴ The event took place in Brasília on February 10 to 14, 2014. At the time, a heterogeneous group – with more than 15,000 landless workers coming from 23 Brazilian states and the Federal District plus 1000 landless rural children, with the presence of 250 international guests from five continents of the world – met to participate in one of the most important moments of the MST.
- ¹⁵ In general, the frames presented in the article are frames of images *printed* from the 6th MST Conference video. Since the images were used for academic and non-commercial purposes with proper mention of the source, the restriction of use of the material for the respective purposes does not apply
- ¹⁶ Macali and Brilhante Occupations (1979); Encruzilhada Natalino Camp (1981); 5th Earth Pilgrimage (1982); National March for Employment, Justice and Land reform (1997); International Day of Peasant Struggle (April 17); National Journey of Struggles (1999); Popular March for Brazil.
- ¹⁷ Corumbiara Massacre (1995); Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre (1996) and Felisburgo Massacre (2004).
- ¹⁸ The manner in which the speeches were given also revealed a hierarchy between militants and leaders, expressed subtly when one observes the tenuous relationship between viewers and narrators, between those with a voice in the video and those who are only identified in this *big collective subject called MST*.
- ¹⁹ “It’s dark, but I sing, because the dawn will come. Come see with me, comrade, as the colors of the world change. Not sleeping is worth it if to wait for the colors of the world to change. It is already dawn, the sun comes, I want joy, so I can forget

my suffering. Those who suffer stay up to defend their heart. Let's go together, in a crowd, work for joy, tomorrow is a new day".

In the original: "Faz escuro, mas eu canto, porque a manhã vai chegar. Vem ver comigo, companheiro, a cor do mundo mudar. Vale a pena não dormir para esperar a cor do mundo mudar. Já é madrugada, vem o sol, quero alegria, que é para esquecer o que eu sofria. Quem sofre fica acordado defendendo o coração. Vamos juntos, multidão, trabalhar pela alegria, amanhã é um novo dia" (Mello, 2018).

- ²⁰ The Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) was created in June 1975 during the Meeting of Amazon Bishops and Prelates convened by the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), held in Goiânia (GO). It was founded amidst the military dictatorship in response to the serious situation experienced by rural workers, squatters, and peons, especially in the Amazon, who had their work exploited, were subjected to conditions analogous to slave labor, and were expelled from the lands they occupied (Pastoral Land Commission, 2010).
- ²¹ In the Newsletter No. 215 (Pastoral Land Commission, 2014), the publication's editorial is dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the MST. Available at: <https://www.cptnacional.org.br/component/jdownloads/send/49-edicoes-de-2014/360-jornal-pastoral-da-terra-janeiro-a-marco-de-2014-ed-215?option=com_jdownloads>. Accessed on: March 6, 2019.
- ²² In the original: "Aqui temos um passado e um presente. E na luta está o nosso futuro! Todos os que morreram no sangue, permaneceram vivos na lembrança. Todos os gritos que ceifaram o silêncio da impunidade e ecoaram do alto da guerrilha, hoje são as nossas canções de liberdade. Todos os corpos que encheram os campos de batalha, hoje são os pilares da nossa luta. As palavras exiladas, hoje são os caminhos das nossas ideias. [...] Só se é permitido descansar quando a luta de nossos mortos se realizar, porém inteira, não pela metade" (Débora MST-AL, no vídeo oficial do 6º Congresso Nacional do MST) (MST, 2014c)
- ²³ In a protest at the Ministry of Education (MEC), a group of children present at the 6th Conference carries a banner that says: *landless children against the closure and for the construction of schools in the countryside*. And a poster: *We demand schools where we live*. The group performs a direct action by leaving handprints painted in various colors on the outer walls of the Ministry of Education building. The children also carry a banner with data: *More than 37,000 country schools closed. What is the Ministry of Education doing?* Following the MST's manifestation mystique, a child chants in the microphone: *Free Homeland, we will win!*

- ²⁴ Both highlight messages on the posters – with words such as *genocide, murder, repression, death, removals* – that are similar to accusatory categories recurrently used by the MST in their dramatizations.
- ²⁵ No original: “Na base do continuum vitrine-palco opera um gradiente de violência que vai das dinâmicas apenas tácitas de tensão a formas abertas de conflito físico. [...] trazendo à tona sua capacidade de articular diversos e numerosos atores [...] trabalho dramático de martirização e que a violência dramatizada exige vítimas, de modo que o poder dessa dramatização depende de como ela é comunicada e encenada [...] o recurso à violência não é, por si só, uma estratégia desse movimento: é, antes, uma modalidade de interação pela qual e a partir da qual os militantes se representam como personagens ‘vítimas’, isto é, vitimizados e antagonizados por ‘vilões” (Dowbor; Szwako, 2013, p. 50-54).
- ²⁶ *The pedagogy of steels (Pedro Tierra)* – Candelaria, Carandiru, Corumbiara, Eldorado dos Carajás.../ 100 years ago Canudos, Contestado, Caldeirão .../ The pedagogy of steel strikes this atrocious geography in the body.../ There is a nation of men excluded from the nation./ There is a nation of men excluded from life./ There is a nation of silent men excluded from every word./ There is a nation of men fighting after the fences./ There is a nation of faceless men buried in the mud, nameless, buried by silence./ They prowl the wire of the fences lit by the campfire./ They prowl the wall of the laws and have a bomb throbbing in their breasts: the dream of free land. [...] If wkeep quiet, the stones will cry out...
- In the original: “*A pedagogia dos aços (Pedro Tierra)* – Candelária, Carandiru, Corumbiara, Eldorado dos Carajás... / Há cem anos Canudos, Contestado, Caldeirão... / A pedagogia dos aços golpeia no corpo essa atroz geografia... / Há uma nação de homens excluídos da nação. / Há uma nação de homens excluídos da vida. / Há uma nação de homens calados, excluídos de toda palavra. / Há uma nação de homens combatendo depois das cercas. / Há uma nação de homens sem rosto, soterrado na lama, sem nome, soterrado pelo silêncio. / Eles rondam o arame das cercas alumiados pela fogueira dos acampamentos. / Eles rondam o muro das leis e ataram no peito uma bomba que pulsa: o sonho da terra livre. [...] Se calarmos, as pedras gritarão...”.
- ²⁷ On April 17, 1996, 19 landless rural workers were killed by military police in the episode that became known worldwide as the Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre in Southeastern Pará. More information at: Amnesty International (2016).

- ²⁸ It takes up a sense of religiosity present at the origin of the mystiques by referring to a very similar biblical passage – “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (The Bible, Luke, 19, 40).
- ²⁹ Via Campesina (Peasant Pathway) is a worldwide articulation of peasant movements that has among its goals the building of solidarity relations that recognize the diversity of the peasantry in the world; building a model of agricultural development that guarantees food sovereignty as the right of peoples to define their own agricultural policies; and the preservation of the environment with the protection of biodiversity (Fernandes, 2015).
- ³⁰ More information on the MST website (2014b). The massacres can be consulted according to a historical periodization presented by the website: Corumbiara (94-95); Eldorado dos Carajás (96) and Felisburgo (00-04).
- ³¹ In the original: “mobilizações, e teve como principais incentivadores os ‘agentes religiosos’ que apoiavam e prestavam assessoria ao Movimento. A mística é uma ‘espécie’ de ritual e celebração que acontece de diversas maneiras e com significados e sentidos variados. Sua prática dá-se nos mais variados lugares, como nos acampamentos, assentamentos, Encontros, Congressos e nas diversas manifestações que o MST empreende. De maneira geral, é praticada em forma de teatro, contendo músicas, poesias e diversos elementos simbólicos em seu interior” (Coelho, 2017, p. 120).
- ³² In the original: “Enfrentamos o poderio do capital sem pátria, sem povo e entreguista. O capital internacional, o agronegócio. O Estado burguês e oligarca. Uma mídia burguesa e preconceituosa. Mas nesses 30 anos também tivemos conquistas. Com a experiência do passado e a esperança de um futuro liberto. Em nome dos trabalhadores e trabalhadoras sem-terra desse país declaramos aberto o 6º Congresso Nacional do MST”. (Diego MST-PR, video of the 6th National MST Conference) (MST, 2014c).
- ³³ In the original: “o maior trem do mundo com suas engrenagens subtrai o tempo, a infância e a vida...Com muita miséria e destruição...Lá vai o maior trem e um dia não voltará”.
- ³⁴ Excerpts from the song *Arrepio*, performed by Marisa Monte and composed by Carlinhos Brown.
In the original, respectively: “pancada de arrepio” and “arrepio de pancada”.
- ³⁵ In the original: “A essência da reforma agrária é começar repartindo a terra. Mas a reforma agrária que defendemos tem outros pilares além da terra: a produção de alimentos saudáveis. Essa é a mudança ideológica, porque antes bastava a terra para o

trabalho dos camponeses. Agora os camponeses querem terra para produzir alimentos saudáveis para todo povo. Essa mudança ideológica que define o caráter popular da nossa reforma agrária: a Reforma Agrária Popular (João Pedro, MST, no vídeo oficial do 6º Congresso Nacional do MST) (MST, 2014c).

- ³⁶ In the original: “A agroecologia se coloca dentro do nosso projeto. Nosso projeto rumo ao socialismo. Um projeto de transformação social. Uma alternativa importante para os camponeses, com o objetivo de produzir alimentos saudáveis, mas também como enfrentamento do modelo do agronegócio, uma agricultura perversa que está sendo colocada, sendo financiada pelo Estado e pelos governos” (Antônio, MST-TO, in the 6th National MST Conference) (MST, 2014c).
- ³⁷ Within the theoretical and methodological premises of the CDA established by Norman Fairclough (2001).
- ³⁸ Fight, Build Grassroots Land Reform!
- ³⁹ In the original: “*forjada na luta de uma pátria livre, operária e camponesa*”.

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