

## Estratégias de resistência do movimento camponês brasileiro em frente das novas táticas de controle do agronegócio transnacional<sup>1</sup>

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**Resumo:** O artigo examina as estratégias desenvolvidas pelos movimentos sociais do campo brasileiro para combater a hegemonia de companhias agrícolas transnacionais e o agronegócio em geral que utilizam biotecnologias como transgênicos para controlar a produção e venda de *commodities* agrícolas.

**Palavras-chave:** MST; Via Campesina; biodiversidade; biotecnologia; sementes crioulas.

### Estrategias de resistencia del movimiento campesino Brasileño contra las tácticas nuevas de control del agro-negoció transnacional

**Resumen:** El artículo hace una analice de las estrategias en desarrollo por los movimientos sociales del campo brasileño para combatir la hegemonía de corporaciones agrícolas transnacionales y el agro-negoció que utilizan biotecnologías por ejemplo semilla transgênicos para tomar control de la producción agrícola y los mercados de maíz e otros *commodities*.

**Palabras-claves:** MST; Via Campesina; biodiversidad; biotecnología; semillas naturales

### Brazilian Peasant Movement Responses to New Transnational Corporate Control Strategies in Agriculture

**Abstract:** The article surveys strategies developed by Brazilian rural social movements to combat the hegemony of transnational agricultural corporations and agribusinesses utilizing biotechnologies such as transgenic seed to gain control of agricultural production and commodity markets.

**Keywords:** MST; Via Campesina; biodiversity; biotechnology; native-seeds

## Introduction

The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), formally celebrated twenty years of activism in January 2004. Six months later, on June 20, it commemorated by hosting a vast party in Itapeva, São Paulo, with some 500 self-described peasant leaders from around the world as special guests among the thousands who attended (MST, 2004a). The presence of delegates from the international group of peasant organizations, the Via Campesina, confirmed one of the most important shifts in strategy in the history of the MST. Globalization, made concrete since the late 1990s by the liberalization of regulations on trade as well as land and intellectual property rights, has brought an intensification of transnational corporate (TNC) influence in Brazilian agriculture. The presence of predatory TNCs, especially those engaged in biotechnology and agricultural export commodities like soybeans, has challenged the MST to make a number of strategic adjustments in order to continue to advance the struggle for agrarian reform. As transnational agricultural conglomerates headquartered in the United States and Europe, such as

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Monsanto and Aventis, have burrowed deeper and deeper into the Brazilian countryside, the MST and its organizational allies have had to think and act in transnational terms as well (MST, 2004b).

The core element of the new offensive by TNCs in Brazil is to be found in various biotechnologies, particularly transgenically modified seed (TMO). Many are the critics of the new biotechnologies. The geographer and environmentalist Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves recently elaborated on their political, social, cultural, and natural costs (PORTO GONÇALVES, 2004, 234-45). Unlike genetically modified plants – hybrids arising from a cross between members of the same species – transgenically modified plants represent a complete break with nature because they involve the transposition of species that would otherwise have no contact. The hazards of introducing the strange fruit of laboratory science in nature is unknown and only time can reveal the answer. But, as Porto Gonçalves notes, “time is money”, and the patience of capitalist investors is as short as their insurance is long. Like Porto Gonçalves, the Harvard University zoologist R. C. Lewontin has written that biotechnologies are one of capitalist agriculture’s latest tools. They are a key ingredient in the proletarianization of farmers because they transfer control over farm production and reproduction to the owners of seed patents and other inputs such as modified-hens and their mutated-chicks (LEWONTIN, 2000). The introduction of the new technology compels land concentration, reducing the number of farmers and turning those who stay-on into virtual contract laborers. Without going into scientific detail on the environmental implications of biotechnologies – what the Brazilians call *transgênicos* – it is important to note the economic and political challenges these new technologies create.

First, biotechnology focuses basic inputs essential to farming and ranching, such as plant seeds, the genetic composition of semen for artificial insemination and hormones. Second, the biotechnologies are patented and most of the patents are owned by only five transnational companies, three of them concentrated in one country, the United States: Aventis (StarLink), Dow (U.S. : Sinal Verde), Dupont (U.S.: Pioneer), Monsanto (U.S.: Dekalb, Monsoy, Roundup Ready), and Syngenta (Novartis). Third, once used the nature of the technology is such that farmers are required to plant the next generation of OTM seed and livestock-growers are obligated to use the carefully controlled inputs provided by companies such as the U.S.-based OSI Group or Brazil’s Sadia. Fourth, strange to nature, advanced biotechnology threatens natural processes of development among humans, plants, and animals. Fifth, the biotechnologies are aggressively marketed by these companies and production closely monitored. The seed and its product are genetically altered not only for abundant output but also to be identifiable by a distinct DNA signature. The companies vigorously prosecute any farmer who uses their materials without paying for its use and royalties on the crops. Analysts believe agricultural capitalism has developed modern, industrial features in the input and output system rather than in the farming sector itself. Thus, at this moment, land control is not as important as control of the mode of production, something the transgenically modified biotechnologies help secure for the TNCs (LEWONTIN, 2000; MAGDOFF et al., 2000; BRAC DE LA PERRIÈRE et al., 2001; PORTO GONÇALVES, 2004; REDAÇÃO, 2005b).

Under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2002), Brazil became party to international agreements respecting intellectual property rights in genetically-modified products and loop-holes in the 1995 bio-security law helped make it possible for Monsanto to introduce OTM seed on the sly (BRANFORD & ROCHA, 2004, 172-79). For two years in a row, the government of President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva (2002-) dealt with the question in contradictory ways, expressing opposition to satisfy its social movement base while refusing to outlaw existing OTM crops to satisfy financial backers. While agribusiness lobbyists pushed relentlessly to open Brazil permanently to *transgênicos*, most popular movements fought to keep them out of the country. Pressured by lobbyists, some farmers, and planting seasons, the temporary solution allowed for biotechnology transnationals to spread and deepen their hold on Brazilian agriculture. In March, 2004 the Lula administration passed the buck by approving a version of the bio-security law that gave decision-making responsibility to a government commission alleged to favor corporate interests (GORGEN, 2005, XXIII; BRASIL, 2005).

This article reviews a few strategies the MST and its allies have adopted to resist the territorialization of the biotech agenda of the TNCs and to create new spaces for the territorialization of an alternative agenda increasingly identified as “peasant,” a term avoided during most of the movement’s history (FERNANDES, 2000a; STÉDILE & FERNANDES, 1999b, 31-32).

The movement has revived old tactics and developed new ones in an attempt to integrate activism at local, national, and international levels, and in the productive and reproductive spheres. Examples include everything from more aggressive land occupation practices, domestic and foreign alliance building and political action to the adoption of a new, counter-hegemonic discourse.

### Organizing principles

The MST and its allies have built a strategy on two major lines of argument (MST COORDENAÇÃO NACIONAL, 2004). One is scientific, the other political. The scientific argument questions the biological and ecological impact of biotechnology on soils, plant diversity, consumers, and farmers. It is incontrovertible that OTM seed disrupts natural processes of soil restoration and plant adaptation and that agro-chemicals pollute water but scientists disagree over the significance of these observations. For consumers, the dangers are also ambiguous. A recent article in the MST's *Jornal dos Trabalhadores Sem-Terra*, for example, reported on studies that connect the high rate of allergy among U.S. citizens to the high consumption of grains produced from OTM seed. (In the U.S., more than 75 percent of key grains come from genetically modified seed.) The European União has found the science so uncertain that it restricts OTM products from European markets. The Japanese also prohibit the entrance of OTM commodities. In fact, the number of countries that question biotechnology is significantly larger than those with an open door policy, like the United States. (Even in the U.S., key capitalist sectors criticize unquestioned support for agricultural biotechnology. In March, 2004, *The New York Times* found that “genetically modified crops are compromising genetic purity of at least some traditional seed varieties” and called “for study and testing on a scale reflecting the enormous acreage and risks involved” (EDITOR, 2004).) The MST and its allies have argued that Brazil can afford to wait and see what the hazards are, keeping *transgênicos* out until the science is clear, and promoting agricultural diversity as the best option (EDITORES, 2003; CORREA, 2004).

A political argument is the other principle of MST organizing. In this argument, Brazil is said to be losing its food sovereignty to transnationals through the spread of biotechnologies. This argument fits well with the organization's well-known opposition to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (ALCA) and neoliberal reform in general. Both are described as neo-imperialist and thus threats to Brazilian autonomy. But the threat of biotechnology allows the MST to bring this argument directly to the family table. First, dependency on *transgênicos* makes farmers dependent on annually purchasing seed, an essential input, since OTMs are genetically engineered – intentionally designed – to be sterile and produce no seed. Second, *transgênicos* are costly and their cost and the royalties demanded for their use of necessity require farmers to indebted themselves, either to credit agencies such as banks or to the seed producer's themselves, as an advance against production. Enriching the five TNCs that control most world patents for the biotech seed, they fall into a cash nexus almost impossible to escape. Designed to protect corporate interests, intellectual property law “further enslaves farmers,” argues an MST position paper (CORREA, 2004). Third, indebtedness places farmers in a dependent position and this, combined with economies of scale that favor large-scale production of most OTM crops, contribute toward land concentration (MIDDENDORF et al., 2000; PORTO GONÇALVES, 2004). Finally, on both a philosophical and practical level, biotechnology represents a reprehensible transfer of knowledge and natural resource wealth from the plant-rich money-poor tropics to the plant-poor capital-rich northern hemisphere. Nearly all of the original genetic material used to create the OTMs comes from the south while most of the power to develop and patent these new discovers resides in the north. For the MST, then, biotechnology continues centuries-old patterns of dependent development, accelerates on-going enclosure processes, worsens land concentration, expands the territory occupied by dysfunctional latifundios, and thus diminishes the chances for democracy and national independence (RIBEIRO, 2003; PESCHANSKI, 2004).

## Old, revised and new elements of MST strategy

Occupying land to force public and private authorities to distribute is the most traditional agrarian reform tactic used by the MST for more than two decades. The strategy includes organizing the rural and urban poor, politicizing them, building community through militancy and confrontation, attracting broader attention and support, negotiation with authorities, and the chess game of advance and retreat until an accord is reached. This is the essence of the socio-territorial movement the geographer Bernardo Mançano Fernandes has described (FERNANDES, 2004b). This strategy is still being practiced by the MST in the context of fighting transnational corporations and *transgênicos* and it has generated angry responses by the defenders of agribusiness.

During 2004, in the states of Paraná and São Paulo the MST organized several occupations of land ear-marked for conversion from cattle pasture or sugar cane to OTM soybeans. In a manifesto called the “Carta de Ribeirão Preto,” the São Paulo federation of agriculture – an agribusiness association – condemned the MST mobilizations as “criminal invasions of rural properties (*invasões criminais de propriedades rurais*)” and the destruction of property “atrocities (*atrocidades*).” The letter claimed that these actions cost Brazil investment dollars by creating “an increasingly insecure and unstable environment (*um ambiente crescente de insegurança e instabilidade*).” Each occupation, claimed the agribusiness letter, “causes material damages of at least \$80,000 (*causa prejuízos materiais de, no mínimo, R\$ 160 mil*)” (BRESSAN, 2004).

Starting in April, 2004, the MST targeted eucalyptus forests planted by transnational corporations such as Brascan, a Canadian-owned, Brazilian-managed forestry company producing cellulose and paper products. This attracted significant media attention and harsh criticism from agribusiness proponents. For the first time, the MST specifically focused on lands generally considered productive, arguing that they were unconstitutional because they failed to fulfill two of the “social functions” required by the 1988 Constitution: providing employment and protecting the environment.

Until these occupations occurred, any intensive-production farm – and sugar-cane as well as eucalyptus plantations certainly fit the category – were considered to fulfill these “social function” tests. But movement leaders argued that eucalyptus plantations were predatory and anti-social since they displaced farmers, threw hundreds of people out of work and created very little new employment while abusing the ecosystem, particularly water supplies, due to soil erosion and agro-chemicals usage. Worse still, argued the MST, the main beneficiaries were foreign corporate investors. Much to the consternation of agribusiness interests, occupations involving hundreds of landless occurred in the states of Bahia, Santa Catarina, Minas Gerais, and São Paulo. “Such actions call attention to these large business projects, financed with public funds, the Bank of Brazil and development banks, that cause environmental damage and employ very few people”, national coordinator João Paulo Rodrigues told the *Estado de São Paulo* in May. “We demand that the land fulfill its social function. We stand against any type of monoculture”. For the cellulose producer’s association in Brazil “o MST é uma ameaça,” said president Osmar Zogbi (CRISTINA & ARRUDA, 2004).

Building coalitions to pressure the government to implement agrarian reform has always been a strategy of the MST. To confront the transnational campaign for biotech agribusiness, the organization has internationalized the strategy. The largest, most specific coalition built with MST leadership is the Peasant Way-Brazil (Via Campesina-Brasil), a national coalition of seven organizations linked to the international organization known as the Via Campesina.<sup>2</sup> International-

<sup>2</sup> As of January 2004, six additional organizations were united with the MST in the Via Campesina-Brasil. These included the Peasant Women’s Movement (MMC-Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas), Pastoral Land Commission (CPT-Comissão Pastoral da Terra), Agronomy Students’ Federation (FEAB - Federação dos Estudantes de Agronomia do Brasil), Movement of Those Affected by Dams (MAB - Movimento de Atingidos por Barragens), Small Farmers Movement (MPA - Movimento de Pequenos Agricultores), and the Rural Youth Pastoral (PJR - Pastoral da Juventude Rural). Notably absent from the list is the Agricultural Laborers Confederation (CONTAG - Confederação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura) or any of its component organizations, especially the rural labor unions (STR - sindicatos dos trabalhadores rurais) and state federations of unions or family farmers. The operations secretary of the Via Campesina-Brasil can be contacted at: [viacampesina@terra.com.br](mailto:viacampesina@terra.com.br). Telefax: 55.61.322.5035 (STÉDILE et al., 2004a).

level organizing among peasants and rural laborers has precedent in initiatives taken by the Communist International and successor institutions. Into the late 1960s, for example, the Brazilian Communist Party sent delegates to international rural labor conferences (VERA, 1967). These efforts were shaped by what the Soviet-oriented communists defined as United States imperialism. In other words, international solidarity was part of the bi-polar struggle of the Cold War. Today's organizing efforts are also shaped by imperialism – the neo-liberal reform policies of globalization that have benefited transnational agricultural corporations. While social democratic if not explicitly socialist in orientation, the Via Campesina is not associated with an overarching political ideology or nation as were Cold War organizations like the World Federation of Trade Unions (WELCH, 1995). The new national and international coalition building comes as a response to the interventions of western capital, assisted by a diversity of commercial organizations and nations. As the German geographer Benno Werlen has suggested, each pursues activities which occupy social, political and economic space on the world stage (WERLEN, 1993, 200-06). Thus, as the TNCs have moved to occupy lands in Brazil and elsewhere with their biotechnology, small, independent farmers (peasants) formed the Via Campesina to fight back. In 2000, at the Via Campesina's III International Conference, the movement developed a response to the biotech threat by adopting a position paper on "Biodiversity and Genetic Resources (*Biodiversidad e Recursos geneticos*)" that has oriented the struggles of member organizations like the MST in Brazil (JMDESFILHES, 2000).

In a much cited 2001 action, for example, MST militants combined occupation tactics with internationalist strategies. Along with other participants of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, they occupied a Rio Grande do Sul plantation and destroy a crop of soybeans produced with OTM seed.

During the first World Social Forum...militants organized a protest against transgenic soy and corn by destroying crops on a Monsanto experimental plantation in Não-me-Toque, RS. Although peasants from various countries from around the world participated in the action, the media focussed its attention on José Bové – one of the militants involved, member of the Peasant Confederation of France, and especially notorious for ransacking a McDonalds restaurant in the southern French city of Millau (FERNANDES, 2005c, 6-7).

Faced with a strong coalition of agribusiness supporters in Congress, many of whom enjoy favorable and lucrative relationships with TNCs and their lobbyists, the MST opened new offices in Brasilia. The battle for government support from both sides has grown so intense that the functions of the MST's traditional national headquarters in São Paulo – the "national capital" of agribusiness interests – has been eclipsed by the Brasilia lobbying office.

Another classic strategy used by the MST has been the mobilization of marches. As a form of protest and socialization in struggle, marches have long characterized the movement at the local level. In 1997, however, the MST organized a national march from São Paulo to Brasilia. The march focused the attention of the world press on Brazil's agrarian question. Within the country, national polls placed the MST as the nation's fifth most popular organization, after the church, press, armed forces, and public universities, and demonstrated that over 85 percent of the population supported agrarian reform (CHAVES, 2000; COLETTI, 2002, 66-67). A concerted campaign to demonize and isolate the MST by agribusiness leaders and government ministers caused a decline in support for both. The election of Worker's Party leader Lula to the presidency in 2002 encouraged hopes for a better relationship with the government. Although a better relationship has been established, it has not resulted in increased land reform. To pressure the Lula administration to fulfill its promises, then, the MST returned to the march strategy. To build forces to occupy greater territory in the battle for state policy, the MST sought to unite a variety of social movements. Forecasting the march in a September, 2004 address, MST national coordinator Gilmar Mauro said the MST would work with more organizations to create a march not just for agrarian reform but against misery, neo-liberal reform, TNC neo-imperialism, and for

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The Via Campesina itself began in 1992. It held its fourth international conference in Brazil in June 2004, with 400 delegates, representing 76 countries and 120 peasant movements. The secretariat is currently located in Indonesia (FERNANDES, 2005c, 54).

participatory democracy and jobs. The implicit and, at times explicit, goal was to further a peaceful transition to socialism (MAURO, 2004; REDAÇÃO, 2005a).

From May 1 to 16, 2005, a march of more than 10,000 militants made its way to Brasília from a gathering point in Goiânia, GO. A large rally on the 17<sup>th</sup> culminated with an audience between march leaders, President Lula and various officials. The MST termed the march a success but it was not the event Mauro had predicted (DIREÇÃO NACIONAL DO MST, 2005). By the time it started, the MST was singularly identified as the march sponsor and its name linked to agrarian reform rather than the larger plank of social democratic goals suggested some months earlier (ARRUDA, 2005). Nevertheless, the demands expressed at the closing rally extended well beyond agrarian reform and demonstrated the movement's desire to reach out to urban workers, for example, with a push for a higher minimum salary and to consumers in general with a proposal for reducing interest to a dream-rate of 2.5 percent per year (TOMAZELA, 2005). Commentators commended the MST for its capacity to organize such a vast and peaceful march but questioned what else it might accomplish (EDITORES, 2005; VALENTINI, 2005).

One acclaimed result of the National March for Agrarian Reform (*Marcha Nacional pela Reforma Agrária*) promised to affect TNC-biotechnology dominance by gaining the Lula administration's commitment to facilitate the expropriation of lands considered unproductive for the social reasons spelled out in the constitution. For the MST and its allies, this decision meant the executive branch would push for rules changes that would limit if not roll back the expansion of large scale biotech agriculture. Constitutional standards, though ambiguous and open to varied interpretations, seemed to condemn the extensive plantation of mechanized soybeans, feed-corn, sugar-cane, livestock confinement, and cellulose timber since they polluted – and sometimes destroyed – the environment and offered little direct, decent employment, generating instead a dependency on forced “slave” labor (RAMOS, 2005; PORTO & MIKLASEVICIUS, 2005). Agribusiness interests confirmed the significance of this accord by organizing a “tractorage (*tratoração*)” protest – a show of force via tractor blockade – in various agricultural centers around the country in late May (TOMAZELA, 2005). The agribusiness mouthpiece, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, seemed to toy with marchers by publishing a magazine cover celebrating the disposition of São Paulo farmers to plant thousands of hectares of OTM soybeans in June (TOMAZELA, 2005). Indeed, the march seemed to intensify the battle for land and policy while the Lula-MST agreement remained unfulfilled months later.

A new resistance initiative is reflected in its careful use of language. In periodic contact with some of the world's top scholars, MST militants are no strangers to concepts such as discourse theory and writers such as the French historian Michel Foucault. In his essay “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault took up where another great European writer, the English journalist George Orwell, left off, by digging deeper into the connections between language and power. “[I]n every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its power and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (FOUCAULT, 1972, 216; ORWELL, 1946). Increasingly inundated by the ideology of agribusiness and its magical tool for transforming and improving reality, biotechnology, the Sem-terra movement started to fight back with an alternative, counter-hegemonic discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A peasant identity began to take hold within the movement to contend, in part, with the hidden-meaning of agribusiness. The concept of biodiversity faced off in the battle of words against biotechnology. Each has their own strengths, demanding citizens to consider the implications of language, insisting against the evasion of the “ponderous, awesome materiality” of the predominant concepts. For some in the movement, biodiversity and the peasantry mean “life” while agribusiness and the new agricultural biotechnologies produce the contrary.

Perhaps the most unprecedented and novel new strategy is the juxtaposition of the “native seed campaign (*campanha semente*)” against the *transgênicos*. The idea of creating a positive campaign on a global scale seems to have come from the Via Campesina conference in Bangalore, India, in October 2000, when the document on biodiversity and genetic resources was produced. Ciro Eduardo Correa of the MST's Production, Cooperation and Environmental Sector (*Setor de Produção, Cooperação e Meio Ambiente*) composed an official version of the process, arguing how the Via Campesina-Internacional created a

Campaign: Seeds – Patrimony of the People in Service for Humanity [with the central objective of reaffirming the struggle of all people for their historic and natural rights to freely access and cultivate the biodiversity of the planet. The MST, as a member of the Via Campesina-Brazil, is engaged in the campaign and developing innumerable strategies that contribute not on to the rescue of peasant autonomy to produce their own seeds and breeds but also to ensure that this campaign become a fundamental instrument in the construction of a new agricultural model, based in agro-ecology, the restoration of the countryside, especially watersheds and forest reserves, the promotion of food security and sovereignty, and the recuperation of the productive capacity of soils, among other initiatives (CORREA, 2004).

By 2002, the agrarian engineer and MST ally Horácio Martins de Carvalho had begun to publish sophisticated analysis of the questions involved (CARVALHO, 2002a). A year later, he edited a 500-page book of articles and sources on the subject for the MST (CARVALHO, 2003b). In preparation for the IV Conferência Internaonal da Via Campesina, Carvalho, MST founding coordinator João Paulo Stédile and others produced a six chapter pamphlet on the problems of biotechnology and agribusiness (STÉDILE et al., 2004a). The bibliographies from these authors demonstrate how an earlier generation of publications in Brazil – such as Pat Mooney’s 1987 article collection entitled *The Seed Scandal (O escândalo das sementes)* – and congressional hearings in 1999 influenced the discussion but failed to change the territorial dynamics. Only the pressure of these socio-territorial movements, as Fernandes argues, seems to have the potential for occupying space and changing the power dynamics both physically and ideologically (FERNANDES, 2000a).

The essential idea behind the territorial battle has been one of putting TNC agribusinesses and *transgênicos* on the defensive by valorizing native species and the benefits of tried and true methods of genetic development through hybrids. Instead of just attacking OTM seed, the “native seed (*semente crioula*)” campaign has argued that native seeds are superior to transgenically-modified ones. The first popular event of the campaign was a native seed festival held in the state of Santa Catarina in March, 2004. Sponsored by the Via Campesina-Brasil, the event’s leading organizational participants was the Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA), for whom the native seed campaign is crucial. As co-founder Charles Reginatto told the *Revista Rural* the native seed campaign is designed to help them fight free of the transnational biotechnology oligopoly and “fight for the preservation of peasant identity and the elaboration of a new project for Brazilian agriculture” (S/A, 2004). In addition to the MPA concern, each multi-state region of the MST has an organizer assigned to help discover, teach about and develop native seed species and farming practices. Native seed can be defined as everything OTM seed is not: it is ecological, indigenous, historically productive, naturally reproducible, and cheap if not free to use. Because this campaign offers a response to nearly every supposed benefit presented by *transgênicos*, it promises to be a core organizing tool, one that has the potential for satisfying middle class consumers as well as providing decent incomes for small farmers.

The native seed campaign also adds a production element to the peasant reproduction campaign that is the essence of worldwide Via Campesina movement. The organization seeks to rescue the word from mainstream and Marxist analysts who have long forecast the extinction of peasants. For Via Campesina organization’s such as the MST, peasant has become a new identity marker. Rather than accept the elimination of this social category, MST intellectuals have argued that peasants are here to stay. They note that peasants have survived and thrived in civilizations around the world for thousands of years while agribusiness has only a 50 year old history. They define the peasantry not as a backward looking socio-economic category but as a dynamic social class responsible for producing the vast majority of the world’s food. (Statistics certainly support this claim if peasant is taken to be synonymous with small farmer.) The agricultural TNCs and the *transgênicos* they push pose a serious threat to the class, one that has begun to galvanize a new transnational peasant consciousness and various plans for the perseverance of the peasantry, such as the native seed movement.

## Conclusion

It is not clear that the most significant feature of this new phase of global capitalist agricultural development is one which pits an international peasant movement dedicated to biodiversity against transnational corporate imposition of advanced biotechnology in the struggle to territorialize land and production. But the existence of a stark struggle along these lines in Brazil cannot be ignored. On the one hand, agribusiness interests mix both national and international capital and technologies to present themselves as the solution to Brazil's social and economic problems; on the other, self-conscious peasant organizations raise the flag of agro-ecology and biodiversity to make similar broad claims. This debate is reflected almost daily in the national press. Broadcasters like Globo, newspapers like *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and popular weeklies like *Veja* seem to understand the stakes: they regularly commemorate the successes of agribusiness and demonize the MST. "It it wasn't for agribusiness exports, the country's commercial balance, instead of being in the black, it would be in a deficit situation of \$1 billion", or so reported *O Estado de S. Paulo*, citing without question the views of the National Confederation of Agriculture (CAN - Confederação Nacional da Agricultura) (CHIARA, 2004). Enjoying considerable creative capacity and dedication, but far fewer resources, the MST has sought to occupy the minds of opinion makers, listeners and readers by building a network of radio stations, publishing books, magazines, dynamic websites, and a weekly newspaper called *Brasil de Fato*. "Agribusiness (*Agronegócio*)," read the headline of a recent MST editorial: "the worst business deal for Brazilians (*o pior negócio para os brasileiros*)" (DIREÇÃO NACIONAL DO MST, 2005). The "era of extremes" seems to have reached into the 21st century (HOBSBAWM, 1994).

In the mainstream media, liberal publications such as *A Folha de S. Paulo* and the news-weekly *Carta Capital* have sought to represent fairly both sides. An interesting example of this was a 2004 article in the *Carta Capital* called "Grain in judgment (*Grãos na balança*)" (SAFATLE & PARDINI, 2004). The title and sub-title ("The boom of agribusiness is just one part of the story; one has to measure its costs as well") revealed the sincerity of the coverage and the importance of the subject. Casting one side against the other, the reader was induced to question the costs and benefits of agribusiness. In 2003, agribusiness was responsible for 42 percent of all Brazilian exports (up 7 percent since 1998) and its share of the Gross Domestic Product grew by 6.5 percent in a single year. On the other hand, the magazine noted how Brazilians depended on peasant production in order to fill their larders and eat. During the 2003-2004 harvest year, they produced "67% of the beans consumed in the Brazil, 58% of the pork, 54% of the milk and 49% of the corn. And it employs 70% of rural labor". Moreover, the magazine showed how much more agribusiness than peasants depended on the state to uphold its image as savior. For the 2003-2004 harvest, the ten largest agricultural corporations, many of them transnationals deeply invested in commodity production for export, received just as much federal assistance as 3 million of Brazil's small producers. The authors take seriously the critiques of geographers such as Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira who characterize agribusiness claims as completely fraudulent (OLIVEIRA, 2003).

So the agribusiness-biotechnology vs. peasant-biodiversity confrontation has a presence in the media and thus, one imagines, reflections in society. While the model represented by latifúndios, farms, agro-industries, and agribusiness had long been taken as the norm in Brazil, the rural social movements began to challenge the hegemony of this assumption and agrarian reform recaptured its "extraordinary political force (*extraordinária força política*)" (MEDEIROS, 2003, 7). In the 1990s, transnational capital introduced biotechnology as a new agricultural control method and the social movements re-organized to fight this new threat to peasant existence.

As elaborated above the strategies of resistance have been many. The first necessity was knowledge and movements such as the MST and Via Campesina produced an abundant literature on the hazards and potentials of biotechnology and transnational corporate control. International alliances proved important to the generation and effective use of this knowledge. Just

as transnational capital sought to play one soy growing region of the world against another to reduce costs, minimize losses, and enhances its control, the rural social movements struggled to harmonize their tactics of resistance across national boundaries. But as Oliveira has written, “in its essence, capital is international while the logic of rural development is essentially national” (OLIVEIRA, 2004, 41) and so the bulk of the struggle had to take place in Brazil.

Occupations, marches, alliances, education, and literature have been the main strategies adopted by the movements. But there has also been the remarkable construction of a peasant identity never associated with New World societies. Traditions, such as peasant migratory behavior (MARQUES, 2004) and historical memories (FERNANDES, 2000a, 25-47), have been invented that demand further exploration (HOBSBAWM & RANGER, 2002). This identity has largely been defined as what the *agronegócio* is not. Thus, while the *agronegócio* is associated with foreign capital and control, with monoculture and biotechnology, with enclosure and mechanization, with hierarchy and masculinity; the peasantry is associated with national capital and local control, with biodiversity and agro-ecology, with expanded participation in agriculture and the application of ancestral knowledge as well as science, and with gender equality and bottom-up decision making. Both concepts are presented as worlds unto themselves, tempting citizens to chose one over the other in the name of Brazilian progress.

Statistics such as those related to the unequal distribution of funds between agribusiness and the peasantry shows the peasant movements have much ground to cover. But the persistence of their resistance offers remarkable testimony to their durability and potential. Through their actions, they create new space to occupy. Territorializing this space, they alter society, politics and the economy.

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