

Schools, Land, and Power: Education and Brazil's Landless Workers Movement

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Abstract

This essay reviews two recent books on the role of education in Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST), a far-reaching social movement that advocates for agrarian reform and social welfare of the rural poor. The first book, *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education* by Rebecca Tarlau offers an insightful examination of how the MST worked to reclaim formal education from their oppressors, establishing schools within their settlements, and developing tertiary education opportunities for members to train as both leaders and teachers. *The Political Ecology of Education* by David Meek explores the educational forces shaping the movement's land ethic, with a focus on adult education, agroecology and foodways. Both Tarleau and Meek highlight the ways in which the MST promoted action learning and self-knowledge in creating meaningful and lasting education in Brazil's countryside.

Keywords: Brazil, MST, social movement, rural education, PRONERA.

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Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education by Rebecca Tarlau, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2019, \$58.00 (hardback), 416 pp., ISBN 978-0190870324

The Political Ecology of Education: Brazil's Landless Worker's Movement and the Politics of Knowledge by David Meek, New York, NY, West Virginia University Press, 2020, \$99.99 (hardback), 252 pp., ISBN 978-1949199758

Introduction

Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education by Rebecca Tarlau and *The Political Ecology of Education: Brazil's Landless Worker's Movement and the Politics of Knowledge* by David Meek both explore the crucial role of education within the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement. One of the most widely studied and heralded social movements in Latin America, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), advocates for agrarian reform and the social welfare of the rural poor. The books reviewed here remind readers that while much of development education scholarship is focused on the workings of national governments and bilateral aid organizations, the pursuit of an educational system of, by, and for the people is a reality in rural Brazil. Moreover, the educational system developed by the MST is exemplary of the social movement's ongoing commitment to self-knowledge, resistance, and activism.

On April 17, 1996, thousands of MST families gathered to block the PA-50 highway in the northern state of Pará, as they made their way to the state capital. The military police opened fire on the crowd, killing nineteen activists, and wounding dozens. The massacre drew international outcry, calling attention to the MST's plight after a more than ten-year struggle for agrarian reform. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, forced to act on his campaign promises, ceded land to 300,000 families (Meek, 2020). As both books reviewed here can attest, the massacre served as a turning point for the MST, one which put education at the center of the movement. Based on my analysis of the books, it seems that the MST has done more to educate the people of the Brazilian countryside than any presidential administration has in the last thirty years. The movement has demanded and overseen the establishment of rural schools, teacher training programs, and both baccalaureate and graduate degree programs for its members. Moreover, the MST's ability to develop and expand systems of formal and informal education is a key force in the movement's longevity and future sustainability. In addressing the agrarian question, the MST has supported the development of education in rural Brazil spatially, pedagogically, and politically.

The MST: A Case Study of Social Movements and Education

In *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land*, Rebecca Tarlau, Associate Professor of Education and Employment and Labor Relations at Penn State University, offers a powerful account of the MST's struggle for education over the last thirty years. This

political ethnography makes three main arguments: 1) social movements increase their impact through direct and purposeful work with institutions at multiple levels, 2) in order to keep advancing, movements must continue to agitate and disrupt at the institutional level, while simultaneously working through established networks, and 3) it is possible for social movements to make gains under all sorts of political and economic conditions, from leftist workers parties to right-leaning conservative regimes.

Tarlau makes the important observation that even in the early days of the movement, the MST recognized the need to transform education as integral to their success (Tarlau 2019, p. 56). In the eyes of the MST, this transformation would be a way of reclaiming education from their oppressors and would first require the establishment of schools within their own settlements. Locating schools inside settlements chipped away at the urban bias of schooling – students no longer needed to go to the city to attend school. Also, the schools themselves would reflect the ideals of the movement, they would be built collectively by the activists, and be decorated with MST symbols. The pedagogy of the schools was also key – this was a pedagogy of the MST. Influenced by the writings of Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire and Soviet education leader Nadezhda Krupskaya, MST members forged their own pedagogy rooted in work, land, and resistance (Tarlau 2019, p.53). Lessons would be relational to the schoolchildren’s realities, and the teachers themselves would come from the movement. By centering lived experiences, this pedagogy encouraged both students and teachers to create and share knowledge of self and community. The need for teachers within the movement dovetailed with one of MST’s greatest political victories: PRONERA, the National Program for Education in Areas of Agrarian Reform. As Tarlau details, through PRONERA MST negotiated with the Brazilian government to create and fund numerous educational programs that would ultimately serve as leadership development opportunities for their members. Additionally, as we see in the second book reviewed here, PRONERA enables an important framework of agroecology education for the MST.

Agroecology Education and the MST in a Political Ecology Framework

In *The Political Ecology of Education*, David Meek, Assistant Professor of Global Studies at the University of Oregon, argues for a political ecology approach in the study of education in relation to the MST. Political ecology examines problems involving human-environment interactions, often to determine how decision-making at multiple scales results in land or resource degradation (Watts, 2015). In making the case for a political ecology approach in the study of education and the MST, Meek focuses on the educational forces shaping the movement’s land ethic. Meek is particularly concerned with agroecology and food systems education and provides an ethnographic account of land use and foodways within the 17 de Abril settlement, the land concession born out of the 1996 massacre in Pará. Specifically, the book focuses on adult education, and how learning about agroecology and foodways is supported by “communities of praxis” in Pará. These communities of praxis are made of up educators that are both concerned with critical food systems and committed to transforming the social reality, evident in secondary and tertiary education, as well as non-formal trainings sponsored by the MST (Meek, 2020, p. 133). This focus on learning through action, while a core tenant of the movement, also promotes the cultivation and celebration of self-knowledge and advocacy. An example of this is the explicit emphasis on agroecology, where the MST

claim for themselves a more ecologically and socially sustainable livelihood, one which is tied to both a rejection of industrial agriculture, and a commitment to furthering local food sovereignty.

As an anthropologist, Meek explores the meaning and making of space both in formal schools and in nonformal spaces of learning. Like Tarlau, Meek's research is based on several months of living and working alongside the movement. Meek observes how the MST uses the physical spaces of schools to reflect and promote the movement's ideals. For example, one school Meek visits is decorated with red MST flags, quotes from Freire, and a mural memorializing the nineteen activists killed in the massacre (Meek 2020, p. 83). In agroecology education, Meek explores how so much of the MST's dreams of a collectively managed, productive countryside is at odds with the realities of land tenure in rural Brazil. Tropical rainforest ecosystems, combined with decades of deforestation, mechanized agriculture, and cattle grazing left the land unsuitable for sustainable agriculture. Pedagogically, Meek envisions MST agroecology education as a potential force of *repeasantization* – a process where small farmers become more secure in their livelihoods through the adoption of traditional farming methods and collectivization (Meek 2020, p. 94). In the 17 de Abril settlement, we see how some smallholders attempt this in multiple ways – dairy production, beekeeping, orchards, all while working full time jobs at the local iron mine. Interestingly, it is the presence of the mine as stable employment that allows for MST members to “remain on the settlement, working the land agroecologically” (Meek 2020, p.103). Perhaps because of this focus on the physical landscape, Meek is somewhat more circumspect than Tarlau with regards to MST's political successes; he worries about the movement's ability to retain its youth, now that so many of them were born after the initial allocations. Yet, as young adults move off the settlements, they don't all migrate to the cities; new encampments are being established throughout rural Brazil (Meek, 2020). The future of MST still lies with the next generation of activist, and the promises of self-knowledge.

Conclusion

As scholars, politicians, policymakers, and think-tank consultants deliberate over how to educate the world's poor and meet the objectives of SDG 4, they would do well to consider the experience of the MST because it is a case study in how a grassroots educational system can prove to be both successful and sustainable. The Brazilian Landless Workers have made significant advances in bringing meaningful change to education through the creation of rural schools, university programs for teacher education and leadership development, nonformal adult education, and strategic partnerships. Furthermore, the educational system that the MST has constructed – particularly its pedagogies, curriculum, and spaces - is an education rooted in respect for self-knowledge, and a commitment to activism. Walking with the movement, the works of Tarlau and Meek illuminate these achievements and offer important lessons for all interested in strategies for educational systems in developing countries. Moreover, both books provide insights and detail to the still understudied topic of the role of education in the success and sustainability of one of the world's best known social movements.

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