

The narrative making of resistance

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Markus Lundström, *The making of resistance: Brazil's landless movement and narrative enactment* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, Department of Economic History, 2016). 186 pp.

Brazil's landless workers' movement MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) has struggled since the early 1980s for a land reform by gathering landless families and occupying land, thus reclaiming the land for those who toil it. Today, MST has more than a million active followers and it has carried out thousands of occupations to date. Despite encountering strong local repression from landlords, militias, mass media, police and state governments and very little support from the federal government, even during the rule of the workers' party PT, they have enforced a substantial land reform from below. This is a remarkable achievement in a country the size of Europe with one of the most unequal land distributions anywhere. Today MST is one of the biggest land reform movements in the world and to many a model of how to conduct a struggle for and by the poorest in society.

Summary of content and argument

The aim of Lundström's dissertation is to understand how a political subject (such as MST) is socially constructed and maintained over time. Typically, a subject is formed by a heterogeneous accumulation of people at a particular time and place where certain circumstances make this possible. It is necessary to explain how such a contingent process can be sustained over time, especially when there are conflicts – both internally and externally – that involve negotiations and struggles between actors in a changing environment and dynamic power relations. This makes Lundström highlight the agents, activities and advocacies (visions) constituting MST. In a general

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sense the research problem deals with the continuity of a contingent subject formation. The specific research problem deals with the question if we can understand the continuity of the political subject based on the movement's narrative (its protagonists, antagonists, story/plot and theme) drawn from a constructed history of the movement (memory/history as an experience space and horizon of expectation) (p. 14–19).

Lundström uses a combination of ethnographic fieldwork with 18 focus groups, 14 interviews and observations, as well as a computer-supported analysis of the MST magazine *Sem Terra* (4.5 million words), and some 275 academic texts about MST that are categorized thematically.

The theoretical framework of the thesis is constructed from a number of different theorists: Butler, Laclau, and Mouffe are used for the political subject's articulation; Spivak and Guha for subaltern historiography; Scott, Tarrow and Tilly, and Melucci to understand resistance activities; Holloway, Zibechi, Day, Scott, Graeber, and Maeckelbergh on the subject's visions and ambitions; and the Popular Memory Group, Davis and Koselleck for memory, narrative and history as a social construction.

Lundström claims that the narrative of collective action links the diverse experiences of individuals, images, and ideological fractions with the actual conduct that the collective performs, and thereby gives collective actions meaning and direction. Thus, the narrative construction also constructs the political subject. The narrative's story (the plot) is constructed by the movement from elements of its prehistory (its perceived and constructed "origin") and is constantly reconstructed, actualized and stabilized by the movement's struggle in the contemporary situation (in everyday life, as well as in negotiations or indirect politics, and in dramatic confrontational direct actions). In this way the contingent political subject creates continuity. The story is staged by the activities that the subject performs and thus the story is continually recreated. However, and this is important: the narrative needs to change in order to create continuity since the context changes over time.

The argument is supported by Lundström's quantitative analysis of the *Sem Terra* journal (p. 87–94). The author convincingly proves how there are historical shifts in the frequency with which certain types of protagonists and antagonists are mentioned. He shows a shift of the type of antagonist from the *latifundiário* (large land owners) to *agronegócio* (agribusiness), and of the type of protagonist from the rural worker (*trabalhador rural*) to the small-scale farmer (*pequenos agricultor*), and, consequently, from *acampado* (temporary camps on occupied land) to *assentado* (permanent settlements, with legal land titles). None of the categories disappeared. The change is in the frequency of use. The key argument here is that these historic frequency shifts correspond to shifts in the context and in the MST narrative. Key

antagonists and protagonists are replaced, and thus MST is maintained as a political subject.

I understand this to mean that the story has to be both flexible and stable. Flexible to a certain extent, without losing the main narrative plot upon which the political subject is created. Flexibility thus takes the form of shifts in the understanding of the protagonist and antagonist to a certain degree. New interpretations of the protagonists constantly occur as a response to changing circumstances in the social context where, and the concrete situation when, the political subject is articulated. But interpretations cannot be too drastically altered without creating severe conflicts and internal tension – ultimately fragmenting the subject. The story is created from an experience space and a horizon of expectation (its history) within which the political subject is both made possible and limited. If my interpretation is correct, one consequence is that when the story is shifting fundamentally, the political subject also fundamentally changes, or ceases to exist. This is a key problem to which I will return.

Strengths and contributions

The dissertation has original contributions. It creatively utilizes sophisticated discourse analysis on a case – with original empirical data – concerning a socio-economic/material struggle: a struggle for land. That is in itself a contribution. However, the main contribution is the temporal perspective, which is original, both in relation to theory and to the particular case. Lundström's work is a contribution because of the unsatisfactory way that social movement theory and poststructuralist theory deal with the contingency/continuity problem, and because of the privileging of space over time in the social sciences (outside the discipline of history). Thus, there is relative little research that discusses temporality as an analytical category that matters to social practice. The author shows convincingly how temporality is connected to space, practices, narration, discourse, relations, agents, context, etc. Furthermore, Lundström also contributes to our understanding of the empirical case: *MST*. He looks both at the long-term history of the rebellions in which *MST* inscribes itself, and at the role of time/space in shaping narratives and practices, especially resistance. Lundström is clearly part of a refreshing interdisciplinary, poststructural and social constructivist approach to economic history.

The study shows several strengths. Lundström offers an impressive analysis of a collection of extensive (and unique) empirical sources from focus groups and interviews, the *Sem Terra* journal and the academic literature on *MST*. As far as I know, no one has made a full review of all written research on *MST*. This is very helpful since the research is vast and not everyone

masters both key languages (English and Portuguese) in which these works are written. The text is coherent and well-constructed. The discussion is condensed and focused in a way that makes the dissertation a pleasure to read. Lundström also shows a deep respect for the MST participants and their struggle, while simultaneously highlighting themes and discussions that critically reflect on contradictions within the movement (and where the critical reflections by interviewees show how the author really gained the trust of, and access to, the movement).

The author recognizes the combination of confrontational and constructive elements in the MST struggle. This has so far not received much attention, despite the fact that it is one of the more striking and interesting aspects of the MST. It is indeed fascinating *how* MST resists: by building a new social model on their occupied land. Unfortunately, the author does not delve much into this aspect and does not discuss how the construction of a new society relates to resistance in any deeper sense. This is a missed opportunity.

Theoretical and methodological weaknesses

There are – despite the author's impressive command of the theory and literature – some theoretical weaknesses. Ultimately the thesis fails to fully convince in its analysis of the narrative logic of political subject formation. Taken together, I see the weaknesses as seriously undermining the core narrative argument of the thesis, but without challenging its strong theoretical basis, unique empirical material, and narrative perspective that helps our understanding of subject formation and resistance. Let us take one weakness at a time.

There is no real analysis and explanation of how the particular form of MST's resistance is (re)created. The struggle for, and occupation of, land by communities are indeed explained (and well documented through the historical narrative of previous struggles that inspired and formed the MST). But while earlier struggles in Brazilian history understandably reacted to state repression with armed defence of their communities, MST has chosen to defend their land occupations without arms. This is only one distinguishing quality of MST resistance (others are, for example, land occupation and the construction of new autonomous communities). MST's particular resistance form is puzzling because of the movement's direct historical link with the communist-organized peasant communities in the armed movement *Master*. Is it the result of the influence from Christian liberation theology, or from a less repressive state strategy during the Third Republic and liberal democracy in Brazil? This is not clear. Liberation theology was a motivating ideology for many armed rebellions in South America and the MST began its

struggle during the military dictatorship. The change of strategy warrants more of an explanation. Ultimately the question is not a matter of historical origins but about the making of resistance today. As Lundström argues, a resistance repertoire is not established at some earlier point in history and then applied routinely forever after. Rather, it is constantly reconstructed, refined and discursively legitimated, in new situations, and for new participants, meeting new challenges.

Charles Tilly's historical repertoires of social movements are similar to the ones presented in this study. This is especially the case in relation to how history both provides and limits the toolbox of resistance methods available to the subject. But for Tilly it is the state's formation and relationship with the subject that determine the repertoire. In Lundström's analysis, it appears that it is the movement's own story that determines the repertoire. In fact, the state is remarkably absent from the analysis. This is a pity since it seems the state and MST have a very interesting and ambivalent relationship. In the view of MST, it is the state today that protects the landowners and the (unequal) distribution of land, yet the same, or rather a reformed new state, is expected to (with the help of pressure from MST and other movements) be the institution that organizes a fair land reform in the future.

The methodology is sufficiently described and suits the purpose of the study well. However, it is clear the study is focused on MST in one particular state, Rio Grande do Sul, the birthplace of MST. Since the author is aware of the vast contextual differences in different states in Brazil, it is a strange omission not to reflect upon this methodological problem. As a consequence, the text has a problem balancing a discussion of MST at a national level (its history, the Brazilian context, changes in the discourse and strategy, etc.) with a discussion based on interviews and observations of what happens with MST in Rio Grande do Sul.

As we have seen, Lundström utilizes statistics to underpin his argument about the key concepts of the narrative found in the MST journal. But when discussing the social composition of MST we are kept in the dark. It is repeatedly emphasized how participants in the movement articulate a "heterogeneity" (e.g. p. x and 20), but we never get a chance to assess this heterogeneity. What is the class, racial/ethnic or religious composition of the movement? Is MST heterogeneous? It is a mistake to assume heterogeneity instead of investigating it. Lundström seems to avoid using social categorizations, as if he fears it would lead to essentialism. Early on he suggests that "resistance agents derive not from class, ethnicity, gender, or any other form of social categorization. Agents of resistance instead become distinguishable through their activities, and advocacies [visions]" (p. x). For the remainder of the dissertation social categories are mostly absent (except gender, which

is noted occasionally in relation to MST). Using social categories – even in statistics – does not mean they are essential, however. They can still be discussed as social constructions. Ultimately it seems peculiar to discuss the construction of a subject without relating it to the most prominent social categories in social science.

The unclear composition of social categories within MST has important consequences for the analysis. Is it really the story that merges a heterogeneous mass and forms a subject and determines the collective action orientation, or is it the other way around, i.e. is it the dominant socio-economic position that unites individuals and determines the content of the story (and thus collective action)? The vast majority of MST activists began as farmworkers without land and it became natural to make land occupations the narrative core. Today, many (perhaps most) are small farmers with access to land (and owners in a collective sense). Thus, cooperatives end up being the focus, along with their (difficult) access to a market dominated by export-oriented multinational agribusinesses. Maybe MST is not as heterogeneous as the dissertation claims? And maybe the socio-economic reality of the members forms the narrative more than Lundström is willing to concede? It is a pity the argument is not pursued further, demonstrating rather than assuming the social construction force of the narrative.

Taken together I think these weaknesses undermine the core claim of the thesis. There appears to be some inbuilt unclear aspects of the main narrative framework, aspects that result from the analysis in the study. How contingent is the MST – the collective, political subject – in reality, when everyone active within MST (appears to) come from a similar socio-economic position? And, what really is continuity in this case, when, as we learn from the analysis, not only the protagonist and the antagonist, but also the story fundamentally changes? These are questions that haunt the analysis throughout.

Assessment of the PhD

The PhD thesis *The Making of Resistance: Brazil's Landless Movement and Narrative Enactment* by Markus Lundström consists of a unique literature review of the MST, a very fruitful study of discussions in the movement's journal of themes and historical shifts in conceptual use/perspective, and a helpful temporal and narrative analysis of the movement MST that clearly contributes to the vast existing literature. The voices of MST activists are heard in a clear way throughout the dissertation by means of frequent quotes from the interviews/focus groups, which makes the people studied come alive in a way that an ethnographic study should. The theoretical analysis is competent, focused and advanced. The conclusions have a significant impact

on how to look at the political subjectivity of MST and its future, and serve as a model for how to understand the collective construction of subjectivity from a narrative framework. But the many weaknesses seriously undermine the core argument of the thesis: that the narrative is what creates the continuity of a contingent political subject.

This PhD is impressive in so many ways, and it is an excellent contribution to several fields: social movement theory, contentious politics and resistance studies. There are, however, aspects that could be developed more and issues that are not convincingly argued, which is as it should be with any research. Hopefully Lundström will continue his research in new projects.