

Reviews

Rebecca Tarlau, *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land. How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education*, ISBN 9780190870324 (hbk), 9780190870355 (epub), 2019, New York: Oxford University Press, 391 pages.

This magnificent volume in hardback is the product of painstaking research carried out in Brazil on the work and impact on education of one of the world's most vibrant social movements. This is the Movimento Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (literally: Movement of Landless Rural Workers, shortened as Movimento sem Terra –MST, more commonly referred to colloquially as the ‘Sem Terra’). The movement qualifies as what is often referred to, following Dip Kapoor (Kapoor, 2009), as a Southern Subaltern Social Movement.

The book’s author, Rebecca Tarlau, adopts a predominantly Gramscian analytic framework, throughout this detailed analysis, that combines a variety of features including in-depth and extensive interviews with a variety of personnel involved as peasants, educators, activists, politicians and policy makers at different levels (Federal, State, Municipal).

This multivaried approach in a Southern Subaltern context, in a country which, rich in mineral resources but characterised for the most part by settler colonialism and conditioned development, serves to provide students, adopting a postcolonial lens, with much grist for the mill. The volume serves as a detailed

contribution to studies of the state in its different forms and, needless to say, given the central focus of this book - the MST - the ever growing domain of social movement studies.

It sheds particular light on state-social movements relations, a complex and delicate area in which the latter want to work 'in, with and against ' the State, at different levels, while maintaining their freedom to mobilise and act in disruptive ways. As O'Cadiz et al (1998) demonstrated with regard to social movements and the municipal government of São Paulo during Freire's tenure as Education Secretary, the MST was careful to retain its autonomy from the State even when the party in office was closer, in its political orientation, to the movement than any other party in the Brazilian political firmament.

The main thrust of the struggle as presented in this book is of a movement guided by a vision that transcended the given Capitalist framework. The movement's goal was not limited to simply providing Landless peasants - *camponesas* and *camponesos* - and their offspring in rural encampments with a better 'share of the cake' in the complex ways and reach of Brazilian *realpolitik*,¹ but to transform the state and its educational provision itself.

They do this in a variety of sites, not only those of public education, although the latter is still regarded as an important site of struggle, but even itinerant and nonformal ones. Education does not change things on its own, as it is not an independent variable, but it is an indispensable contributory variable nevertheless. The struggle concerns school provision in the areas of settlement and in the encampments themselves. It concerns the much contested sector of education in

¹ Realpolitik entails, in this specific case, playing on the concerns of those who thrive on clientele politics, hence even twisting the arm of right wing governments

rural areas, a historically neglected issue in Latin America and other territories worldwide. It concerns the important area of *Educação do Campo* for which Brazilian popular education and the MST have made sterling contributions, an area which saw the development of many *dispositifs* worldwide (rural schools and universities), with an accompanying supportive literature to boot. All one needs is to access, online, the *Educação do Campo dicionario*² (Caldart et al, 2012), and peruse the contributions of such activist/luminaries in the field as Roseli Salette Caldart (2012), whose insights feature in this and another forthcoming book (Mayo and Vittoria, 2021). This struggle represents a wider perennial one concerning the development, alongside the historically more favoured urban schools, of rural education. In Latin America, this struggle evokes such figures as socialist and feminist poet (Nobel laureate) and critical educator, Gabriela Mistral and the ideas contained in her verses concerning 'La Maestra Rural' (the rural teacher) (Mayo and Vittoria, 2021, p. 37). In Europe, we find some connection with the struggle to stem the constant exodus, in countries such as Spain and Portugal, from internal rural areas to the more commercially attractive coastal areas, through such projects as La Plataforma Rural (the rural platform), treated some time ago in this journal.

The radical nature of the movement's struggle in Brazil is reflected in the fact that the MST is not content with simply surrounding the inner core of the state with a plethora of educational initiatives as itinerant schools, multi-level learning settings in tents, popular education initiatives with adults and younger ones learning together in intergenerational spaces and much lauded landmarks in social movement education as the Escola

²https://www.academia.edu/15087143/DICION%C3%81RIO_DA_EDUCA%C3%87%C3%83O_DO_CAMPO_PDF_1_

Nacional Florestan Fernandez. To the contrary, the movement's effort is to co-direct the publically funded schools themselves.

This is carried out in the form of a Gramscian 'war of position'. It is also reflected in the sources of inspiration for the education ideas its activists bring to the table, radical figures such as Anton Makarenko, Paulo Freire, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, Florestan Fernandez, Antonio Gramsci etc. The book makes use of the contributions of some, notably Gramsci. Perhaps more could have been made of the 'Southern Question' essay by Gramsci, given the widely perceived affinities between the Latin American contexts and the Italian Meridione. This work was widely believed to be an incomplete manuscript, supposedly because of Gramsci's arrest, although more recent research indicates that it is a completed piece.

Of course the success of transforming education radically varies from municipality and state to another. It depends on how supportive the government in question is both on the grounds of political orientation and, in the case of right wing administrations, on those of clientele and populist politics. The reaction varies even among the different communities involved, some being averse to overt ideological influence. This connects on a larger scale with the Bolsonaro mantra, and that of the preceding interim government: Escola Sem Partido (School without Party). This is a case of presenting education as a 'neutral' enterprise, never mind the observation by Freire and many others that this would mean one's siding with the dominant forces, maintaining the status quo in a society marked by stark inequality. It recalls the attack on the D'Alema government in Italy, and then Education Minister, Luigi Berlinguer (cousin of the famous Enrico) for attempting to introduce Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* into schools.

The various reactions to the MST involvement in education vary from state to state and this diversity is shown in the final section of the book which deals with a number of states throughout Brazil. These include states in the impoverished North-East and others in the industrially-oriented South -East, São Paulo in particular. A fine conclusion enables Rebecca Tarlau to pull the strings and she follows this with a text in which she brings the discussion up to date with recent developments under the right wing federal government of Jair Bolsonaro. His policies are deemed by many as fascist marked by his rabid crusade against anything smacking of left wing inspiration. Prime target is Paulo Freire whose image is caricatured in an attempt to denigrate his intellectual legacy and to deny him the title of patron of Brazilian education. Bolsonaro's politics of *negacionismo* (politics of denial), especially with regard to Covid-19, border on the irresponsible, especially with regard to the Indigenous. The MST also suffered the wrath of the right wing oriented interim government when, as reported by Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2017), the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandez premises were ransacked.

As this excellent book intimates, the MST faces overtly hostile times. This notwithstanding, as the study shows, its adroit handling and renegotiation of the relations of hegemony at different levels of Brazilian society, and the popular bases it managed to consolidate over the years, make it a force to be reckoned with. Hope springs eternal.

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