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Constructing legitimacy?

Agroecology within and beyond the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST)

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## English summary

This ethnographic research examines the ways that the multiple dimensions of agroecology—broadly defined as community-based ecological agriculture—are legitimized, learned and contested within Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), a prominent member of the global food sovereignty coalition La Via Campesina. It explores the following questions: 1) Why do farmers affiliated with the MST come to embrace or reject its agroecological mission and ethos? 2) To what extent does agroecological education facilitated by the MST create conditions for young activists to identify with agroecology as a political project and to convince others to join it? 3) How has agroecology's legitimacy been constructed within the MST?

It draws on fieldwork conducted from May 2017 to April 2018, including 84 in-depth semi-directed interviews and participant observation. The setting was one MST-affiliated land reform settlement located in Paraná, Terra Prometida. This settlement is reputed for its agroecological production and hosts a transnational activist school for agroecology, the Ecological Resistance School (ERS). This study shows that even within a 'model' agroecological space, agroecology is highly contested within the MST's rank-and-file bases and has become a source of social polarization. What is more, young food sovereignty activists enrolled in a bachelor of agroecology program at ERS reported complex internal social obstacles, severely undermining their abilities to become effective agents of socioecological change.

The study shows that agroecology's legitimacy within and beyond the MST—including its transnational alliances—has relied heavily on institutionally insecure neo-developmental policies and programs, the semi-autonomy of movement activity within state power spheres under the center-left Workers' Party governments, and centralized

internal politics. This has resulted in heightened agroecological legitimacy, which translates into social power within the organization, for those able to leverage resources through MST membership.

Such legitimacy takes us beyond typical accounts of organic farming, as it is grounded in an ethical worldview that transcends mere economic prospects and seeks to politically transform wider society. It demonstrates intense desires for the conciliation of rural life, agriculture, and ecology among both established farmers as well as young adult students enrolled in movement-mediated agroecological training courses. However, a lack of internal democracy and gender equality threaten rank-and-file members' ability to stay committed to the MST and undermine young activists' abilities to be effective agents of socioecological change. While it would be an overstatement to affirm that this study's findings are easily generalized for the MST as a whole, this research suggests that the organization has thus far been unable to engender sustainable agrarian transitions on a broad scale. Given the simultaneous decline of the Brazilian economy and its effects on progressive social actors from 2013–2018, this study suggests that serious transformation of the MST's tactics, priorities, and internal organization is warranted to strengthen the future of agroecology