Title

Once upon a time in Utopia: Bergson, temporality and the remaking of social movement futures

Author

Flynn, Alex Ungprateeb

ALEX UNGPRATEEB FLYNN

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When her father was away, Mariana counted the hours, which were round and the colour of air, like invisible clocks. When they looked unbearably faceless, she pretended she could string them together, into necklaces made of sky. (Vaz 2004: 3)

In this article, I focus on utopian social movements and how their members are increasingly seeking to exit from what I term, after Raymond Williams, a subjunctive grammar of transformation. Analysing a Marxist social movement in Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), and placing my ethnography in dialogue with the conceptual philosophical framework of Henri Bergson, I argue that such movements have a special relationship with utopia, inscribing a contradiction that is characteristic to the mode of willed transformation: the very impossibility of distant objectives becomes the justification for striving ever harder in perpetual struggle; for the MST, programmes of movement massification and the maintenance of a unified front are the inevitable and necessary conditions to create a new society. This teleological impetus is normative and regulatory in character and is resolutely premised on a linear understanding of time. Recognising that the occupation of land is central to MST practice, I question how change might occur through a disaggregation of space and time; how the unexpected and unforeseen might arise despite mechanisms designed to engender continuity; how in each moment, there is the latent potential to inscribe – in a creative gesture – a future as yet uninscribed of meaning and being.

Key words   Utopia, MST, social movements, Bergson, temporality

Introduction

In this article, I ask how it is that from within a movement driven by a normative teleological impulse, the unexpected and unforeseen may yet occur, bringing about change that seeks an exit from the contradictions of a utopian mode premised on a linear understanding of time. For Raymond Williams, utopia was characterised by the subjunctive, it was a mechanism in which the vision of the promised land, rather than the journey itself, becomes the most important element. Williams identified the notion of a 'willed social transformation' as the characteristic utopian mode (1978: 208), describing how positing a distant objective could justify any and all means to get there, allowing those who articulate that vision to determine how the journey will be undertaken, by whom, and under what conditions:

> The sweet little world at the end of all this is at once a result and a promise …
> the sweet promise which sustains effort and principle and hope through the long
> years of revolutionary preparation and organisation. (1978: 209)

The contradiction that such a utopia inscribes is thus totalising and yet also ephemeral: striving for a distant horizon becomes the *raison d'être* for the daily activities that constitute the motor of a project of willed transformation, while the question of whether the new world to be realised really lies within the ambit of possibility, or is even entirely desirable, can be safely left to one side, to be confronted 'when the time comes'. Drawing on ethnography conducted with the Landless Workers' Movement of Brazil (MST), I show how the utopian goal of creating a new society through agrarian reform became the justification for the programmes of massification and the maintenance of a unified front that characterise the movement's struggle. I demonstrate how the MST's theoretical apparatus of change, right from its very first instances, embedded the utopian contradiction into its politics and practice leading to three consequences: first, the creation of latent conditions of sacrifice based on the unity that such a vision entails; second, a nationwide programme of transformative politics, delayed in the present, but promised in the future, whereby the locus of realisation is deferred from the here and now to a distant horizon; and third, a normative teleological impetus premised on a linear understanding of time in relation to space, which manifested itself through the very act of occupation itself.

    The editors of this special issue seek to move beyond the unattainable ideals of utopia and towards micro-political domains interrogating the strictures of politically conformist notions of the real. So why, therefore, an article on a movement like the MST? While much recent work on social change has been done in conjunction with 'progressive' micro-political, horizontalised contexts (see Cooper 2014; Blanes et al. 2016; Razsa 2015), less attention has been devoted to how change, and its latent dimension of creative becoming, occurs from within spaces that seek to maintain a greater degree of homogeneity, both ideological and practical. If, as contributors to this special issue, we are asked to create debate concerning an anthropology of generative socialities, I take this as an invitation to place my ethnography into dialogue with the conceptual philosophical framework of Henri Bergson to rethink how utopia as as 'total and large-scale order' (see the introduction to the special issue) can be subverted and undermined, its linear direction of travel waylaid by unexpected twists and turns. But why Bergson?

    My conviction in making this move stems from Bergson's theory of difference, and its resolutely non-dialectical stance,[1] – whether that be a Platonian dialectic of alterity or Hegelian dialectic of contradiction – put forward in *Matter and memory* (1991 [1896]), *Time and free will* (1910 [1889]) and *Creative evolution* (1944 [1911]). Bergson sought to analyse the seeming contradiction that exists between the continuity of all living beings and the implicit discontinuity and vitality that underlies creation: life reproduces in a continual sense but always with an evolutionary impulse, meaning that continuity must necessarily be complemented by change. Bergson's interest in change is embedded within his elaboration of a specific temporal ontology and his theoretical vocabulary is complex: in the next section, I outline the terms that we will be working with before recapitulating the overall argument.

Bergson: time, *la durée* and becoming

Where Bergson figures in the anthropological literature, it is often his theory of time that is put forward, whether in Nancy Munn's article 'The cultural anthropology

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[1]   That is, difference does not arise through negation.

of time' (1992), Alfred Gell's *The anthropology of time* (1992) or more recent work by Morten Pedersen (2012), Stuart Rockefeller (2011) and Matt Hodges (2008). For Bergson, however, time was intrinsically connected to change, or in his vocabulary, becoming, and while this connection and emphasis is less apparent to us today, Bergson's writings deliberately addressed the evolutionary scientists of his era and particularly their theories of change. To condense the life work of one of the 20th century's most original philosophers into a few short paragraphs is necessarily to synthesise to the point of folly, but it is important to create working descriptions of Bergson's critical vocabulary for the argument moving forward. With apologies thus made, one of Bergson's most important ideas centres on his argument that the evolutionary theories of his day were *mechanistic*. Bergson argued that Herbert Spencer's theory of homogeneity to complex heterogeneity (1867), Charles Darwin's theory of variation and selection according to adaptation (1864) and Hugo de Vries's theory of mutation (1909–10) are all based on a set of assumptions inherited from classical philosophy, and as such, premised on a linear understanding of time: how, observed from the point of view of the present, the past is necessarily anterior, becoming the present before ultimately arriving into the future. Such an understanding is precisely what Bergson sought to challenge. As Heike Delitz argues:

> These theories present evolution *as something other than* a process. Every evolutionary theory is approached from the viewpoint of eternity. Evolutionary history is divided in stages which can be seen *all at once* from this viewpoint. (2014: 86)

Bergson argues that in this conception of time, which he terms as 'spatialized' (1944 [1911]: 233), time is understood as a series of intervals rather than a continuum, facilitated by our own inability to be able to separate time from space. After all, what is an hour, a minute, a second? These units of time, our ways of being able to grasp time, are merely quantifiable measurements that derive from how our planet has moved through space in relation to the sun. As Bergson wrote in *Time and free will* of our common understanding of time:

> We introduce [space] unwittingly into our feeling of pure succession; we set our states of consciousness side by side in such a way as to perceive them simultaneously, no longer in one another, but alongside one another; in a word, we project time into space, … and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another. (1910 [1889]: 101)

Bergson drew on the theories of physicist and mathematician G. B. R. Riemann to make this argument, particularly Riemann's distinction between *qualitative* and *quantitative* multiplicities. For Bergson, a quantitative multiplicity was composed of homogenous elements that could be numbered and distinctly ordered in space. The example he gave was of a flock of sheep: each sheep exists in a distinct location, does not touch another sheep, and it is this discontinuity between sheep that allows them to be counted. By contrast, Bergson sought to identify time's inherently continuous and inter-connected processuality, its elements that (unlike sheep) were heterogeneous, could not be isolated into separate moments, and could not be counted, that is, its *qualitative multiplicity*.

His notion of *la durée*, commonly translated into English as 'duration', exits from the temporal ontology of Aristotle, Newton and Einstein to lay claim to *time itself* as opposed to mere measurement: time is no longer the motion of a minute-hand pausing over fractions of space, instead it becomes the fusion of the experience of nowness with that which will follow; moments that inter-penetrate to become inseparable points of a single continuous, connected process; a flow, the 'ceaselessly seething surd at the heart of things', in Barrett's famous words (1968: 373).

Bergson did not dispute the empirical facts of evolutionary biology: his argument instead centres on *how* it is that things change, and the necessary adjustments that we must make to our temporal ontology to comprehend this. His understanding of time, *la durée*, is therefore 'invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new' (1944 [1911]: 14) whereas biological theories, trapped in their conceptualisation of time as space, are inevitably *mechanistic* in their step-by-step, gradual linearity: 'they understand (individual) development and (trans-individual) evolution as agglomerations or combinations or series of states-of-affairs' (Delitz 2014: 86), each in touching distance, but without a discernment premised, as Bergson terms it, on penetration.

What is the significance of such a position? If we move from a linear 'clock-time' to *la durée* and its premise that time cannot be broken into separate moments, we must accept that it is not the case that each event is discrete and bounded; instead each present moment interpenetrates, that is, it acts as a vessel for what Deleuze termed 'the thought of the future' (1994: 7), inscribing – in a creative gesture – a future as yet uninscribed; time becomes, as Pedersen has written, 'a dynamic field of potential relations without beginning or end, from which the present is actualized' (2012: 144).

This continual elaboration of the new sits at the heart of Bergson's critique: Spencer, Darwin and de Vries may explain the facts of evolutionary biology, but trapped in linearity, they do not address the nature of the evolutionary force; while their project 'consists in cutting up present reality, already evolved, into little bits no less evolved, and then recomposing it with these fragments, thus positing in advance everything' (Bergson 1944 [1911]: xxiv),[2] for Bergson, the future is unknowable and yet already present, driven by an *élan vital*, a generative and creative impulse that *actualises* life in unexpected and unknown directions, assuming trajectories that in their unpredictability can only be termed as possible and determinable in *post hoc*, after-the-fact, analysis.

Deleuze termed Bergson as 'perhaps the greatest theorist of difference' (Grosz 2005: 4), and although the resurgence in interest in Bergson's work is largely attributable to Deleuze (Lundy 2018: 11), in this article I seek to embed my work in Bergson's own concepts of differentiation, as opposed to Deleuze's interpretations, reworkings and expansions (1991, 1995, 2004). While actualisation is essential to understanding Deleuze (Boundas 1992), Deleuze himself acknowledged how he had built on Bergson's thought, and indeed, Maras has argued for a 'Bergsonian model of actualization' (1998: 48) based on the notions of 'scheme and image' that figure in Bergson's essay 'Intellectual effort':

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[2] As Delitz states, 'the essence of any "mechanical explanation, in fact, is to regard the future and the past as calculable functions of the present, and thus to claim that all is given" (Bergson 1944: 43)' (2014: 87).

The scheme is tentatively what the image is decisively. It presents in terms of *becoming*, dynamically, what the images give us statically, as *already made*. (1920: 186, cited in Maras 1998: 50)

If this pairing prefigures Deleuze's later work, establishing a genealogy of actualisation and an ambit of authorship between Bergson and Deleuze falls beyond the remit of this article. However, it is important to highlight Bergson's own work on this key concept as it allows us to sidestep the many criticisms levelled at Deleuze's theory of differentiation, among them its oft-claimed revolutionary intent.

Actualisation is best contextualised by going back to the evolutionary theories that Bergson sought to confront. The problem with linearity, he stated, was that we have to 'resign ourselves to the inevitable: it is the real which makes itself possible and not the possible which becomes real' (Bergson 2002: 232). This is because, as Delitz argues regarding evolutionary biology's conception of spatialised time, 'prevailing evolutionary theories explain only *what has been selected*, instead of explaining what *arises*' (2014: 96). Bergson's riposte is to put forward the notion not of how the possible becomes real; but rather how the virtual actualises itself: 'rather than awaiting realization, the virtual *is fully real*; what happens in evolution is that the virtual is actualized' (2014: 89–90). This concept and its pairings of the *virtual/actual* instead of the *possible/ real* sits at the heart of Bergson's insistence on *la durée* as 'becoming': if all elements are inter-penetrable, in this flux we can already recognise the presence of moments that are as-yet-to-be; the possible is no longer reality denuded of its existence, predetermined and finite, but it is rather *virtual*, fully real, and merely awaiting actualisation. This is 'true' evolution, a process in which life 'involves a movement of differentiation whereby the virtual is actualised in a creative process of divergence' (Ansell-Pearson 2019: 20) and in which the future is spontaneous and unpredictable: mechanistic theories on the other hand 'regard the future and the past as calculable functions of the present, and thus … claim that all is given' (Bergson 1944 [1911]: 43).

With these concepts of *la durée*, becoming and the virtual in mind, we can begin to perceive the unique affordances that Bergson offers for a discussion of the MST: the very act of occupation and how it crystallises the process of time invested by movement members being converted into space; the subjunctive grammar that the movement's utopian model of transformation implies; and how members within the MST might bring about change in unexpected ways. In seeking to move away from utopia's vanguardist mode, Slavoj Žižek has put forward what he terms as 'enacted utopia':

In a proper revolutionary breakthrough, the Utopian future is neither simply fully realised in the present nor simply evoked as a distant promise which justifies present violence – it is rather as if, in a unique suspension of time – in the short-circuit between the present and the future, we are – as if by Grace – for a brief time allowed to act as if the utopian future is (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed. (2005: 267)

This notion of a *short circuit* between the present and the future allows us to perceive the underlying temporal ontology on which Žižek makes his claim: the vanguardist utopia here can be subverted by the unforeseen, the unknown, and yet that which is already present and embedded in our continuous becoming; Žižek's enacted utopia must be necessarily based within *la durée*. And yet, is such a 'short

circuit' possible within vanguardist liberatory structures? Can we discern the ever-quickening traction of change without falling back on, as Holbraad *et al*. note, the dialectical and revolutionary baggage of 'rupture' (2019: 11)? Thinking with Bergson's conceptual vocabulary points toward the idea that within the MST there are at least two understandings of time: first, a linear and teleological mode, validated by the act of occupation, in which all outcomes are predetermined and given; and second, a minoritarian understanding, one based within *la durée*, in which space and time have been disaggregated, and from which change inevitably will surge. As Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov argues in his book *Two Lenins*, 'multiplicity is not a destination where an argument finally arrives but a point of departure' (2017: 6), and the MST context invites questions that are best answered through ethnographic work: what are people's lived experiences of multiplicity and how are its different temporalities interrelated? Bergson conceived of life as 'a reality which is making itself in a reality which is unmaking itself' (1944 [1911]: 270) but to grasp how such a process might occur from within institutionalised contexts, it is first necessary to describe the MST and how utopia became embedded into its discourse.

Structure within the MST

With an estimated 1.5 million members, the MST is one of the largest social movements in Latin America and is currently active in 24 of Brazil's 26 states. Founded in 1984, the movement coalesced around two objectives: the struggle for a fairer society, and the means to achieve this, a programme of agrarian reform. From that first meeting, attended by a mere 80 representatives, the MST grew rapidly, and by occupying unproductive lands and lobbying the government to expropriate such assets for the use of landless families, the movement succeeded in placing agrarian reform at the heart of the political agenda.

Growing so quickly from a small organisation in the south of Brazil to a nationwide phenomenon, the MST became aware of the need to reinforce its organisational durability and moved to establish a verticalised system of direct authority throughout the movement. How this occurred and to what extent this structure has remained unchallenged is contested. Branford and Rocha (2002: 253) describe how all members on the national leadership are subject to re-election every two years, bar three people, one of whom is João Pedro Stédile, whom some identify as the MST's *de facto* leader. Both Branford and Rocha (2002) and Wright and Wolford (2003) have emphasised how the movement operates without a centralised decision-making body, describing how decisions are instead made in the assemblies of individual settlements, those areas in which landless people have been awarded land. Wright and Wolford argue that 'the MST has worked through collective leadership, scrupulously avoiding dependence on a single leader' (2003: xiv), while Branford and Rocha describe how the organisational principles of the movement were defined to not allow a clique of powerful leaders to dominate the movement.

From fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2017, I observed four consistent levels of leadership existing in vertical hierarchy, with authority descending from national, to state, to regional and, in some cases, to local. In daily life, while national leadership was remote, state leadership could be heavy-handed, unchecked and arbitrary,

which created a certain cynicism among members with whom I lived regarding the movement's presentation of itself as 'a grassroots democracy'. MST members with leadership roles would often insist that they were merely part of the coordination of any particular activity as opposed to 'leaders', while movement members frequently pointed to what they described as an easily identifiable leadership, a cadre that had resisted change to such an extent that the advanced age of its members had led it to be internally labelled a *gerontocracia*.

João Pedro Stédile is easily identifiable as one of the targets of such a critique, having been present since the movement's formation and a key architect of the 'organisational durability' he cites as one of the MST's central contributions (Welch 2006: 206). Indeed, an emphasis on structure and unification is common in movement life. Wendy Wolford, a scholar and long-time advocate of the movement, notes in her most recent book how the MST has come to strategically essentialise its own members, and how this 'subject elision' is a consequence of the unified front that is one of the 'main strategic advantages they possess' (2010: 11). Such a comment points directly to the contradictions inscribed by the mode of willed transformation that characterises how the MST's founding members articulated the movement: 'subject elision' denotes a normative framework, a movement without 'human values' (Flynn 2015), without 'love' (Lebner 2019: 141), which in turn has led to contested terrain around what it means to be *sem terra* (landless), how change can be brought about, and in what configuration of space. But how did utopia come to be so intrinsic to the landless struggle? The objective of creating a new society held in the subjunctive between subjectivity and collective identity, between grassroots autonomy and organisational rigour, has its roots in class-consciousness and the Marxist notion of a 'scientific socialism'.

Utopia and willed transformation

At an ideological level, being an MST member is to participate in a discourse that is configured by Marxist understandings of the transformative benefits of collectivisation and the necessity for a new type of society. MST discourse puts forward a strong landless identity as part of an oppositional class character that argues that capitalist practice will result in the inevitable proletarianisation of the worker. As Stédile comments in an interview with Bernardo Fernandes, the naming of the movement to include the term *trabalhador* was significant: 'We are workers, we have a society with different classes, and we belong to one of these classes' (1999: 47). Luizinho, a state leader of education in 2007, and later a member of the national leadership, told me that in the encampments, the occupied land that awaits government expropriation, *formação*, or political training, played a key role in this regard:

> That's where the question of *formação* comes in, because for example, the values that the movement puts forward … the question of solidarity, the question of us against everyone, of bourgeois values and human, socialist values. We have a different way of seeing things, a different view of life. A different way.

This class consciousness, which Meek argues constitutes a wider Gramscian 'war of position' (2011), is the basic justification for the necessity of a unified movement of

the 'landless' to seek redress in an organised manner[3] and these Marxist concepts of how to bring about change are rooted in a 19th-century political thinking that was rich with visions of utopia. Henrietta Moore, in her analysis of the 'good life', divides these utopias into two categories: first, the fictional utopias, scenarios that proposed an inversion of present-day evils thereby making a critique of contemporary society; and second, the utopia as a new world, 'to be designed and planned and lived out in this life' (1990: 14). Raymond Williams' essay 'Utopia and science fiction' (1978) emphasises how these two different modalities of utopia were embedded in the distinction that Marx and Engels sought to make between 'utopian' and 'scientific' socialisms; the latter, a necessary and inevitable outcome of class conflict, the former, a daydreamer's hypothetical vision of the future, abstracted from the necessity of revolution and practicalities. As the Communist Manifesto states of the 'utopians':

> Hence, they reject all political, and especially all revolutionary, action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavor, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel. (Marx and Engels 2012: 74)

In distancing themselves from the 'utopians', writers like Charles Fourier (1971), Étienne Cabet (1840) and Robert Owen (1991), Marx and Engels sought not only legitimacy for their hypothetical contribution, but also the impetus and justification for the mode of willed transformation that was fundamental to their project: revolution was to entail a realisable utopia, one underpinned by the conscious effort and sacrifice of those involved.

   In 2017, I asked Jennifer, an MST member in her twenties, what she thought about the MST's goal of creating a new society. Back from the ITERRA leadership school in Rio Grande do Sul, where she studies under the overall direction of Miguel Stédile, the coordinator of education in the south of Brazil and the son of MST leader João Pedro, her response was thoughtful:

> Agrarian reform and the MST, all together, is a dream, it is something that drives us forward. There is a certain conflict, it's a utopian movement. It's impossible but it's a way forward [*uma saída*]. It's a dream, but it's also the mechanism [*o dispositivo*].

Jennifer's response makes plain that Marx and Engel's mode of 'willed transformation' is inevitably subject to the same contradictions as any other utopian projection. As she identifies, the goals of the MST are both impossible to realise and yet also, in a contradictory sense, the very motivation to try and realise such an attempt. Sitting on her porch, Jennifer added:

> You can't think of the movement, with many things and people, as a beautiful and wonderful thing, it's not as if this will change huge things and structures,

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[3] It is important to note that direct action and horizontal practice have long been part of an anarchist, syndicalist and autonomist Marxism that can trace its lineage from Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman and Rosa Luxemburg to Cornelius Castoriadis and Antonio Negri. However, the MST's interpretations of class consciousness, alienation, social power and industrialisation stem more from Marx and Engels' *The German ideology* than from Kropotkin's *The conquest of bread*.

it's not the case. Huge things? I refer here to the third dimension of the MST's struggle: create a new society. Or even the second, agrarian reform. *This isn't something that is solely within our control*. (Author's emphasis)

Fernando Birri famously commented that 'utopia is on the horizon: I walk two steps; it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking' (cited in Galeano 2003: 499) and this conception, with the latent dimensions of sacrifice that such 'walking' might involve, allows us to perceive its normative and regulatory potential. One area that is increasingly contested within the movement in this sense is the idea of what it is to be '*sem terra*'. As an example of how a transformative teleology might predetermine outcomes within a linear scheme, the next section addresses how utopian visions have historically centred on the notion of the 'new man' with its concomitant questions pertaining to subjectivity.

New social citizens

Karl Mannheim argued that utopia should not be understood as a fictional portrayal of the future, but rather as a re-meaning of what any given future could be. In a 1930 lecture, he affirmed that 'as soon as utopia appears, a substantial transformation occurs, a new type of man comes into being' (cited in Loader and Kettler 2001: 24) and this thinking was important to the MST, especially for its first decade. As Wolford describes, early editions of MST's monthly newspaper, *Jornal sem terra* (*The Landless Newspaper*), 'were filled with discussions of the new "social citizen" that the MST wished to create' (2003: 505), an identity that was explicitly connoted with certain preferable, elite behaviours and values. In identifying vices such as individualism, spontaneity and immobility, MST militants were influenced by the writings of Che Guevara, who made a direct connection between the notion of a 'new man' and the creation of a revolutionary subjectivity in his essay 'Socialism and the new man in Cuba': youth being the 'malleable clay from which the new person can be built with none of the old defects' (2005 [1965]: 224). Another important point of reference was Brazilian sociologist Clodomir de Morais' 40-day 'organizational workshops', the first of which was held in 1988 in the Palmeira das Missões settlement in Rio Grande do Sul (Stédile and Fernandes 1999: 99). These *laboratórios de campo* complemented an influential training document authored by de Morais, in which he identified vices particular to the rural peasant, including 'anarchism', 'adventurism' and 'self-sufficiency' and the necessity to address them (1986: 27–36). In thus establishing certain behaviours and values as more desirable, from an early stage, initial MST leaders sanctioned the notion that some members could be a better fit than others and the beginnings of a contested subjectivity through which members and their contribution could be evaluated were created.

Such a formation of the subject is rooted in essentialisation and Malcolm McNee has commented on the MST's emphasis of uniformity of identity. McNee describes how Ademar Bogo, a culture sector leader's vision puts forward an inherent contradiction: on the one hand, there is a wish to delineate a clear vision of the MST 'peasant' attached to folklore, authenticity and the past, 'embodying a timeless pastoral vision of harmony' (2005: 345), but on the other hand, the type of new social citizen that the movement demands is required to act as a revolutionary agent for change 'expanding enlightenment ideals of literacy, science and beauty into the Brazilian countryside' (2005: 345).

Ideological *formação,* or training, still occurs across the movement. Ashley Lebner's recent work shows how the formation of the ideal MST militant has not changed substantially in almost 20 years, describing how at an annual meeting MST members in groups of 20 read aloud a pedagogical text emphasising how to see reality one must go from being an '"object" to a conscious agentive "subject"' (2019: 139). This discourse is particularly present in the leadership schools of the type that Jennifer attends. I was told repeatedly by MST leaders of various levels how such training of the new generation was essential to creating new 'social citizens' and Gabriel Ondetti's account of one such institution in Santa Catarina describes how young activists who make an impression on local or state leaders are selected from across the country to take part in a residential school programme:

> The aim, first and foremost, was to cultivate a radical political perspective. Participants were taught elementary Marxist sociology, in classrooms adorned with images of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. … They were also pushed to change their personal behavior, becoming more disciplined and less individualistic. (2008: 120)

Such training programmes have been well documented (see, for example, Kane 2000; Veltmeyer 1997; Wright and Wolford 2003) and demonstrate that the MST continues to think carefully about the training of future leaders, even if the pedagogical content is mainly drawn from paradigms rooted in the past. In describing the processes that constitute the formation of a 'revolutionary subjectivity', I seek to demonstrate merely one of the outcomes that utopian thinking in the MST has brought about. Such leadership training camps are an indirect manifestation of a temporal ontology that regards the future as a calculable function of the present and in the next section, I seek to make clear how such thinking, while utopian, is also *mechanistic*: based within an understanding of time that is teleological and linear; an ontological stance that can be traced to mass acts of occupation across Brazil.

Occupation as aggregation of time and space

At the 2007 state meeting of Santa Catarina, I was part of an audience of hundreds of MST members listening to a speech by state leader Everton. Speaking from a stage, his amplified words echoing in the concrete hall, Everton made reference to Florestan Fernandes, a Brazilian sociologist and Labour Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores –* PT) Federal Deputy, Karl Marx, Che Guevara and Antonio Gramsci, as inspirations for progress. Outlining the movement's strategy, Everton, a middle-aged man who would have been in his early twenties when the movement was formed, broke down the movement's key objectives to three distinct goals. First, the MST has to take land: we have to occupy. Second, it is imperative to make possible the continuation of this struggle for agrarian reform: the movement's longevity is key. Third, we must create a new society: an alternative society to capitalism must be made real. He continued:

> The bourgeoisie must be confronted and through education, we can prevail. The struggle begins through people's examples of character: we must demonstrate *sem terra* values and behaviours through the way we behave, each and every day.

Everton also asked us to memorise a specific phrase:

> *Os sem terrinha são a continuidade, a existência e a potência da mística.*

> (The young MST members are the future, the existence and the potential of *mística*.)

The phrase was recited twice before we all repeated it twice at his request. Another followed:

> *O movimento tem que superar o sistema do capitalismo – é possível realizar.*

> (The movement must overcome the capitalist system – it's possible to achieve.)

Everton's address reveals not only the normalisation of the distant objective that is the goal of willed transformation (the overthrow of the capitalist system), but also two further considerations: first, how the MST's transformative teleology presupposes linearity and predetermination; and second, how this utopian mode is embedded in strictly *spatial and temporal* dimensions.

How does this occur? First, Everton's explanation of the *stages* of the struggle allow us to glimpse the leadership's mechanistic theory of the landless evolution; that if carried out correctly, all is predetermined:

> The doctrine of teleology, in its extreme form, as we find it in Leibniz for example, implies that things and beings merely realize a program previously arranged. But if there is nothing unforeseen, no invention or creation in the universe, time is useless again. As in the mechanistic hypothesis, here again it is supposed that all is given. (Bergson 1944 [1911]: 45)

Second, Everton's stages are interconnected: we must occupy land, but this land can only be won if we invest our time; only through a long-term struggle can a new society be created. What Everton presents here is a reinterpretation of Bergson's observance of spatialised time, except that, for Everton, time is not measured by the ticking of a clock or the movement of the earth around the sun, but rather by how much land the movement will manage to claim, how many family plots will be demarcated and how many hectares will be expropriated by the federal government. This very particular spatialisation of time, which is inherent to the act of occupation, underpins Everton's third point, the utopian call for a new society, a goal that can only be realised by the *act of occupying land*. Everton presents an evolution of the landless struggle based on linearity: he divides landlessness into stages which can be seen *all at once* from his viewpoint; a new society *must* follow on from agrarian reform; it is inevitable, it is a given. This is what Bergson terms a 'false evolutionism' in which from the standpoint of quantitative multiplicity, everything is posited in advance. In this manner, we can perceive that the MST's utopian vision as an ontological stance may be characterised by a subjunctive grammar, but it is *underpinned* by the spatialisation of time. MST leaders such as Everton, through their focus on the winning of land and the calculus of how much time is necessary to invest to do so, have become wedded to a linear and teleological mode, where what counts most is a federal waiting game with plots of land as the stakes in play. The disjuncture between such a temporal ontology and a more

minoritarian understanding, one based within *la durée*, is made clear by Clodomir de Morais' discussion of time and its connection to productivity:

> Amongst the rural peasants (*camponeses*), for example, units of time are ill-defined, and in general, long: a *momentinho*, a moment, midday, a week, the next new moon, the harvest etc. Whereas for factory workers time is measured in seconds, minutes, an hour etc. With the development of a mercantile economy, time takes on value: as the English say, 'time is money'. (1986: 8, my translation)

Invited to work with the MST by its most senior leadership, de Morais' analysis makes clear how the movement identified the persistence of a 'rural' understanding of time within its members and the necessity to address this temporal ontology in the same manner as the vices I previously discussed: to realise a new society, efficient and massified schemes of production were earmarked as essential, schemes that necessitated an 'ill-defined' understanding of time to conform to a new linear paradigm premised on industrialised arrangements of work.

As I discussed with the notion of a 'new man', such a stance is explicitly normative, so how is it that change may occur from within this context? Notions of what it is to produce, to have a family or to experience *mística* (a type of meaningful performance that occurs within the movement) are increasingly being contested, and here, focusing on what happens to land *after* it is occupied, I seek to describe how emerging differences may prompt unexpected dimensions of meaning and being in relation to what it is to be '*sem terra*'.

An exit from the subjunctive

During our discussion about the movement's politics, Jennifer commented directly on how the utopian idea could be transformed, reconfigured and perhaps rendered more tangible:

> [agrarian reform] is possible to discuss, but in these small spaces, not the big ones. Because the MST is not totally utopian, I mean, you get land. You achieve agrarian reform in small spaces.

Jennifer here points to a potential *saída*, or way forward, from the subjunctive grammar of transformation that exists as a central contradiction within the MST. It is an impossible struggle, and yet, you *can* gain land, you *can* realise the impossible in small spaces, albeit on a different plane to that on which the movement's utopian vision rests: the personal, the small scale, as opposed to the national, the massified. As I discussed previously, Žižek's 'enacted utopia' calls for a short-circuit in time, suggesting that a true breakthrough can only be achieved from within *la durée*. For Žižek, revolution is not sacrifice to an edifice that is created in the mirror of the system whose end is sought; it is, as he describes it, the state of being free while already fighting for freedom, subverting linearity from within 'a unique suspension of time'. While the vanguardist utopian vision of the wider movement is premised on the occupation of land and the aggregation of time and space that this applies, younger members like Jennifer who grew up on MST settlements have a different understanding of land, one in which space

and time have been disaggregated, one that allows for the unexpected and unforeseen to emerge as a function of the continuous becoming of *la durée*.

Jennifer's careful consideration of the MST's politics is significant because from an early age she was identified as a potential MST leader: the Santa Catarina state leadership earmarked her as someone destined for the leadership school, ITERRA, and inevitably she was sent there (it is a residential school) aged 17. And yet from within this structure, Jennifer, like other younger members (Gurr 2019), contests many of the core tenets that constitute an ideal '*sem terra*': she became a mother at a young age, puts forward her own stance in classes on classical Marxism and clearly took a side when factions of her settlement, with the support of the state leadership, tried to expel one of her neighbours, an MST member named Davi, from his land. Particularly significant in this example is how she resignified the very act of occupation in an entirely unexpected way to articulate her struggle.

Davi was part of a cooperative within the wider settlement and wished to leave and farm his own plot. When he told the *de facto* leader of the cooperative of his intention, he was frozen out for months before finally the leader of the cooperative, Roberto, called a meeting of the whole settlement, asking for Davi's expulsion. Roberto was a firm believer in the need to increase levels of production and interpreted Davi's actions as a form of sabotage: seeing that Roberto would not back down, a group including Jennifer occupied Roberto's land in protest of his vindictiveness. She told me:

> It's a symbolic act. To occupy is to resist. If you want to confront someone or something head on, you occupy. Usually it's a landowner, not a *sem terra*, but this was a *sem terra* who didn't understand things in a social dimension. Simple.

Jennifer's act entirely subverted the act of occupation, and in doing so, broke the connection that the MST leadership have created in making occupation the device through which the movement must move forward. Her protest worked: Roberto gave in and Davi was allowed to farm an individual plot within the settlement, but outside of the cooperative's land. I asked Jennifer how the state leadership had responded to this:

> We can't just have one way of solving things. I don't see it that way. 'For this situation, the movement says that etc.', no it's not like that. There are diverse ways to solve things. As women we try to meet up, and we get taken to task for this 'Ah, you're proposing separate meetings' – 'You're breaking the hierarchy, regional, state etc.' We make an effort to create informal spaces, away from these '*instâncias*', this hierarchy.

Jennifer's resignification of the act of occupation and defiance of a hierarchical system of authority is merely part of a wider becoming that finds expression within various spheres of the movement. She, like many other members of the MST, long ago rejected the promise of a utopian vision that informed their early experiences of landlessness and through the unpredictable and quotidian, her actions, discourse and views of the world are changing the wider movement, exerting a creative impulse on schemes of linearity that date from 1984.

One way to understand how MST members like Jennifer engage with the notion of *la durée* is to think of the prefigurative dimensions of MST *mística*. Christine Chaves (2000) has written insightfully about this practice, highlighting how it both evokes the

experience of the struggle for land rights while also serving as a vehicle for MST ideas and guiding principles. In the large performances that accompany state meetings and the like, *mística* has become over-rehearsed and institutionalised. However, in more personal spaces, *mística* still offers a possibility to compress many different temporalities into one performative space; it is the possibility to both glimpse and enact through mimesis personal interpretations of struggle, the past and the value of sacrifice. Chaves suggests that in this manner místicas make tangible and real the past and the future through the present (2000), providing the possibility of an exit from a naturalised subjunctive and the opportunity to create one's own subjective meanings, and re-meanings, as to how the landless struggle might be imagined. Thinking with Bergson here, we can appreciate how *mística* offers a glimpse of the experience of nowness with that which will follow and that which has already 'passed'; these are moments that inter-penetrate to become inseparable points of single continuous process. In this sense, *mística* enables MST members to both 'look back' and 'look forward' in a way that brings together Morten Pedersen's work in Ulaanbaatar, where his interlocutor is described as 'leaping' into new futures (2012: 144) and the work of Rebecca Coleman, whom he cites: 'to re-experience the past … is not to remain in the present and recollect or recount the past but to "leap" into the past, to remember the past and experience its intensive temporality again' (2008: 94; cited in Pedersen 2012: 144).

    I asked Jennifer about how she reflected on her gesture to infuse occupation with a new purpose:

> To help Davi out in that moment, which was so difficult for him, was a mystical act: to make a connection between what he went through and why he was in the situation he was in, how he was trapped, was a mystical act. Because, in *mística*, you make a connection between the past and the present.

Jennifer's stubborn single-mindedness to reconfigure the way the MST is led, despite participating in a programme of formal training that reproduces the existing model, is a reflection of the practice of her own particular version of *mística*: not as institutionalised performance, but something that Thiago, another MST member, described as the 'spiritual dimension' of the movement (Flynn 2013: 185–7). This personal, interpretive and reflexive modality of *mística* is perhaps the most tangible instantiation of thinking based within *la durée*, and a process that is generative of a new way of being:

> Duration is difference, the inevitable force of differentiation and elaboration, which is also another name for becoming. Becoming is the operation of self-differentiation, the elaboration of a difference within a thing, a quality or a system that emerges or actualizes only in duration. (Grosz 2005: 4)

MST members are increasingly making unexpected and unforeseeable gestures like Jennifer. Settled in a home, these members have disaggregated time and space: no longer engaged in occupying to gain land means that time is no longer measured by how many hectares the government may or may not grant. This shift in temporality that characterises an MST settlement (in contrast to the MST encampment) is particular to what comes to be a dynamic field of relations: land becomes a home, a means of production, access to schooling, one's community, social life, a sports facility, a place of worship and often a site of extended family networks. Moving away from prescriptive

notions of agrarian reform, long-term MST members are increasingly enacting change, as they understand it, from the point of view of their own particular subjectivity.

Conclusion

I have outlined how the MST's utopian vision as ontological stance may be characterised by a subjunctive grammar, but is *underpinned* by the spatialisation of time: especially at state level, the act of occupation has embedded a mechanistic, normative and linear vision of how the movement must move forward. The outcomes of this are an emphasis on the notion of a 'new man' and the creation of a revolutionary subjectivity and an accompanying reproduction of discourse through devices such as leadership training camps, which can be metaphorically thought of as 'reconstructing evolution with fragments of the evolved' (Bergson 1944 [1911]: 396).

However, from within a liberatory structure, which has moved toward institutionalisation and verticality, people still imagine and actualise new worlds. The lives and experiences of Jennifer and many others demonstrate how meaning might be elaborated in contested circumstances, and how *élan vital* must be considered as the inevitable counterpoint to the predetermined reality that is the mark of the subjunctive mode. Stevphen Shukaitis has suggested such programmes of revitalisation can be thought of as 'the task of bringing what Durruti called "the new world we carry in our hearts" into existence as a tangible reality, even if only in a piecemeal fashion' (2004: 13). Members of the MST like Jennifer do not consider that which does not exist as unreal, as possibilities to be brought into existence: through *mística*, what is yet to be is already tangibly present and by articulating her vision for the future of the MST, she puts forward Bergson's conviction in the dimensions of 'disorder' (1944 [1911]: 254) that he understood as creative and vital to change.

Acknowledgement

Alex Ungprateeb Flynn iD
Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance
University of California, Los Angeles
auflynn@ucla.edu

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Il était une fois en Utopie: Bergson, la temporalité et la refonte de l'avenir des mouvements sociaux

Je me concentre ici sur les mouvements sociaux utopiques et sur la façon dont leurs membres cherchent de plus en plus à sortir de ce que j'appelle, d'après Raymond Williams, une grammaire subjonctive de la transformation. Analysant un mouvement social marxiste au Brésil, le Mouvement des travailleurs sans terre (MST), et mettant mon ethnographie en dialogue avec le cadre philosophique conceptuel d'Henri Bergson, je soutiens que ces mouvements ont une relation particulière avec l'utopie, inscrivant une contradiction caractéristique du mode de transformation voulu: l'impossibilité même d'objectifs lointains devient la justification d'une lute perpétuelle toujours plus dure; pour le MST, les programmes de massification des mouvements et le maintien d'un front unifié sont les conditions inévitables et nécessaires à la création d'une nouvelle société. Cet élan téléologique a un caractère normatif et réglementaire et repose résolument sur une compréhension linéaire du temps. Reconnaissant que l'occupation du territoire est au centre de la pratique des MST, je me demande comment le changement peut se produire par une désagrégation de l'espace et du temps; comment l'inattendu et l'imprévu peuvent surgir malgré les mécanismes conçus pour engendrer la continuité ; comment, à chaque instant, il y a le potentiel latent d'inscrire – dans un geste créatif – un futur encore non inscrit dans le sens et l'être.

Mots-clés Utopie, MST, mouvements sociaux, temporalité, Bergson