

Rural Commons and the Experience of the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyse the experience of the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil, with the analysis of a single case study, in order to highlight how it resonates with the theory of commons and rural commons, and how such practices can advance sustainable development and inter-generational equity. This topic is particularly interesting given the growing interest for commoning practices and their positive approach toward environmental issues. The research will be conducted by using a qualitative method based on a single case study, which was chosen for its relevance in the local context and for the possibility of accessing primary information. Results indicate that the approach of the MST, and of participants in the Dorcelina Folador settlement, is quite similar to other commoning practices and strongly focused on caring for land and making it flourish, rather than ensuring private ownership for profit-making purposes. In fact, settlers state that they do not want to become land owners, as they see land as something sacred and belonging to the community as a whole, and their objective is to ensure that it is protected. Moreover, the practices carried out by Movimento Sem Terra usually lead to improved conditions in terms of agricultural results, biodiversity and environmental protection, indicating the movement's strong drive toward sustainability.

Keywords: Brazil, commons, Movimento Sem Terra, rural commons

1. Introduction

1.1 Land, Sustainability and the Commons

The question of land in Brazil is a central one, and has been for centuries, since the colonisation of the country by the Portuguese. As we will see, land policies enacted over time have led to great social inequalities and to the impoverishment of land and of the environment in general, which has often been neglected and not cared for in a fruitful way. In this paper, we want to link the theory of the commons and rural commons with the experience of Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil, a grassroots social movement that fights for a fair agrarian reform and more in general for greater social justice in rural areas. We believe that combining these two elements is especially important as there are interesting similarities between them in terms of perspectives and practices, and the experience of Movimento Sem Terra represents a successful case of creating and maintaining rural commons for the benefit of large communities. Another key issue that crosses both topics is sustainability and inter-generational equity: in fact, both in commoning practices and in the experience of the Movimento Sem Terra, the awareness for sustainable development and environmental protection is high, even if it is not always explicitly stated as part of the strategy. We can say that both these approaches have a natural tendency to be oriented towards sustainability and have a strong drive to ensure that natural resources are protected and made available for future generations.

1.2 Commons and Rural Commons

Commons are a rather complex topic which encompasses several disciplines (economics, philosophy, political sciences, law, sociology), making it difficult to provide a one-size-fits-all definition of the problem. Depending on the theoretical and disciplinary lens, understanding of the commons changes and so do the main definitions that can be used (Hess, 2008; Wagner, 2012; Ruiz-Ballesteros & Gual, 2012). For the purpose of this research, we will adopt an approach that is predominantly based on economic aspects, as well as political sciences. Thus, the key scholar that has to be referred to in this field is Elinor Ostrom, Nobel laureate in Economics for her work on the

commons, who defines commons as “a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use” (Ostrom, 1990). Bollier (2011) adds that commons are not only resources, but also include “a defined community and the protocols, values and norms devised by the community to manage its resources”: this means that the idea of creating commons, i.e. commoning, is central in this approach (see also Hess & Ostrom, 2007; Patnaik, Ruivenkamp & Jongerden, 2017). Commoning indicates “the social practices and norms for managing a resource for collective benefit” (Bollier, 2011), and it is clear that commons arise when a specific community carries out collective practices that are often informal (or start as such) and are deeply different from market and State-based approaches.

According to Benkler (2008), commons can be open-access or only available to specific groups, and they can either be regulated or not regulated. Le Crosnier (2010) states that commons are linked to a particular form of governance: it is a question, for a given community, of creating them, maintaining them, preserving them, ensuring their renewal as resources. Commons exist only with the communities that manage them, which are local, self-organised or have strong collective rules, including laws and judicial decisions. The commons are places of expression for society and, in this sense, a place of conflict resolution.

It is interesting to note that specific theorisations regarding the commons and nature have arisen in Latin America, the geographical area of this research. Florez (2008) coined the concept of “lo nuestro”, i.e. “what belongs to us”, to describe natural resources that belong to indigenous populations and that cannot be referred to as “public” or as “res nullius”. This concept, according to the author, originates from the close relationship that indigenous people have with the land they live on.

For what concerns rural commons, they are those practices, activities, projects, systems, collective strategies of care, revitalisation, enhancement of the territory and its resources, considered important by a community of people. There are three fundamental elements of the rural commons: the community of people who recognise the presence of tangible and intangible shared resources as important, commoning actions to take care of the good, rules and responsibilities that the community gives itself to collectively manage the good.

Rural commons are collective practices that represent an alternative in the process of caring for resources and organising communities; they are not excluding, on the contrary they are open to new ideas and suggestions coming from the outside, a key aspect in protecting collective interests related to land and in taking into account the ever-increasing links between rural and urban areas and the complexity of human life on Earth.

1.3 Historical Notes on Land Rights and Reform in Brazil

In order to understand the issue at the heart of this paper, it is necessary to provide some context information regarding land rights and reform in Brazil.

Land colonisation in Brazil began when Portuguese conquerors took the land away from indigenous people, and started dividing it up into pieces that could be inherited and passed on within families: this marked the start of social inequalities in Brazilian society.

Later on, the law established that land had to be assigned (and this often meant gifted to noblemen, members of the army and of the high bourgeoisie) and that its owners had an obligation to keep it productive. It was often difficult to find workforce, and owners ended up forcing at first indigenous people to work for them, and then turned to Africans who had been taken to Brazil as slaves. Still, many land owners were not able to meet production criteria and decided to sell their land to others, which was forbidden by the law. In 1850, the Law of Lands was passed, stating that land could indeed be sold, turning it into a commodity and reinforcing the creation of large land properties.

In the next centuries, several governments did not do much to improve the conditions of peasants, and mass migrations from rural areas to cities occurred, with the consequence of increasing unemployment, reducing wages and in general worsening living conditions for those that decided to move. Around the 1950s, social movements started advocating for an agrarian reform that would benefit the people, be fair and move towards greater social justice. The government led by Joao Goulart adopted a positive approach to land reform and social movements, which led army members and a part of society to declare it unfit to govern, leading to the start of the military dictatorship in 1964, lasting until 1985. During these years, although formally legislation seemed to be in favour of indigenous and rural people, in reality land owners did not respect their obligations toward workers, which ended up in increased migrations toward cities and a consequent increase in social inequalities. Around the mid '80s, the struggle for a fair agrarian reform intensified considerably, leading to the creation of the Movimento Sem Terra.

Democratic governments after 1985 antagonised peasant activism as much as possible, and land concentration increased even more. In 2002, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was elected as President with the support of social and rural movements, and his government presented the National Plan for Agrarian Reform in 2003, drafted in cooperation with the Movimento Sem Terra, marking a shift in public policy with respect to previous administrations.

1.4 Objective of the Research

The objective of this paper is to investigate the experience of Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil and how it relates to rural commoning practices. To do so, we will employ a qualitative research methodology based on a single case study describing a specific settlement within the Movimento Sem Terra, which was chosen because of its relevance in the local context and for the possibility of reaching informants and settlers in order to have a first-hand account of the case. We will see that there are strong links between the approach of Movimento Sem Terra and the concept of rural commons, recalling the idea of “lo nuestro” proposed by Florez (2008) and the close ties between local communities and land.

2. Method

In order to answer our research question we will adopt a qualitative approach based on a single case study. This choice is linked to the complexity of the field of commons, which is hard to capture through quantitative methods because practices and experiences can be vastly different and still be significant examples of the concept. Moreover, carrying out a single case study allows for in-depth research, which at a later stage can be used as the basis for comparisons with other cases.

The selected case study within the experience of Movimento Sem Terra is that of a specific settlement called Dorcelina Folador, which has come to be regarded as a model in its local context. The relevance of the Dorcelina Folador settlement case was the main reason for its choice, along with the possibility of contacting settlers and participants to collect primary information and first-hand accounts. Moreover, preliminary investigation held in cooperation with a participant of the Movimento Sem Terra, analysing different settlements and exploring possible objects for the case study, confirmed that the Dorcelina Folador case was the most appropriate choice.

We had several informal conversations with settlers at Dorcelina Folador, held on the phone and online, and one in-depth interview with a settler, which was recorded, transcribed and then translated to English. Excerpts from the interview will be quoted in the text when necessary. We also used secondary documents, such as texts and interviews published on the website of Movimento Sem Terra, to provide a general framework to the case study. Moreover, documents produced by Movimento Sem Terra were especially relevant because of the difficulty of having direct contacts with settlers. Before introducing results and discussing findings, we will provide a brief description of Movimento Sem Terra, discussing its origins, main practices and key figures.

2.1 Brief Description of the Movimento Sem Terra

The Movimento Sem Terra was officially born in 1984 on the occasion of the 1st Gathering of Landless Workers in Cascavel. The main objectives of the movement are to fight for the land, for a fair Agrarian Reform and for social changes in the country. The MST was born at the end of the Military Dictatorship in 1985, at the beginning of the so-called re-democratisation.

Illegal occupation of land is the main strategy of the Movimento Sem Terra: peasants erect their shacks and begin to live in these lands by lobbying for their expropriation, thus establishing a camp, where they begin to plant and make actual use of land that was unproductive. Families develop farming in the form of cooperatives. When an occupation occurs, the MST denounces land grabbing and unproductiveness, thus creating a political question, a sort of pressure on the government that must provide answers to the issue of land concentration in Brazil. Normally, the owner of the occupied land goes to court with the request for reinstatement of possession: in this way legal channels are activated, passing through various instances, and the judge recognises the irregularity of the property, authorises the expropriation and recognises the MST the right to remain on the land and thus the settlement is established. This process can, however, last for years.

A settlement is a group of families who begin to work an area of land intended for landless farmers, using it for agricultural production. The settlements organised by the struggle of the MST try to plan and organise production to make the settlement viable, to ensure the subsistence of settled families, to promote the economic and social development of the families who conquer the land.

Currently, the Movimento Sem Terra is organized in 24 states in 5 regions of the country; it includes more than 450.000 established families, 90.000 camped families, owns more than 2.000 public schools in its settlements and is responsible for the largest organic rice production in Latin America.

It is important to underline that after the settlement families remain organised in the MST. When a piece of land is expropriated, it usually does not have infrastructure, sanitation, electricity and access to culture, education and leisure. When they occupy the land, settled families organise themselves to gain access to these fundamental rights. This organisation is based on a basic model for all settlements, with a participatory and democratic structure of the whole community that lives there. Families are organised in nuclei, in these nuclei two coordinators are chosen (a man and a woman), a structure that is repeated at all levels: regional, state and national and during the Assemblies, everyone has the right to vote: young people, men and women. There is also an organisation by sectors that extends from the local to the national level, in accordance with the needs and requirements of each settlement. The MST holds National Congresses, every five years, and in the National Meetings held every two years, the decisions of the National Congresses are validated and implemented.

For what concerns sectors of activity, the Movimento Sem Terra operates with regard to:

- Land occupation, the process of which is described above;
- Education, meant to provide settlers and workers with political knowledge and culture; another important aspect is the fight to eradicate illiteracy, and to grant all children the possibility to attend a free, high quality school system;
- Production, which is based on agricultural cooperativism;
- Communication, in order to have a voice and be able to be heard;
- Projects, which are linked to the objective of self-sufficiency and sustainability of the MST, in order to be autonomous from outside interventions;
- Gender equality, which goes hand in hand with the fight against racism;
- Human rights, especially for what concerns legal defense of those who take part in illegal actions;
- Healthcare, with the objective of granting everyone free access to basic healthcare, a right that rural communities are often denied, although it is included in the Brazilian constitution;
- Finance, in order to collect resources for all activities and be accountable regarding how they are used;
- International relations with other social movements;
- Culture and the arts, which play a central role in the philosophy of MST;
- The youth and the LGBTQ+ community, two key groups within the framework of the MST.

The Movimento Sem Terra employs a series of practices to reach its goals and carry out its activities, such as land occupations, settlements, “walks”, fasts and hunger strikes, the occupation of public buildings, demonstrations in cities and vigils.

Recently, the Movimento Sem Terra turned 38 years old, and it has become the largest producer of organic rice in Latin America, its latest harvests exceeding 27.000 tons of organic rice, exporting more than 30% of its production to countries such as the United States, Germany, Spain, New Zealand, Norway, Chile and Mexico. This organisation takes place through cooperatives, associations and agro-industries in the settlements. Currently, the MST manages seven main production chains: beans, rice, milk, coffee, juices, seeds and honey. It also organises Agrarian Reform fairs throughout Brazil. Currently, there are 17 state fairs scattered throughout the country, in addition to the national fair which takes place annually in the city of São Paulo.

3. Results

The Dorcelina Folador settlement, located in the northern area of the State of Parana, is regarded as a model within the experience of the Movimento Sem Terra. Around 130 families have been living there for 20 years: when the land was first occupied, it was a vast territory without trees and wildlife. Following the expropriation of the land due to the accumulation of debts by its owner, settlers were able to make it flourish again, and today it is a great example of biodiversity and sustainability. During the 20th anniversary of the settlement, Dorcelina Folador settlers presented their new project for processing fruits and vegetables: the plant and machines were bought thanks to the families’ resources and to a project promoted by the State Department for Agriculture. This new plant will allow to fulfil residents’ needs and also to sell produce on the market.

The first and largest agricultural production of the settlement regards dairy products and was launched in 2013, creating more than 100 job opportunities. Everyday, about 40.000 liters of milk are processed, produced by the settlement and by about 4.000 families in the neighboring municipalities. A group of women also runs a community bakery, with weekly production of 380 kilos of bread, 500 kg of cakes and 400 kg of homemade biscuits. The

production and marketing of the settlement is organized by the Cooperative for the Commercialisation and Agrarian Reform of Peasants Union. The cooperative serves 32 municipalities and 500 municipal and state schools with the provision of school canteens, through the National School Feeding Program (PNAE).

According to the mayor of Arapongas, more than 70% of schools meals are bought from the settlement and from small local producers: in the eyes of the local administration, the settlement is not a problem to deal with, on the other hand it solves problems of the area it is located in.

The settlement has a football field, a playground for children, and a space for the elderly. All the families who live there show great satisfaction with the environment and the production of the settlement: in fact, the well-being reported by residents is part of the action of MST to implement the popular Agrarian Reform. As Jose Damaceno, member of the state coordination of the MST and inhabitant of the settlement explains: "Our secret is to have an organisation, to have a dream to realise, to plan and to carry out. This is why we built this settlement and others". The goal of the Movimento Sem Terra is the construction of a "peasant community", where human beings are in first place, regardless of religion, political party or sexual orientation. To achieve this, education was fundamental: "Our main mission was the elimination of illiteracy. Here we defend the idea that each person should have a book, and not a weapon", Damaceno adds.

Settler Dirlete Dellazari took part in the occupation of the area in 1999 and is proud to say that the settlement is a reference point for the Agrarian Reform. "It's not just the distribution of the land. It is creating the conditions for people to live, have an education, health, roads, have the conditions to develop production and their knowledge". Agriculture emphasises the importance that settled families have preserved, over the 20 years, the identity of the social and popular organization: "We are the MST, we continue and will continue to be the MST, since it is our strength, for all the families here in the settlement" Dellezari concluded.

Another settler recalls that the last was first occupied because activists in the Movimento Sem Terra knew that its owners had debts that were too large to repay, and that the land was owned by the Federal Bank, which made it a possible object of Agrarian Reform based on the Federal Constitution. Nine months after the occupation, a court decision expropriated the land and stated that 92 families had the right to use the land. Then started a long journey of education and organisation, since no infrastructure was available. The settler recalls that

"The 92 families were divided into 9 nuclei (each nucleus had a man and a woman as coordinators) and each group had 7 sectors (health, education, culture, security, internal finance, mass front, production), to be carried out, they met on weekends and discussed the problems and needs of that nucleus. We learned a lot during that time. In the cultural sector we have been put in contact with the State University of Londrina. In the education sector, the goal was to eliminate illiteracy and we succeeded. I had only studied up to 4th grade and managed to finish high school with my partner. In the health sector, a group brought doctors here. We also had to organise ourselves in the production sector and we created an association, but that wasn't enough, we needed a cooperative. COPRAN had already been created and we moved it here. This cooperative today produces milk (5.000 liters of milk per day during the summer), fruit and vegetables (4.000 to 6.000 kg per week for school canteens), bread and biscuits (800 to 1.000 kg for municipal canteens)".

The settler also recalls that there have never been violent episodes in the settlement, and that today the experience of Dorcelina Folador is regarded as a model, and this represents a great responsibility. Out of the 130 families living in the settlement, 92 only have the concession to use the land, and they are fine with it as they do not want to become owners or turn the land into money. They say that "The land does not belong to us, the land belongs to all of them who live and produce in it. We defend land as a sacred gift".

4. Discussion

The experience of the Movimento Sem Terra, and especially the case of the Dorcelina Folador settlement, strongly resonate with the theory of commons and rural commons. Activists and peasants come together to collectively improve the condition of land and treat it as a shared resource, rather than aiming at ensuring private ownership of it. In fact, as we saw in Dorcelina Folador, most families living in the settlement do not have ownership rights, only the concession to use the land, and they agree with this situation as they do not want to become land owners. On the other hand, they want to care for the land, protect it and make it flourish for the collective good and for the benefit of future generations. This approach is very similar to commoning practices, where communities treat a specific resource as shared and take the responsibility of caring for it without claiming or restricting ownership and access.

We should remember that communities and social groups that inhabit these commons have managed them for generations in a dynamic way, in a process of co-evolution, involving resources and themselves (as seeds that

diversify and improve over time). They perceive these ecosystems and these resources as a condition for their survival, the basis for sustaining and reproducing their life and, therefore, it is necessary to conserve them. They are therefore social strategies and not mere resources. They are regulated by a group over time according to its interests, which coincide with the broader interests of humanity and with the perpetuation of ecosystems, guaranteeing their resilience.

The implication of adopting an approach based on the commons, and of the experience of the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil, is quite interesting for public policy especially in context, such as the Brazilian ones, where social inequality is still high and the use of land is a key political and economic issue. To carry out this rethinking, the collective practices of care of the territory and the communities that implement them must think of themselves as interdependent: as forms of care and organisation from the bottom-up, they work on the basis of the concept of subsidiarity as guardians of rural habitats, but at the same time must be able to count on a fruitful collaboration with local institutions, and forge alliances with other networks and territories that face similar challenges. In collaboration with local institutions there must be mutual recognition and that leads to sitting at a common table for an open discussion on the future of the territory. It is only with the opening of this dialogue and with the recognition of such interdependencies that the rural commons can become the driving force of a concrete and feasible alternative for the management and governance of the territory.

Moreover, treating land as a (rural) commons, belonging to a large community that collectively care for it in a cooperative way, also has interesting implications in terms of sustainability policies and strategies: the key principle driving commoners and activists of MST alike is the respect for the resource (in this case, land) and the need to ensure that it is not over-exploited by enclosing it and using it for profit-making purposes, which means that sustainable development and sustainability in general is a logic consequence of commoning practices, even when it is not declared openly as such. Moreover, in commoning experiences the level of awareness for issues such as intergenerational equity is usually high, which means that current users of the resource know that they have to preserve it for future generations as well.

For what concerns the limitations of this research, the main issue consisted in reaching informants and participants. Moreover, the paper analyses a specific case study, so there would be difficulties with generalising results. At the same time, however, common traits and features can be found in many experiences of commoning, and future research could focus on creating a database of cases in order to highlight similarities and differences of commoning practices.

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