Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education

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Resumo:
Over thirty years the MST has developed an education reform proposal based in Freirean pedagogies that is linked to the movement’s vision for agrarian reform through large-scale land redistribution and the establishment of collective, small-family farming in the Brazilian countryside. MST leaders have had success convincing governments to allow the movement to implement this proposal. The book Occupying Schools, Occupying Land analyze the steps that the MST has taken to lead this national education reform effort in the Brazilian countryside.

Três palavras-chave
_Educação do Campo, Movimentos Sociais, o Estado_

Introdução
This book examines the MST’s thirty-year attempt to transform the Brazilian public school system. The Brazilian public school system is not a singular entity but can be understood as a state sphere that includes a combination of subnational governments, federal agencies, and public universities that govern formal educational provision in Brazil, from infant care to bachelor- and post-bachelor degree programs. For the past thirty years, MST activists have attempted to lead a process of education reform at every level of educational provision, through both contestation and negotiation. The MST’s explicit objective is to link the provision of education in Brazil to the movement’s broader political and economic goals. Through an analysis of the MST’s educational struggle, I make three broad arguments about the nature of social change, public education, and state-society relations: (1) Education and social change strategies are closely linked; (2) Social movements are collective actors both demanding state concessions and working within the state to govern these concessions; and, (3) There are multiple paths for social movement-led institutional change.

Metodologia ou Referencial Teórico
In this book, when I refer to the MST’s educational struggle I am specifically referring to their attempt to offer formal educational opportunities to their activists—schools and other educational programs that result in society-recognized degrees—that support the movement’s political and economic goals. For example, the MST’s broader goals include promoting schools participatory self-governance, collective agricultural production, agroecology, respect for rural culture, and continual political engagement occupying land and demanding agrarian reform. In order to support these goals, the movement advocates for students’ participatory governance of their own schools, involvement in collective work practices, the organization of cultural activities, engagement in agroecological farming, and participation in local political struggles. Transforming public education directly contributes to the movement’s social change goals by teaching students how to _prefigure_ alternative political and social practices in state institutions.

“Prefigurative politics” is a concept coined by political scientist Carl Boggs that refers to social movement’s attempt to create “local, collective small-scale organs of socialist democracy”
that help to build in the present the forms of social relations, decision-making, and culture that are the ultimate goal of political struggle (Boggs 1977:363). Similarly, the MST’s educational struggle is an attempt to prefigure in schools the decision-making processes, collective work practices, and cultural production that the movement’s leaders also promote in their communities. By exploring how education reform has become a critical part of the MST’s social struggle, this book brings together two audiences who often ignore each other: educational scholars, who assume that changing educational practice is sufficient in itself to catalyze broader social change, and social change theorists, who typically ignore the role of schools or see education primarily as a tool for reinforcing the social and political status quo.

By examining the particular case of the MST’s education reform efforts, I show why this new perspective on social movements is needed. I base my approach on Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and the recognition that civil society is an ambiguous sphere that both protects the state from attack and is a terrain on which resistance is organized. In the case of education, this means that schools are both institutions of social reproduction and terrains of dispute that can promote counterhegemonic goals. Although these institutional struggles may lead to the cooptation of social movement’s precious resources and energy, this outcome is not inevitable. Social movement’s attempt to transform the state, what sociologist Tianna Paschel (2016) refers to as social movements’ “long march through the institutions,” can directly increase movement’s internal capacity for future political and economic struggles. I refer to this process of institutional change as social movement-led participatory governance.

Resultados ou Desenvolvimento.

This book makes three theoretical contributions. (1) The book illustrates that public education can help catalyze social change, but only if reform is part of a broader vision for social transformation, thus rejecting the assumption that education reform is a technocratic process and arguing that education and social change strategies are intimately linked. (2) By examining this particular case of education reform and its relationship to social change, Occupying Schools, Occupying Land offers a new perspective on social movements as actors not simply demanding concessions from the state, but attempting to establish grassroots governance built on the foundation of these state concessions—a process that is both contentious and synergistic. (3) Through an analysis of how social movement-led participatory governance takes place, the book also identifies a key prerequisite and two key obstacles to the success of social movement-led institutional change. Not surprisingly, strong leadership-base relations are critical for this participatory governance to develop; less expected are the challenges that high-capacity states and technocratic governance pose to successful grassroots initiatives.

Together, these three arguments—that there is a close relationship between educational and social change goals, that social movements are collective actors both demanding state concessions and working within the state to govern these concessions, and that there are multiple paths and conditions for institutional change—offer insights about social movements, education, and participatory governance globally. Most significantly for education, this book illustrates why contesting the formal public school system, where youth and adults spend extended periods of time, is an extremely important component of social change. As Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (1984) suggested more than four decades ago, the educational system is one of the most important “ideological state apparatuses” of contemporary society, an institution that plays a critical role helping to cultivate the societal values of meritocracy, competition, and expertise.

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1 Paschel (2016) on this phrase from the German student activist Rudi Dutschke.
and helping to integrate people into the capitalist economy. One of the most important findings in this book is that social movements have the capacity to implement their own social, economic, and pedagogical proposals inside this same formal school system, even under contradictory conditions. Moreover, transforming the public school system does not simply mean teaching “progressive” theories or having more critical discussions with students about politics. Above all, transforming the public school system means allowing students to put into practice the type of society that they want to construct in the future. Progressive teachers who hold on to decision-making power or educational institutions that do not allow students to participate in financial oversight are not challenging the fundamental structure of schooling and society. If a grassroots movement hopes to implement more participatory forms of community self-governance, students have to be allowed to practice this self-governance in their schools, regardless of the conflicts or tensions in the process. If the goal of a movement is to transform the criminal justice system, then the public schools must be an experiment in cultivating student-led disciplinary collectives that focus on transformative justice. If the goal is to create collective economic enterprises and a solidarity economy, then students must experiment with developing these types of activities in their schools, learning how to participate in collective work processes.

Public schools, as institutions embedded in communities that are nominally open to parent and student involvement, are unique locations for prefiguring these practices in contemporary society. For the MST leadership, which proposes to construct a society of farmer-intellectuals engaging in agroecological food production, cooperative work practices, and participatory democracy, the implementation of agroecology in schools, the integration of manual and intellectual labor, and the promotion of student self-governance are extremely important pedagogical proposals. Similarly, other grassroots movements must think about the type of society they want to build in the future, and then structure the school system to support the construction of that world in the present.

Conclusão.

*Occupying Schools, Occupying Land* brings together two audiences who often ignore each other: educational scholars, who assume that changing educational practice is sufficient in itself to catalyze broader social change, and social change theorists, who typically ignore the role of schools or see education primarily as a tool for reinforcing the social and political status quo. Through an examination of the success and failure, potentials, constraints, and contradictions of this social movement-led education reform process in Brazil, *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land* offers insights into the relationship between education and social change, social movements and states, and the barriers and possibilities for similar reforms in democratic contexts throughout the Global South and Global North.
Referências.

Althusser, Luis  

Auyero, Javier, and Lauren Joseph  

Boggs, Carl Jr.  

Paschel, Tianna S.  