Landless Identity Politics and Pedagogics:
An Open-ended Project of Nomadic Becoming?¹

Michalis Kontopodis, University of Amsterdam
michaliskonto@googlemail.com

Preface: Looking to the Future

Figure 1 Looking to the Future. China Central Place in Beijing, 2011 (photo by the author).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

When a person decides to live in Beijing, work in Beijing, or to take a tour of the city, their decision is, in fact, synonymous with accepting and fulfilling a role in a drama; with hopes of

¹ I would like to thank very much my Brazilian colleagues M.J. Coracini, A.M. Carmagnani, M. Marscia, E. Foerste and G. M. Schutz-Foerste, the anonymous Landless Rural Workers who appear below and my Chinese anonymous friend, depicted in Figure 1: without the continuous support, inspiration and hospitality of these people the below presented work would not have been possible.
making himself or herself part of the future and is promise of excitement brought about by an urban life, more active than in any other place. This decision is also synonymous with moving into a public space in which the visitor only has the future, never the past. For any person, China Central Place is a symbol that represents the modern city of Beijing, the capital of China. (Inscription on Monument, China Central Place in Beijing, written originally in both English and Chinese—see Figure I.1)

I was very surprised when I saw the quote above in a newly built monument in the center of one of the newly built areas in Beijing, China, last summer. Although the monument claims that it concerns only the future, it is written with golden letters on marble thus imitating a quite traditional technique (non-Chinese by the way). If the same text had been presented with modern lighting techniques that would eventually be more appealing to what is the “future,” but then it would just look like a commercial. Still, could this be considered a monument at all? Usually monuments materialize past memories. This monument contradicts the very notion monumentum, from Latin monere that means to remind: It is a monument that deletes the past and witnesses only the future. It enacts “a public space in which the visitor only has the future, never the past.”

The informed reader could understand here the underlying opposition: This new Beijing central square has only a future, as opposed to Tiananmen Square that has been the central square since ages. Tiananmen Square cannot move to the future, as it is caught in past memories. Tiananmen Square is the place where the still-open-to-visitors Mao Zedong Mausoleum materializes the contradiction between the free market economy and the previous regime; it is also the place where the former imperial buildings materialize the long and contradictory history of the entity that is nowadays called “China.” What is even more important, as seen from my perspective is that among these memorial places, all evident traces of the protests and of the students’ assassinations that took place there in 1989 are the cautiously deleted while the memories and imaginations of “the coming tanks” are still there (cf. Agamben, 1993).

But why should one bother with all this history and the politics involved in it? The discourse on the monument continues:

Place yourself in China Central Place: you will be astonished by the perfect match between its sceneries, architecture and open spaces which are divided by the buildings. Every element

---

2 Gutman, Brown & Sodaro (2011) present a detailed account on memory and the future. For an investigation of how temporal relations are materialized, see the editorial of the special issue Materializing Times: From Memory to Imagination (Kontopodis, 2009).
echoes others. Even a small factor is designed for actual use in daily life. China Central Place is a complex project conveying an ideal about perfect and detailed designs, which cannot be reflected in any individual element. China Central Place is giving people who work, live or just visit here unparalleled enjoyment and a multitude of services. (Inscription on Monument, China Central Place in Beijing, written originally in both English and Chinese—see Figure I.1)

“China Central Place is giving people who work, live or just visit here unparalleled enjoyment and a multitude of services”—what else can one wish for oneself?

I was supposed to be one of those people who had access to the multitude of services, however, this did not seem very appealing to me. What can people do at a place without any history? It seemed to me that the only future that such perfectly designed spaces promise is the excitement of consuming: a “promise of excitement brought about by an urban life, more active than in any other place” (Inscription on Monument). This excitement is just personal, since there cannot be any sense of community without past memories.

And not only the past is here deleted—but also the present: Instead of “looking to” the multiple and heterogeneous pasts, presents and futures of the people living in Beijing, China, this square is “perfectly designed” as a non-place that offered the experience of non-time. If the names of the places were removed, the above quoted lines (which anyway were originally written in English, too) could have been written for similar central squares that are “perfectly designed” in Los Angeles, Berlin, São Paulo or Moscow. This indeed is global neoliberalism—a certain way to look to the future while not seeing anything else …

Neoliberalism

It has already been more than 15 years since Arjun Appadurai in his groundbreaking book Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (1996) described how even inhabitants of remote mountain villages in India dream of the life in New York and Hollywood. He argued that media images circulate throughout the world much easier than before, and

---

3 While discussing Figure 1, the local artist and friend depicted in Figure I.1 criticized most Western analyses about current China for reproducing negative stereotypes about China in reductive and simplified ways without rendering visible anything good. I would not like to reproduce such a simplified understanding here and would like to emphasize that my narration above has very little to do with China itself; it concerns global trends of doing future through deleting the past, which exist in this particular square but not everywhere in Beijing or in China. These global trends can also be found in many other places in Europe and North and South America as referred to above. I am very thankful to this local artist and friend for bringing this issue to my attention.
even if there is a person that might have never seen a film or a commercial, this person will have listened to narrations by migrants or their relatives about the life there. Appadurai described how people, information, images and capital flow from one place to the other to a greater extent than ever before thus turning the world into an interconnected whole.

When I visited for research purposes Guarani Indians in the region of Espírito Santo in Brazil 2 years ago, even if they lived in houses made of soil and wood without using any modern technologies, they took electricity from the one central street lamp just in order to be able to have their TVs and their antennas plugged in. The same was the case for all the other countryside communities around—even the Landless Rural Workers, whose radical movement I will refer to below. It has been in such places that I realized the validity of Appadurai’s analysis. These rural places seemed to be very near to the China Central Place described above—more than ever before.

One could say that the interconnected world that Appadurai described—or the Empire, to use another term proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004)—is mainly marked by two tendencies: (a) the desire to be successful and to consume—not to enjoy, share or create but to consume things, services, even people or immaterial goods and (b) the inability to be successful and access, appropriate and consume all those things, services, and goods (cf. Bauman, 2007). The more dazzling the commercials and other images of these goods become, the more excluded or marginalized feel the people who cannot access and consume these goods. This economic-societal crisis, which can be seen as intrinsic of capitalist economy, has recently severely affected even US, European Union and other advanced economies.

Identity politics usually takes two different forms in this frame: (a) deracination of any connection with the past and continuous re-inventing of the self so that it can flexibly and perfectly fit into the job-market and consume as much as possible; (b) nostalgia for the past which is often connected with nationalism, exclusion of otherness and gender inequality. Those tendencies mark a deeper, less apparent, ethical-political crisis i.e. a crisis of ethical-political principles (individualism over altruism, competition over solidarity, hostility over peace and collaboration, homogeneity over heterogeneity) that renders almost impossible any form of non-hierarchical collective organization. These conflictual tendencies are what in my

---

4 For more details, see Kontopodis, under review.

5 Ethical-political in the sense of the line of philosophy that connects Spinoza (1967/1994), Nietzsche (1885/2007), Deleuze & Guattari (1980/1987), and Braidotti (2006)—to mention only a few important works.
view can be called neoliberalism—an absolutely destructive process that pervades literally all domains of life across the most diverse places or contexts (cf. Kontopodis, 2012).

The question poses itself here, which can the alternatives to these destructive neoliberal politics be. A series of critical scholars have recently elaborated answers to this question. In my view identity politics is central for escaping neoliberal binary contradictions; the question is however: which kind of identity politics and how to organize it? To answer this question I will explore below how memory and identity politics is involved in imagining and pursuing futures that do not linearly follow from the past by taking the identity politics of the Landless Workers’ Movement as an empirical point of reference.

My empirical materials come from ethnographic surveys I have been engaged in, mostly in the area of Espírito Santo, over the past three years. My analysis is qualitative and interpretative. There is already much propaganda by different interest groups in favor of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement as well as by other interest groups against it. This is a polarization that I consciously try to avoid although I position myself in solidarity with social movements in general and with the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement in particular.

“Our Identity Project…”

**Extract 1**

1. **T1:** Bem, como eu falei com vocês: Quem aqui que já conhece o que é um acampamento? Well, as I have already told you: who is here who already knows what an encampment is?

2. **Students:** Eu.- Eu.- Eu …

3. **T1:** Já viram as barraquinhas? #Marcia# cê conhece Have you already seen the ((tarpaulin)) tents? #Marcia# do you know an acampamento?

4. acampamento? ^Não.

5. **St1:** [Eu não]

---

6 For an overview see Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos, 2008.
The scene presented above comes from a classroom activity that I observed during my ethnography at a Landless Rural Workers’ settlement in Espírito Santo three years ago. My access was enabled through professora Raquel, the main teacher (T1) leading the activity above. I have been introduced to professora Raquel through other university professors who have done research there and been very well accepted. The language spoken is Portuguese. I am not very advanced but can make myself understood to almost everyone and can also understand almost everything said.

We are at a small school. Primary schools at Landless Workers’ settlements usually have one or two mixed-age classes of children aged 5 to 13 (St), as is also the case in the school I refer to here. For the activity presented above, all of the children from the two

---

7 All names in this article have been anonymized in order to protect the people involved from unwanted publicity. This is also the reason the names of the settlements in which our ethnographic fieldwork took place are not revealed.

8 This analysis goes together with a short film and an online multimedia presentation, see (Kontopodis, 2011).

9 Being an interested colleague from Europe, I quickly gained access to most of the academics or independent scholars who have written about the Landless Movement, mainly, Erineu Foerste and Gerda M. Schütz-Foerste from the Federal University of Espírito Santo and Johannes Doll from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Isabela Camini (former researcher at the Landless Workers’ Movement’s own research unit). Through these colleagues, I gained access to teachers and various other Landless Workers who quickly became familiar with me, welcomed my sincere interest and solidarity and hosted me in their communities.

10 It is worth mentioning here that a big landowner previously owned the area where the action presented above
classes (older and younger) came together. Professora Raquel (T1) begins with a rhetorical question that aims to provoke the curiosity of the children and involve them in the teaching that follows. She refers to a contemporary encampment that exists not very far from the settlement where the children live in order to speak then about the first encampments and the broader history of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (“Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra” or “MST”).

**Continuing Extract 1**

10. **T1:** ^Então, nós vamos mostrar hoje pra vocês (.2) algumas fotos, <dos> d’ algumas

^OK, We are going to show you (2.) some photos

11. acampamentos, ^tá=á? \Acampamentos que nossas famílias passaaaram...

from some encampments, ^OK? \Encampments from which our families passed...

For this particular activity, professora Raquel does not use any printed books or materials that had been centrally produced. Instead, she brings her own family photos and refers to the Landless Movement as a whole by referring to the part of it that is already relevant for the children: the story of the settlement they live in, the stories of their families as enacted through the photos and the teacher’s narrations. Most photos depicted professora Raquel’s family or other people of the encampment (now settlement) in the different stages they went through before living at the place where we were then. A lot of photos, however, did not present persons but materialities—the tent in which they lived in the encampment; the first wall they constructed of what later became the house where they lived, the school, and so forth. Some other photos were from relatives or friends that participated in the central demonstrations of the Landless Movement.

took place. The revolted poor expelled him from the area during the first steps of the Landless Workers’ Movement. His house—the only building at the area in that time—became the school while all the Landless, and homeless, Workers still slept in tents they had constructed out of black nylon (tarpaulin). A few years later the local government built a proper school for the children of the settlement.

11 Even if the Landless Worker’s Movement was conceived from the very beginning as a single, centrally organized movement, one can find huge differences between the various Landless Worker’s settlements and encampments all over Brazil. They each have their own local history, population mix, geographical characteristics, and even differ in their ideological preferences, their relations to state representatives and institutions, and their association with the central Landless Worker’s leadership. Research materials from other regions were also collected for purposes of general comparison during my fieldwork but this chapter restricts itself to the study of the Landless Movement in Espírito Santo.
Taking the speech from her colleague, the other school teacher (T2), professora Clarisse explains to the children why this particular activity is important: “This is our identity project,” she says.

*Doing memory* goes here together with *doing identity*—which implies a feeling of belonging and a sense of responsibility, not for oneself but for the whole community, to which the children belong.  

---

12 For more details on the interrelation of doing pasts and futures and doing identity, see the special issue of *Outlines: Critical Practice Studies* (Kontopodis & Matera, 2010).
experience their parents or broader community members’ struggles, this past also belongs to
them and shapes their identity. Almost automatically, they are children of the Landless
Workers, that is, Landless Children—or *Sem Terrinha*, as children are officially called inside
the Landless Workers’ Movement, which literally means *small landless*. The teacher enacts a
collective past, which the children share—not in the sense of personal experience but in the
sense of collective memory. The teacher’s discourse of martyrdom, solidarity and success is a
discourse of collective responsibility and collective identity. One can seldom find such a
discourse in other Brazilian schools, which are increasingly oriented toward individual
success (and failure).

A recently edited book by Claudia Mitchell, Teresa Strong-Wilson, Kathleen Pithouse
and Susann Allnutt (2011) investigates the social and pedagogical relevance of memory
work—the conscious remembering and study of individual and shared memories, a process
that allows students to see their future as something that belongs to them and that they can
influence in some way for the better. This edited volume extends the work by the feminist
scholar Frigga Haug (1987, 1992) outside feminist research. Haug initiated memory work and
used it as a feminist research methodology that is used to study socialization within dominant
values that make up a particular culture of feminine orientation that can liberate, interrupt
hegemonic ways of seeing and knowing the world and lead to possible social transformation.

Niamh Stephenson and Dimitris Papadopoulos (2006) advanced Haug’s approach to
memory work so that it refers to quite different people (and not only women) who share
experiences of oppression, which might be unique but can at the same time entail similar
elements to others’ experiences—given that oppression is a broader characteristic of
nowadays’ neoliberal regimes. They introduced the term *sociability in the making* to define
the processual way in which collectivities that were not given in advance emerge through this
type of work. Stephenson and Papadopoulos (2006) emphasized that people can act together
without necessarily the one becoming more like the other.

The specific pedagogics in work here is called Pedagogia da Terra—**Pedagogics of
the Land** (cf. Foerste & Kontopodis, 2012, Kontopodis, Schütz-Foerste Margit & Foerste, in
print). Education here is regarded not only as essential for the Landless Workers so that they
could use ecological techniques for planting, fair strategies for trade or have their own doctors
in the settlements; but also the idea is to educate children in such a way that they collectively
participate in changing the world in which they live (cf. Stetsenko, 2008). A new type of
school has thus emerged that aims to generate a collective subject that transforms society and
fights for the further development of the Landless Movement, as well as for broader political-
economical transformation. But this future could be imagined only through remembering the local history of exploitation and struggle. It is not *educação* (general education) but *formação* (political education), as the Landless Workers would say, for it meant developing consciousness about their past exploitation, thus, developing another economy—not of exploitation but of solidarity (Foerste, Foerste-Schütz & Duarte-Schneider, 2008, Heredia, 2008).

In this same context, when one visits a Landless Workers’ settlement, one finds plenty of evidence of its history, in interior decoration, printed on T-shirts, represented by photos of massacres, written poems or CDs with Landless Workers’ music. The Landless Movement has a significant symbolic and discursive production, which involves the imaginary and manifests important aesthetic qualities. It highly values the arts and expresses itself in music, poetry and theatre. The movement considers arts to be mystical elements that bring together its members, are constitutive of the *Pedagogia da Terra* and make up part of the Landless Workers’ identity, as Roseli Caldart writes (2004). Personal photos, narrations, and works of art *mediate* the communication between the teachers and adult members of the community and the “Landless Children” and enable them to view reality, not in terms of potentiality (individual development toward a given end and history as continuity), but in terms of virtuality (i.e. collective fights for a different future, cf. Kontopodis, 2012, Kontopodis & Mascia, 2012).

**Solidarity**

What exactly is however to be or to be-come *landless*? The estimated 1.5 million marginalized urban or rural people, who have made up the Landless Workers’ Movement in the past 28 years, occupied lands that they intended to cultivate collectively in an ecological and directly democratic way. Landless Children in this context should occupy further lands so that the Landless Movement will always grow and there will always be enough land (which

---

13 The central administration of the Landless Workers’ Movement produces the movement’s own newspapers, journals, webpages, CDs and films.

14 Roseli Caldart is one of the main intellectual figures of the Landless Movement. She supported the movement from the very beginning, and although she had enjoyed an upper-middle-class urban lifestyle, she chose to become a Landless Worker and live at a settlement many years ago.

15 The Landless Movement was officially founded during the 1st Meeting of the Landless Rural Workers in Cascavel, Paraná, in 1984. For a quick overview of historical information on the Landless Movement and its early steps before 1984, see: [http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=history](http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=history) (Date of access: 2012-04-06).
should not be divided between increasing family members). The main quest of the Landless Movement from the very beginning has been the Brazilian agrarian reform—a quest that remains until today (Tavares, 2009).

Continuous occupations, displacements, encampments, settlements, resettlements, and a series of demonstrations and violent confrontations with police marked the transitions from individuals to imagined communities, from imagined communities to collectivities, and from collectivities to place-based communities, as Hannah Wittman (2005) writes. In the special issue of the Landless Workers’ own newspaper commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Landless Movement, one can read a heroic historical narrative that refers to a series of events, among others this Eldorado dos Carajás massacre where 19 Landless Workers were gunned down dead and another 69 wounded by police while they were blocking a state road in Pará on April 17, 1996. Another 13,000 Landless Workers marched from Goiânia to Brasilia (more than 200 kilometers) in 2005 (Jornal Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, 2009).

The history of the Landless Movement is a yet unwritten and open-ended story of solidarity:

**Extract 2**

1. **St2**: Ah tia, quando vocês estavam nas barracas, vocês passaram ^fome?
   
   *Did you experience ^hunger when you were living in barracks?*

2. **T1**: Ah, ela está perguntando se a gente, quando acampado, passou fo=ome
   
   *Ah, you ask, you would like to learn, if we experienced hu=unger when we were living in encampments*

3. Às vezes ficava muito difícil, a alimentação ficava pouquinho. A gente
   
   *Sometimes, we had difficulties, the food was very little, we didn’t have,*

4. quase não tinha (alimentação). Mas fome não passamos ^nã=ão! Que tinha
   
   *any (food), but hunger we didn’t experience, ^n-o=, because there was ^m* much

5. ^muita solidariedade! Quando uma família não tinha, pegava uma lata de óleo, e a
   
   *solidarity. If a family did not have enough to eat, we had, for example, a bottle*

6. gente dividia o óleo na ^colher, dava duas, três colheres para cada família, era a
   
   *of oil, and the people divided it in ^spoons, there were two or three spoons for*

7. conta de colocar na panela [...] As crianças eram as que mais comiam no
each family just to put in the pan. The children received the most food of the

8. acampamento! Porque todo mundo levava ^leite, ^fruta. Às vezes falta=ava

encampment, all the people brought ^milk, ^fruits, sometimes, we la=acked

9. o básico, porque quem dá a "cesta básica" é o INCRA (Instituto Nacional de

basic things, because the "basic food basket" was (from) the National

10. Colonização e Reforma Agrária) e às vezes atrasa=ava,

Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform and sometimes it dela=ayed,

11. e as famílias ficavam com um pouco de dificuldade, mas a gente dividia uma(s)

and the families had some difficulties, but the people shared everything

12. com as outras ^tudo o que a gente tinha...

with each other, ^everything that they had...

(Transcript from video-recording by the author at a Landless Workers’ School in Espírito Santo, transcribed and translated from Portuguese by the author, Achilles Delari Jr. & Netto Berenchtein)

The presentation by the teachers (see also extract 1 above), was detailed and very vivid and captured deeply the interest of the children. Professora Raquel (T1) spoke about herself and other people who the children know and who live at the settlement struggling against police violence, detrimental life conditions, and practical and political difficulties and slowly managing to create the settlement where they live now. When the time came for questions, the first question by Ana (St2), one of the children, arose: “Did you experience hunger when you were living in barracks?” This question—among other similar ones that were posed—is quite simple in the sense that it concerns the practical details around the first steps of the movement. On the other hand, however, it expressed the deep affectivity that Ana felt toward professora Raquel herself and the other people who fought for what she now enjoys. We see how Ana made sense out of the teachers’ discourse being concerned and co-experiencing the drama of her predecessors.

Professora Raquel repeats the question in a dialogical way and takes it as an opportunity to explain in vivid details how solidarity has been the solution to the severe difficulties that the Landless Workers faced in that time: “If a family did not have enough to eat, we had, for example, a bottle of oil, and the people divided it in ^spoons, there were two or three spoons for each family just to put in the pan” (lines 5–7). The teacher also emphasizes that the children were taken special care of, and they received the most food of
the encampment while “people shared everything with each other, everything that they had…” (lines 11–12). These practical details enable children to move from their concrete everyday knowledge into a more abstract discourse about solidarity and identity—that again are not presented as abstract ethical principles but as dramatically experienced categories (cf. Veresov, 2010).

Emotions play here an important role because they bring different people to act together, thus, transforming themselves as well as the social and societal relations in which they are embedded. Emotions establish the “conatus,” the strength to deal with reality in acting with others and not alone (Liberali & Fuga, 2007). It is important however to emphasize that acting together does not necessarily presuppose or imply any group homogeneity. A collaborative transformation does not that much regard quantitative aspects (expansion of the spaces in which students move, or different organization of their time for studying) as much it concerns qualitative changes in the ways students speak, think, feel, reflect, remember collective pasts and imagine collective futures. Fernanda Liberali (2008) suggests the term creative chain of activities to refer to collaborative activities that produce new meanings that will be, afterward, shared with other new partners and lead to new collaborative activities. As a result of these new collaborative activities, still more new meanings are produced, which carry some of the aspects created in the first activity. “Similarly, some of the partners from the second activity, when engaged in a third activity, follow the same path,” thus, leading to new ways of being in the world, acting in the world and further transforming it (Liberali, 2008: 10). This is indeed a drama with an unpredictable end, in terms of Lev S. Vygotsky (1929/2005), a process that involves emerging meanings and senses, and the actualization of virtual relations.¹⁶

By participating in such classroom activities, children could view themselves not as isolated individuals but as part of a history of creating discontinuity with the colonial Brazilian past—a history that has recently begun to be written and still continues. The historicity of professora Raquel’s narration is very concrete and at the same time abstract: It is the history of those children’s parents or neighbors and at the same time the history of colonialism and of the fight for agrarian reform. It thus opens space not only for the children to view themselves from a meta-perspective but also to directly participate in the making of history.

¹⁶ As Hardt & Negri write, “by the virtual we understand the set of powers to act (being, loving, transforming, creating) that reside in the multitude” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 357) For a further elaboration of the concept of virtuality and politics see also: Kontopodis, 2012.
“We Remember These Times Sometimes with Old Comrades and We Cry”

Extract 3

It is evening, quite warm and we sit outside. I ask all possible questions about my research field and João brings a box full of photos that have not been ordered. Maria, his wife, and Fernanda their daughter, also exit the house, come to the yard and sit next to me. I pick a few photos, and slowly view the one after the other. Maria explains me what or who each photo depicts. Most photos depicted the family or other people of the encampment (now settlement) in the different stages they went through before living as Landless Workers at the place where we were now. Really enthusiastic and interested I constantly ask questions.

João is happy with my interest, but tries to find just two photos, two particular photos among the many others in the box. “Yes—there they are!” he says with enthusiasm and shows the photos to me. As he explains, the one has been taken recently: it depicts the hill with all its trees and plants, where João and Maria now work. The other photo depicts exactly the same location 15 years ago. I am impressed. Rocks and soil cover the hill and there is only one tree. “In that time,” João explains to me, “nobody cultivated anything here. No water or irrigation existed. We first constructed the lake you saw before to hold the rainwater, then planted the trees and now… you see?” He is so happy to have found the photos and so happy to share his memories and experience with me. “We remember these times sometimes with old comrades and we cry,” João tells me in front of the many photos on the dinner table. “It is not that difficult now for the new land occupiers, they could never imagine how hard these times were…”

(Fieldnotes translated partially from Portuguese by the author)

What lies behind the utterance, “we remember these incidents some times with all comrades and cry”? What could in the case of a marginalized young person have been seen as a personal crisis of “failing” to make a living, becomes here a lived through collective history that entails dramatic moments of struggle, solidarity, and collaboration, sharing of desires, ideas and goods, as well as confrontation with police and legal authorities. João was almost 20 years old when he joined an encampment of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement, in Brazil, Espírito Santo around 1990, that is, 20 years before I met him.17

Figure 2. Landless Rural Workers’ fields around 1993 (photo by João [pseudonym] and the author).

Although João had some basic education and owned some small property in a nearby village, most people at the Landless Workers’ encampment belonged to the poorest part of the Brazilian population, that is, the people who did not own anything at all, had almost no school education and hardly managed to earn their everyday bread. In this area most people had experienced exploitation by landlords who reimbursed them for more than 12 hours of work per day at eucalyptus plantations with just the amount to buy a leaf of bread and—sometimes—a can of condensed milk. Others had been homeless for weeks in nearby towns and survived by collecting plastic bottles and metal cans from the streets and selling them—again—for a piece of bread. Racism due to skin color and social origin had also been a common experience for almost everybody.

João engaged in everyday discussions, participated in collectively facing all possible emerging difficulties, enjoyed living together with others and joined general assemblies sometimes every day and other times once or twice per week. With the other landless people

---

Movement under the Lula government from 2003-2005. The study presented here takes place in 2010-2012 and is situated after this whole history presented by Pizetta & Souza.
he was speaking about a collective past of oppression and exploitation and of their present poverty as something that could have been different if no exploitation were there. This was an intensive process of *collaborative transformation* and *sociability in the making*. Interrupting the continuous becoming of the past into the present and the future and changing the route of the history was then at the same time a personal and a collective *mediating activity*, which was dramatic and led to previously unimaginable all-level outcomes. This transformation took place not only on the symbolic level but also entailed communicative, performative and material-corporeal action.

Figure 3. Landless Rural Workers’ fields around 2000 (photo by João [pseudonym] and the author, same location as in Picture 5, marked by the tree on the right, with much more vegetation all over the landscape).

One could say that the Landless Workers’ Movement has already reached much more than one could ever have imagined given the colonial and capitalist history of Brazil and of Latin America in general (Branford & Rocha, 2002). Although significant issues need still to be resolved, now, after 27 years, the Brazilian government is friendlier toward the movement, processes of negotiation have been established and at least a minimum of quality of life is
The Landless Worker’s Movement led also the organization of La Via Campesina in Latin America in 1992, which developed into a translational movement from the four continents in 1993 in Mons, Belgium. La Via Campesina is a transnational movement which brings together millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world. It defends small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. It strongly opposes corporate driven agriculture and transnational companies that are destroying people and nature. La Via Campesina comprises currently about 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas and altogether represents more than 200 million farmers.

Instead of an Epilogue: Nomadic Becoming

At a first glance the above-presented narration might enact an almost exotic, ideal space that seems far away from the Chinese Central Place in Beijing, the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, the Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California and so many other places around the world where neoliberal consumerism is proclaimed the main purpose of life. A closer look to the everydayness of the Landless Workers reveals however that they are part of the contemporary world and often want to consume more goods and more services in order for them not to feel and not to be perceived as ‘second category’ citizens. The identity politics described above

18 For example, the local government of Espírito Santo funded construction materials that the Landless Workers used to build houses and artificial lakes in the settlements. It also financed a new school building and some infrastructure. Nowadays, local and central governments pay the Landless teachers’ salaries. In Espirito Santo, the state is responsible for removing the collected rubbish from the settlements/encampments and processing it. Public hospitals are responsible for sending an ambulance to settlements/encampments in case of emergency. Free public transportation is organized for the students who visit schools outside the settlements/encampments. Still no agrarian reform has taken place and no new settlements have been organized since the Workers’ Party took the power (which is of course a indication of the Party’s reluctance to pursue a radical politics). There are also a lot of differences among the different states, and the situation is more difficult in the Brazilian Northeast where there is also a tendency toward drought (cf. Sigaud, 2008). Local governments there have fewer resources to support the inhabitants of the settlements in their first steps. The support by local governments depends also on the level of corruption of the politicians involved, as well as on the movement’s acceptance on the local level.

19 What can be seen as an exception but still a worst version of the consumerist tendency within the Landless Movement was that a few corrupt directors appropriated common money for private purposes—a fact that has largely been criticized by Brazilian media, and raised strong polemics against the Landless Movement. Sometimes Landless Workers also have borrowed money from local banks but have not managed to pay back
cannot then be perceived as a closed or stable project; it is per definition dynamic, contradictory and open-ended. Landless identity politics is a never-ending endeavor to move beyond given possibilities and create new ways of being and becoming. This movement is clearly difficult; it concerns not only the Landless Rural Workers in Brazil but also broader socio-economic constellations as well as refers to a new kind of broader ethical-politics.

How to remember which past? How to imagine which future? Should the Landless Workers after they are given land settle down, cultivate their small properties and enjoy some middle-class style of life or should they continue fighting for the present and future of other landless people—including in this category all possible people who suffer from power relations in Brazil and all over the world (indigenous, urban homeless, war refugees, HIV patients who do not have access to medication etc.)? How can such a movement be organized, how can Landless Workers from the Brazilian countryside qualitatively advance their landless identity politics?

In the case of the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement, the past was “reborn,” that is, it was remembered as the past of colonial and imperialist appropriation of land, and in turn, the future was seen not as a continuation of this past but as something radically different—and still unpredictable and open. But nomadic or landless identity politics is not preserving any past with nostalgia—not even the past of fighting for the rights of that specific social group’s rights. Landless identity politics implies nomadic collective becoming i.e. that history is endlessly re-written as seen from the perspective of a coming community (Agampen, 1993).

The nomad, writes Rosi Braidotti, does not stand for “homelessness” (i.e. complete detachment from all roots) nor “compulsive displacement” (with its attendant longing for home), but rather for “the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity” (Braidotti, 1994: 22). Braidotti argues that the nomad is a “form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity” (23). The way is thus open

20 The concept of becoming is central here (cf. Braidotti, 2002). One could think in this respect also of Alfred N. Whitehead’s process philosophy (Whitehead, 1929/1978), Henri Bergson’s concept of virtuality (Bergson, 1896/1991), or Gabriel Tarde’s theory of invention, imitation and opposition (Tarde, 1897/1999). Of course, emphasizing the development toward the unknown does not imply an agreement with liberal or neoliberal flexibility. The explanation by the feminist scholar Donna Haraway is quite sharp: “Complexity, heterogeneity, specific positioning, and power-charged difference are not the same thing as liberal pluralism. Experience is a semiosis, an embodying of meanings [...]. The politics of difference that feminists need to articulate must be
for the further development and expansion of landless identity politics. Nomadic becoming should be understood as an open-ended project, that is, as an eternal return from subjective experiencing to fighting for the common and back—a movement that constantly escapes power relations. The Landless Workers’ Movement can inspire all of us to further move in such a direction and it will be a long and eventful way…

References


rooted in a politics of experience that searches for specificity, heterogeneity, and connection through struggle, not through psychologistic, liberal appeals to each her own endless difference. Feminism is collective; and difference is political, that is, about power, accountability and hope. Experience, like difference, is about contradictory and necessary connection” (Haraway, 1991: 109).


