

REBECCA TARLAU

2. SOCIAL MOVEMENT-LED DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Case of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement

It was July 9, 2011, and I was heading to interview Mayor Eduardo Coutinho of the municipality of Água Preta, in the sugar cane region of Pernambuco. This municipality is one of the strong holds of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), a large agrarian social movement that occupies land in the region and tries to force the government to redistribute this land to poor landless workers. Over the previous thirty years, MST activists have also developed a range of educational proposals for the public school system that support their broader political and economic struggle. These pedagogies include collective teacher planning, the incorporation of students and parents in the democratic governance of the school, the integration of manual and intellectual labor, and connecting the curriculum to the rural reality of the students and local political struggles. I wanted to interview Eduardo because he was one of the many elected officials throughout the country that was allowing the movement to participate directly in educational governance and incorporate these pedagogies in the schools. Eduardo had recently joined the left-leaning Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). He was from an elite family that had been in power in the region for decades with different political affiliations. Similarly to other elite families, the Coutinho family's power was derived from their land, as Eduardo's grandfather had been the owner of the largest sugar plantation in the region. Thus, Eduardo's support of the MST seemed at odds with his economic interests.

After miles of driving on almost-impassable muddy roads we pulled up to his plantation, where a group of people was waiting. I was escorted to Eduardo's office and he asked me to have a seat while he "attended to the people outside." The first woman came in and told a story about someone sick in her family, asking if Eduardo could help. Eduardo gave her 50 *reais* [in 2011 US\$25], saying to the woman, "It is only a little, but it is from the heart, so you can buy some groceries." Then, two more men came inside. The first told Eduardo that he had walked barefoot for four hours to arrive there. After the two men left the office, Eduardo asked his assistant to give each of the men 30 *reais*. Eduardo turned to me, "I know that it should not happen this way, but I have to help people when I can."¹ In the context of a decentralized political system, where mayors have significant economic and political power, citizens that are aligned with Eduardo look to him for material survival.

After the visitors had left, Eduardo and I jumped into a two-hour interview about municipal politics, the regional economy, and the MST. Eduardo explained, “My relationship with the MST began a year after my election ... I became closer to the movement, I supported MST marches, meetings of *sem terrinha* [little landless children].” Eduardo seemed open to the MST’s presence in his municipality, and even supported their participation in the municipal public school system. However, when I pushed him on the issue, asking him why he funded a movement that critiques large land estates, he replied: “I am the mayor, I try to attend to everyone’s demands ... I have always had a good dialogue with the MST. Why shouldn’t I support a meeting of MST youth? *I attend to the needs of the Evangelical church, the soccer team, a guy who wants to go to the beach. Why not fund a plenary of MST youth?* [emphasis added]” Although Eduardo supports the MST’s efforts to increase local democratic participation in the schools – and is able to support them due to the decentralized educational context – these relationships are also clearly part of his strategy for maintaining political power in the municipality.

Across Brazil, municipal, state, and federal government officials are devolving educational responsibilities to local MST leaders to develop curricula support teachers, design new educational practices, and facilitate communities’ democratic participation in public schools. In many locations like Água Preta, conservative mayors allow this to happen because the benefits of social movement participation seem to outweigh the potential conflicts that might arise if this help is rejected. As another local mayor in Pernambuco explained, “After I took power, the MST became part of the administration – they helped to run the government. They began to make a lot of suggestions about education, and we invited them to participate ... It was very practical. The MST education collective had already been working in the municipality for a long time.” For these mayors, the MST’s participation in public schools seems to be a “give-away,” both avoiding conflicts and helping the schools function more efficiently. The pedagogies the MST implements, which promote collective work practices, democratic participatory governance, and political struggle, do not seem to be immediately threatening.

How do we reconcile this tension between an obvious attempt for co-optation within a decentralized political system, and the possible presence of what has been called empowered participatory governance (Fung and Wright 2003)? In this chapter I argue that decentralization does not necessarily lead to more bottom-up democracy at the local level. To the contrary, given the extreme economic and social inequalities within communities, decentralization often leads to power becoming even more concentrated in the hands of economic and political elites. However, if there is a collective effort by an organized group with a clear vision for how to expand democratic participation, decentralization can also offer an *opportunity* for these movements to claim space within the state to promote local governance.