Cybele Kotonias

October 10, 2006

A Milton Analysis of the MST in Brazil

The evidence regarding the MST put forth by Gabriel Ondetti’s article “Repression, Opportunity, and Protest: Explaining the Takeoff of Brazil’s Landless Movement” supports Alexa Milton’s claim that while political opportunity influences social movements, social movements themselves may also profoundly influence the state of political opportunity. While the implications of his article are to demonstrate the manner in which state repression can play a role in actually increasing protest, Ondetti’s evidence lends itself to another purpose as well. In his discussion of the MST in Brazil, Ondetti demonstrates the fact that while political opportunity created by the restructuring of the agricultural sector and a move towards a more democratic government aided in a rise in land occupations, the specific events which took place at Eldorado do Carajás and Corumbiara greatly affected the climate of political opportunity in Brazil. Thus Milton’s argument is demonstrated through Ondetti’s evidence in the fact that while structure created some opportunity, specific actions of the MST led to changes in the structure of political opportunity in Brazil.

 In his discussion of restructuring of the agrarian sector and a move towards a more democratically led government, Ondetti demonstrates the fashion in which the larger structure created opportunity for the MST. In the restructuring of the agrarian sector, many rural workers lost jobs and thus the idea of land reform became much more popular. At the same time, the promise of a more democratic government led to heightened government accountability, causing an all around move towards a political structure more likely to respond to the MST’s actions.

Through his discussion on the massacres at Corumbiara and Eldorado do Carajás, Ondetti demonstrates the manner in which specific social movements also had a considerable impact on the overall structure in Brazil. These two events attracted a great deal of attention from the general public, causing the government to become accountable for its actions in relation to the landless movement. Thus the overall structure was forced to change in reaction to the actions of a specific social movement, demonstrating the fact that while overall structure may create opportunity for social movements, movements themselves can in turn deeply impact the overall structure.

 A seemingly contradictory point comes from the fact that, through MST documents dating prior to the Corumbiara massacre, it is apparent that the movement recognized an opening in political opportunity which it could readily take advantage of. This indicates that the movements were caused and shaped by the structural changes at hand, and thus were a product of the context rather than an important actor. While this may be true, it does not counteract the fact that in turn, these movements had an immense effect on political opportunity. While the actions may have been taking in response to the political opportunity at hand, had they not been taken the government would not have felt as threatened by the movement nor would the movement have gained such popular support. Another argument which can be made is that the repressive tactics of the government spurred the overall change in political opportunity, rather than the movement itself. In response to this I present the fact that the movement took advantage of the political opportunity at hand, taking actions which caused the police to respond in the manner which they did. Thus the social movement itself played the role of the actor, and the repressive actions of the police came as a response to this action.

As Milton professed in her thesis based on the Argentinean factory takeover movement, structural changes can shape movements, while at the same time movements are able to have profound effect on the overall structure. Ondetti’s article demonstrates that while Milton applied her claim in the context of the factory takeovers in Argentina, her concept holds true across other social movements as well.