


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Communication between the Militants of the ‘8 October’ Revolutionary Movement and the Peasants of Brotas de Macaúbas, Bahia, Brazil (1969–71)

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## Abstract

During the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–85), the Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (‘8 October’ Revolutionary Movement, MR-8) attempted to mobilise peasants for its revolutionary project. This article analyses communication between MR-8 militants and peasants in Brotas de Macaúbas, Bahia. Based on interviews and document analysis, it documents the central role of José Campos Barreto (Zequinha) as a leader in this political process. The son of a local family, Zequinha enjoyed the respect of peasants and relied on his knowledge of their lives to better communicate with them. While the MR-8 made some inroads with peasants, its work in the region was prematurely ended when agents of the state descended on Brotas to arrest Carlos Lamarca, one of the dictatorship’s most wanted militants.

**Keywords:** communication; peasants; revolutionary organisations; dictatorship

## Introduction

Due to the confluence of Cold War geopolitical disputes and an internal political and economic crisis, Brazil underwent a military coup in 1964, justified by an alleged ‘communist threat’. Given the closure of democratic channels of popular participation, many left-wing militants began to see armed struggle as the only possible way to politically oppose the dictatorship. However, there was little mass engagement in armed struggle, because of the difficulties of mobilising supporters while operating clandestinely and the efficacy of anti-communist discourse.<sup>1</sup>

The main attempt to form rural guerrilla groups in Brazil during the military dictatorship of 1964–85 was that of the Partido Comunista do Brasil

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Aarão Reis Filho, *A revolução faltou ao encontro: Os comunistas no Brasil* (São Paulo: Braziliense, 1990).

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(Communist Party of Brazil, PCdoB),<sup>2</sup> which had been sending militants to the Araguaia region in northern Brazil since 1967. Although many aspects of PCdoB activity have yet to be studied, there is an extensive literature that investigates this campaign.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I analyse a more ephemeral revolutionary attempt by a smaller group of militants. The Movimento Revolucionário Oito de Outubro ('8 October' Revolutionary Movement, MR-8) tried to mobilise a group of peasants in Brotas de Macaúbas (hereafter Brotas), in the hinterland of Bahia, to form a rural guerrilla group. Although there are already studies on the MR-8, most of this work focuses on the repression suffered by the militants.<sup>4</sup> My article sheds light on the interactions between militants and peasants, an aspect that has not been explored in detail within the existing literature.

Rural areas were critical for armed confrontation in several important revolutions of the twentieth century, especially the Russian (1917), the Chinese (1949) and the Cuban (1959). Influenced by these political events, leaders of many Brazilian left-wing organisations of the late 1960s and early 1970s established a strategy of political struggle that sought to start their revolution in the countryside, mobilising peasants to join them. Although the armed struggle against the Brazilian dictatorship took place mainly in cities, most organisations envisioned the countryside in their political strategies as the ideal geographic space for the revolution to begin through rural guerrilla groups.

Given this context, the following questions guided my work: 1) What were the main characteristics of militant–peasant communication? 2) What strategies did the militants use to gain the trust of the peasants? 3) What did the militants tell the peasants, and how? 4) How did the peasants receive and respond to the militants' messages? 5) What are the conditions that led to peasant political engagement? The construction of these research questions was inspired by Eric Wolf's study of the peasant wars of the twentieth century:

<sup>2</sup>The PCdoB was founded in 1962 as a break-away faction of the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party, PCB). The latter was founded in 1922 under the name Partido Comunista, Seção Brasileira da Internacional Comunista (Brazilian Section of the Communist International, PC-SBIC), changing its name later to Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil, PCB) and then, in 1961, to Partido Comunista Brasileiro, keeping the same abbreviation, PCB. The PCdoB was founded by militants who disagreed with this and other changes taking place in the party: at the time the PCB followed a reformist agenda and advocated for an alliance with the bourgeoisie, considered 'progressive'; the PCdoB believed the party should carry out revolution through armed struggle, without the bourgeoisie. See Dulce Chaves Pandolfi, *Camaradas e companheiros: História e memória do PCB* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Palmério Dória *et al.*, *A guerrilha do Araguaia* (São Paulo: Alfa-Ômega, 1978); Romualdo Pessoa Campos Filho, *Guerrilha do Araguaia: A esquerda em armas* (São Paulo: Fundação Maurício Grabois/Editora Anita Garibaldi, 2012); Patricia Sposito Mechi, *Os protagonistas do Araguaia: Trajetórias, representações e práticas de camponeses, militantes e militares na guerrilha* (Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional, 2015); Wellington Sampaio da Silva, 'A guerra silenciada: Memória histórica dos moradores do Bico do Papagaio sobre a Guerrilha do Araguaia', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidade Federal da Paraíba, 2008.

<sup>4</sup>Emiliano José and Oldack de Miranda, *Lamarca: O capitão da guerrilha* (São Paulo: Global, 2015); Sandra Regina Barbosa da Silva Souza, *Ousar lutar, ousar vencer: Histórias da luta armada em Salvador (1969–1971)* (Salvador: Edufba, 2013); Sandra R. B. Silva Souza and Taylan Santana Santos, 'Zequinha, Lamarca e a revolução: Vozes e imagens marcadas no chão do sertão da Bahia (1969–1971)', in Geovani de Jesus Silva *et al.* (eds.), *Estudos culturais: Diálogos entre cultura e educação* (Jundiaí: Paco Editorial, 2018), pp. 155–205.

Who is it, then, that speaks to the peasant and what is it that they communicate which moves the peasant to violent political action? Peasants often harbor a deep sense of injustice, but this sense of injustice must be given shape and expression in organization before it can become active on the political scene; and it is obvious that not every callow agitator will find a welcome hearing in village circles traditionally suspicious of outsiders, especially when they come from the city. What circumstances and what sets of people will prove propitious to the establishment of such communication?<sup>5</sup>

Paulo Freire provides the basis of my reflection on communication between militants and peasants. A Brazilian educator, Freire contended that revolutionary processes should happen through horizontal and emancipatory forms of political mobilisation and popular education and he therefore advanced the theory of 'dialogical action', according to which liberation from various forms of oppression occurs only if people question the reality in which they live. Freire proposed that communication with the masses was not only a stage of revolution, but the very 'essence of revolutionary action'.<sup>6</sup>

To carry out this research, I analysed documents written by the armed forces and the MR-8, as well as testimonials of former MR-8 militants who agreed to give interviews either to other researchers or to me. My approach to them was facilitated by my commitment to human rights advocacy in the context of transitional justice in Brazil. The interviewees helped me to get in touch with residents of Brotas, where I carried out two ten-day field trips in February 2017 and September 2018, conducting interviews and informal conversations with about 20 peasants and other residents who were directly or indirectly involved. They represent approximately 50 per cent of those who interacted with the MR-8 militants and who are still alive.

The article places special attention on the testimonials of Olderico Barreto,<sup>7</sup> who was involved in MR-8's Brotas group encouraged by his brother José Campos Barreto (the latter, better known as Zequinha, was the main leader of the MR-8 in Brotas; he was killed by the army in 1971); João Lopes Salgado, a member of the MR-8's national board, originally from south-east Brazil and a frequent visitor to Brotas; Edelzuita Pacheco da Silva, a close friend of the Barreto family and spouse of a peasant who joined the MR-8's Brotas group; and Euval Rosa Campos, a resident of the urban area of Brotas and a cousin of Zequinha's who also joined the group. While I developed a relationship of trust with some of these interviewees, others did not agree to record interviews or avoided engaging in conversations about the MR-8 in the region. Because the memory of the dictatorship is still alive among locals, many of them feared some sort of retaliation.

The article begins with a historical overview of the establishment of the MR-8 and its understanding of the Brazilian peasantry. It then analyses how militants

<sup>5</sup>Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>6</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do oprimido* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2018 [1968]); English translation by Myra Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 135, note 10.

<sup>7</sup>Olderico is one of the most prominent figures in terms of survivors, as he was part of the group that MR-8 set up. He was arrested and tortured. He currently contributes to raising awareness of the memory of the work MR-8 did and the repression it underwent.

led by Zequinha approached the population of Brotas and the region, the political work they carried out and the peasants' response to it, the consequences of the arrival in the area of Carlos Lamarca (one of the dictatorship's most wanted militants) and, finally, the military repression of the MR-8's campaign.

### The MR-8 and its Understanding of the Brazilian Peasantry

The name MR-8 has been used by two different groups consecutively, giving rise to what are known as the 'first' and 'second' MR-8. In practice, both MR-8 groups had splintered off from the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party, PCB).<sup>8</sup> Many partisans left the party in the early years of the dictatorship because they considered the PCB to be too 'pacifist' and 'reformist'.<sup>9</sup>

The 'first MR-8' was one of the first armed communist organisations; it was dismantled by the Brazilian government in 1969. Its defeat generated media headlines, publicising the military's strength in eliminating what was considered a subversive organisation.<sup>10</sup> Soon thereafter, the Dissidência Comunista da Guanabara (Communist Faction of Guanabara, DI-GB, which would become the 'second MR-8'),<sup>11</sup> carried out its first armed action (a bank robbery). In response to media reports it released a statement claiming responsibility for the robbery under the name MR-8, undoing the political gain that the military had achieved with the dismantling of the 'first MR-8'. In this article, 'MR-8' refers to the 'second MR-8', which lasted longer, survived the dictatorship and is the better-known group. The new MR-8 espoused a combination of armed and unarmed action. Its militants believed that armed struggle should be based on guerrilla groups and efforts to raise the awareness of the masses, a condition for its success.<sup>12</sup>

In a document from September 1970,<sup>13</sup> the MR-8 addressed the social problems faced by Brazil's rural population, problems that intensified the exodus from the countryside in the 1960s. It indicated that the MR-8 was planning to start a rural guerrilla campaign in 1972, demonstrating how optimistic militants were in their own capacity to mobilise enough peasants to be able to start the revolution in only two years. Such overconfidence may be explained by a characteristic of Marxism–Leninism pointed out by Daniel A. Reis, i.e. belief in the inevitability

<sup>8</sup>See note 2.

<sup>9</sup>Thomaz Joezer Herler, 'Formação e trajetória do primeiro MR-8: Possibilidades e limites de construção de uma vanguarda revolucionária político-militar (1964–1969)', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná, 2015. Translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>10</sup>Desbaratada célula de subversivos: 4 foragidos', *O Estado de São Paulo*, 27 July 1969, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>'Guanabara' refers to the then Estado da Guanabara, which included the city of Rio de Janeiro. The DI-GB was the most prominent of several factions of the PCB (see note 2) that were being formed in the early 1960s by – mostly – university students who opposed the party's leadership. The DI-GB was known originally as Dissidência Universitária da Guanabara (University Faction of Guanabara). See Izabel Priscila Pimentel da Silva, 'Os filhos rebeldes de um velho camarada: A Dissidência Comunista da Guanabara (1964–1969)', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidade Federal Fluminense, 2009, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup>Higor Codarin Nascimento, 'A arma da crítica e a crítica das armas: A trajetória do Movimento Revolucionário Oito de Outubro (DI-GB/MR-8) na luta armada contra a ditadura civil–militar brasileira (1969–1972)', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>MR-8, 'Tribuna de debates', Sept. 1970, Centro de Documentação da Universidade Estadual de São Paulo, Coleção Arquivo Storico del Movimento Operaio Brasileiro, Box 10, 03.31.3.

of revolution as something immanent in the historical process: 'Hence the belief that, despite setbacks, the revolutionary process would always be, in historical terms, advancing.'<sup>14</sup> The MR-8 document also outlined the organisation's approach to mobilising rural supporters, calling for militants to insert themselves into farms owned by peasants who were already sympathetic to the organisation, and 'to grab the hoe handle with determination ... and extreme sacrifice', in order to progressively expand its political base.<sup>15</sup>

João Lopes Salgado, who co-authored the 1970 document, provided the following comments with regard to the organisation's revolutionary strategy:

All the organisations that chose the path of armed struggle had the countryside as their objective because we thought that the armed struggle would consolidate itself in the countryside. We had this vision that peasants were more susceptible to armed engagement ... that peasants were the best social class for the armed struggle ... and that great victories against the armed forces would be possible in the forests, in the most inhospitable regions.<sup>16</sup>

In September 1969, in a joint mission with the Ação Libertadora Nacional (National Liberation Alliance, ALN), the MR-8 kidnapped US Ambassador Charles Elbrick, thereby becoming one of the dictatorship's most targeted organisations. As a result, militants who had not yet gone underground needed to do so quickly, leading the MR-8 to become isolated from the public.

Rural mobilisation became even more central to the MR-8's political strategy after Carlos Lamarca joined the organisation in March 1971. Persecuted by the dictatorship, he was sent to Brotas, where Zequinha, a militant born in that municipality, was already coordinating peasant mobilisation efforts, as will be described below.

According to César Benjamin, another MR-8 militant, Lamarca strengthened the organisation's commitment to the agrarian question: 'The first time I heard of a *boia-fria* was in a letter from Lamarca, pointing out the changes that were taking place in the Brazilian countryside with the concentration of rural workers in the peripheries of the cities of the interior.'<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin's statement highlights a fundamental problem of the Brazilian armed Left at the time: their lack of knowledge about the agrarian reality which militants believed would launch the revolutionary process. Although some leaders were slightly familiar with the structural problems that characterised rural Brazil in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the fact that most urban militants were completely unaware of peasant problems compromised the mobilisation of peasants for guerrilla warfare.

<sup>14</sup>Reis, *A revolução faltou ao encontro*, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup>MR-8, 'Tribuna de debates'.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, member of the MR-8's national board, Petrópolis, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>17</sup>Marcelo Ridenti, interview of César Benjamin, Rio de Janeiro, 28 Jan. 1986, Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Fundo Militância Política e Luta Armada, Box 5. The expression '*boia-fria*' is used to refer to marginalised rural workers. It literally means 'cold meal', from the workers' practice of taking their lunch with them to eat in the fields.

Lamarca himself recognised this difficulty, even before joining the MR-8. In a newspaper interview in June 1970, he stated: ‘We must take account of the fact that comrades trained abroad [i.e. outside rural Brazil] are not prepared for rural guerrilla warfare, since they were always city-based.’<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, he emphasised the feasibility of rural guerrilla warfare and stated that it was a ‘matter of time’ before the revolutionary organisations mobilised large groups of people to join the armed struggle. Asked whether the necessary conditions existed for the revolution to be successful, he answered:

They exist, not only in Brazil, but in all of Latin America. It is in the countryside that capitalist exploitation is most inhumane ... and where repression has been most fierce in the struggles already fought. There is a whole past of peasant struggle and organisation that the dominant class omits from our history.<sup>19</sup>

The MR-8’s strategy had similarities with the Chinese and Cuban traditions and with anti-colonial liberationist Frantz Fanon’s theories of armed revolution, which held peasants to be more likely than urban workers to embrace revolution due to their social vulnerability.<sup>20</sup> As such, the agrarian characteristics of Brazilian society in the 1960s may have contributed to overconfidence among militants, leading them to neglect the constraints that facilitated the defeat of the MR-8’s attempt at revolution.

### The MR-8’s Approach to the Peasants of Brotas

In the 1960s, Brotas, in the Chapada Diamantina region (hinterland of Bahia), was a municipality of about 10,000 inhabitants. Although much of the Brazilian peasantry at the time was landless or had insecure access to land, Brotas peasants, for the most part, owned small tracts of land with security of tenure.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the MR-8 did not target landlessness in its attempt to mobilise peasants in Brotas. Salgado explained: ‘Their struggle was not for more land, it was for better living conditions. They faced hunger, even though they owned land. They had to work as miners because they did not earn enough to live on.’<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, while the agrarian question was not central to the militants’ message, it was central to the military’s discourse to legitimise repression, as explained below.

Olderico Barreto, Zequinha’s brother, reported that the peasants of Brotas did not engage in politics because they thought it was for ‘bosses, not workers’.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup>José and Miranda, *Lamarca*, p. 151.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>20</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspéro, 1961); English translation by Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963).

<sup>21</sup>They produced what was necessary for their own consumption, as well as tobacco and sugar cane, which they sold as *rapadura* (slabs of raw sugar). However, they still faced hunger, largely due to droughts. Former residents often mention periods of food scarcity when talking about the past. They also recall the absence of rural schooling: families which wished to educate their children were obliged to hire private tutors, which few could afford.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, brother of Zequinha, Brotas, 10 Feb. 2017.

In that region, local oligarchies had power over peasants, owing to their social prestige and political privileges that allowed them to control policing and exercise extra-legal authority.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, religious leaders in the strongly Catholic region propagated conservative values that reinforced the oligarchical social order of the 1960s and 1970s.

The harsh reality of peasant life before the coup remained virtually unchanged under the military dictatorship, making it difficult for militants to blame the dictatorship for the hardships of peasants. Therefore, in Olderic's view, they needed to find alternative narratives to mobilise peasants in opposition to the military regime, and to change the commonly held belief that political engagement was for 'bosses, not workers'. The MR-8's work in Brotas gave the organisation some political hope at a time when the military regime was arresting a large number of its militants, forcing them to spend more time trying to hide than working on their political project.

Zequinha's role was central in leading the MR-8's project in Brotas. His family was relatively privileged in the region, owning two properties and a small store that served as a convenient space for networking with peasants. Zequinha's mother, Nair Campos Barreto, was a midwife and teacher, and his father, José Barreto, was well respected in the village.<sup>25</sup> When Zequinha was 12 years old, he entered a seminary, as was customary for many children, given the strong influence of Catholicism in the region. Although only a low-ranking ecclesiastical position, being a seminarian afforded Zequinha some authority in his community.<sup>26</sup>

In 1964, leaving the seminary after six years of study, Zequinha followed the dominant migratory current in Brazil at that time and moved to São Paulo, where he carried out his military service. Zequinha then sought employment as a factory labourer in Osasco, a municipality in the metropolitan region of São Paulo. During this period, the young immigrant from Bahia combined his factory work with college education as a mature student and participated in a left-wing reading group. In both his work and his studies, Zequinha stood out as a leader capable of influencing people around him, which would be key for his later work with peasants in Brotas. In Osasco, he even coordinated a workers' strike that led to his imprisonment for nearly three months.<sup>27</sup>

Zequinha's imprisonment served as a political awakening for Olderic, who moved to São Paulo to spend time with his brother: 'I started to experience political life this way', Olderic recalled.<sup>28</sup> With the implementation of Institutional Act no. 5 in December 1968,<sup>29</sup> Zequinha feared rearrest and went underground. Olderic

<sup>24</sup>Dora Leal Rosa, 'O mandonismo local na Chapada Diamantina', unpubl. Master's thesis, Universidade Federal da Bahia, 1973.

<sup>25</sup>Fausto Salvadori, 'Lembranças do capitão que virou guerrilheiro e morreu por convicções', *Revista Adusp*, 52 (2012), pp. 66–71.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Olderic Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>27</sup>Instituto Zequinha Barreto, *Zequinha Barreto: Um revolucionário brasileiro* (Osasco: Sindicato dos Químicos Unificados / Instituto Zequinha Barreto, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with Olderic Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>29</sup>Institutional Act no. 5 suspended Congress and the right to *habeas corpus*, thereby restricting democratic freedom, facilitating human rights violations and intensifying authoritarianism.

then acted on Zequinha's behalf when he needed to give a name that would not arouse suspicion.<sup>30</sup>

With the increase in repression, Zequinha realised he needed to leave São Paulo. He spent some time in Rio de Janeiro and, at the beginning of 1970, returned to Bahia with Olderico. They spent a short time in Salvador, where Zequinha contacted Lúcia Murat, then a regional leader of the MR-8 in Bahia, with whom he discussed the possibility of carrying out political work with peasants in his region through the MR-8.<sup>31</sup> However, shortly after their arrival, Zequinha and Olderico had to flee Salvador after two banks were robbed by other revolutionary organisations.

Zequinha's case echoes the sociopolitical process described by Antonio Gramsci of the southern Italian peasants who migrated to the industrialised north, established contact with the revolutionary ideas more common in that region, and subsequently returned to their villages spreading such ideas.<sup>32</sup> Because of the multiple spaces in which Zequinha circulated, the sociologist Marcelo Ridenti describes him as a 'composite figure' who embodied 'the diverse social process in which armed opposition to the military regime took root in the second half of the 1960s'.<sup>33</sup>

According to Olderico, Zequinha had been reflecting on the armed struggle: 'He thought there was still no consciousness in the population. So the stage he was advocating for was primarily that of awareness. The armed struggle would come later. [Otherwise, it would be] like starting to build a house with the roof.'<sup>34</sup> Consciousness building formed the basis of Zequinha's return to Brotas and of the various political training activities that he began there, as outlined below.

Salgado, who was responsible for the organisation's political work in the Bahian countryside, says that in his first conversation with Zequinha in Bahia, they agreed that their objective in that region was only recruitment, not the instigation of an armed confrontation. Chapada Diamantina's *caatinga* (dry shrubland) environment did not favour guerrilla warfare, which is better suited to forested areas where militants can hide from the forces of the state. It was important, however, to take advantage of the fact that Zequinha had previous ties, as a 'son of that land', with the local population. As sociologists Marcelo Silva and Bianca Ruskowski point out, in these cases, 'mediation [between individuals and causes or organisations] tends to occur in a "natural" way, since these individuals are already indirectly connected to organisations due to bonds built in other spheres of life'.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the Chapada Diamantina region is relatively close to the Goiás–Bahia state border. It was considered potentially 'strategic for a guerrilla group' because it contained thick forests, was crossed by several important highways, and was located at a convenient distance from the national capital, Brasília: close enough to get there quickly and far enough to avoid being caught by agents of the regime.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>32</sup>Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question* (Toronto: Guernica, 2005).

<sup>33</sup>Marcelo Ridenti, *O fantasma da revolução brasileira* (São Paulo: UNESP, 2010), p. 238.

<sup>34</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>35</sup>Marcelo Kunrath Silva and Bianca de Oliveira Ruskowski, 'Condições e mecanismos do engajamento militante: Um modelo de análise', *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, 21 (2016), p. 214.

<sup>36</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.



Zequinha's tendency to attract an entourage, coupled with his considerable prestige within the community, meant that peasants warmed to him. His prestige was grounded in the fact that he was the son of a respected local family and a former seminarian. Moreover, he had lived in other states, could sing in English whilst accompanying himself on his guitar, and was considered by his friends to be intelligent and charismatic. All these characteristics helped him as leader of the MR-8's political work with peasants in Brotas.

### **The Peasants' Response to the MR-8's Political Work**

The political work of the MR-8 in Brotas began with Zequinha. According to Salgado's account:

Zequinha convinced peasants of the injustices they were experiencing there ... He started by developing a programme of politicising the people he knew, with whom he had a relationship of trust, with those interested in knowing his history. And he had strong leadership characteristics.<sup>37</sup>

Edelzuita Pacheco da Silva reports that, during this time, Zequinha frequently gave public talks attended by the residents of Buriti Cristalino, the rural community where she and her family lived, and of surrounding areas:

Zequinha gave lectures, talked about human beings, taught that humans are rational. The irrational ones are those without reason. We would take notes ... He taught these lessons for a couple of months. But they were just lectures ... he didn't say anything [specifically about guerrilla warfare].<sup>38</sup>

In the interviews I conducted with former residents who spent time with Zequinha, they repeatedly mentioned his concern about the peasants' right to social security. Edelzuita, for example, reported that Zequinha frequently told rural workers: 'You are going to retire, you have a right, because you work!'<sup>39</sup> Miguel Barreto, Zequinha's cousin, also emphasised Zequinha's keenness to communicate with his fellow residents of Brotas:

Zequinha dedicated his life to the cause of peasants ... He knew the difficulties faced by the rural man. He said: 'The government has to find a solution to support these people in the countryside who grow old, work until they die and leave nothing for their families.' ... And by irony of fate, a few months after his death, rural workers were given the right to retire.<sup>40</sup>

The MR-8's advocacy for social rights shows that its work was not restricted to the recruitment of peasants for armed struggle: it included efforts to improve the

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>Interview with Edelzuita Pacheco da Silva, Brotas, 9 Feb. 2017.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>Interview with Miguel Barreto, Ibotirama, 8 Feb. 2017. Elsewhere in this article I explore the connections between revolutionary organisations and the creation of a retirement programme for peasants by the dictatorship.

quality of life and to build a popular base of support in rural areas. Militants also raised the issue of regressive taxation, arguing that it was unfair for hungry peasants to be forced to pay *ad valorem* taxes on property and livestock.<sup>41</sup> Edelzuita recalls that Zequinha managed to convince her husband Abel Pereira da Silva to resign from his job as a tax collector: ‘He [Zequinha] said, “Oh Abel, please stop doing that ... it is ridiculous. How dare you tax something that the person worked to produce?” ... Then Abel quit.’<sup>42</sup> In addition to being a tax collector, Abel was a peasant who raised dairy cattle and grew beans (a Brazilian staple).

Edelzuita’s testimony shows that the militants tried to change some of the peasants’ ways of life. To fully engage in the revolution, it would not be enough for peasants to simply agree with radical ideas: they would have to adopt a new lifestyle in line with the revolutionary project and abandon certain practices, such as collecting taxes on hungry people, which reinforced patterns of exploitation opposed by the MR-8.

A significant MR-8 member who moved to the region in early 1971 was Luiz Antônio Santa Bárbara. He had previously been a member of the student movement in Feira de Santana, a municipality about 100 km from the Bahian capital, Salvador. Son of a humble family, ‘his life history enabled him to do political work in rural areas, according to MR-8 criteria’.<sup>43</sup> ‘Zequinha presented Santa Bárbara as a former colleague with whom he had studied in the seminary who was coming to stay for a while, to work in mining.’<sup>44</sup> Zequinha used the local mining industry as a smokescreen to justify the presence of strangers, since it attracted many people from outside Brotas.

In practice, however, Santa Bárbara embedded himself in the community primarily as a teacher, using the code name Roberto. As there was no school in Buriti Cristalino, Edelzuita offered him the possibility of working as a literacy instructor. To Santa Bárbara, teaching was a strategic way to approach the community, gain respect, have a space through which he could spread ideas and build closer relationships with people. The children of Buriti and surrounding communities would go to the Zequinha family home to attend Santa Bárbara’s classes.

One of the main forms of communication developed under Santa Bárbara’s watch was a play performed by local children. According to Olderico, the script addressed the cost of living, ‘tax violence’ (unjustly high property taxes), health and education.<sup>45</sup> A good number of my interviewees reported having heard of ‘Professor Roberto’s theatre’.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Under Bahia state law, Lei No. 1246 de 28 de dezembro de 1959 (‘Altera o Quadro Tributário do Estado, Cria Fundo Assistencial e Dá outras Providências’), tax to the value of 1 per cent was imposed on privately owned land and 1.2 per cent on vacant land. Properties worth less than Cr\$ 50,000 (US\$ 10,000 at 1959 prices) were exempt and there was a 50 per cent discount for properties worth between Cr\$ 50,000 and Cr\$ 100,000. In addition, the law mandated a *per capita* sales and consignments tax on live or slaughtered cattle, to the value of 7 per cent.

<sup>42</sup>Interview with Edelzuita Pacheco da Silva, 9 Feb. 2017.

<sup>43</sup>José and Miranda, *Lamarca*, p. 219.

<sup>44</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>Liberation theatre was introduced to Brazil by working-class European immigrants, who brought their anarchist experience of using theatrical performances as a political tool to communicate with the public. In the case of Brotas, the fact that interviewees repeatedly referenced memories of the discussions about the need to pay taxes may be seen as an indication of the relative success of Santa Bárbara’s theatrical pedagogy

MR-8 militants also distributed political brochures and educational booklets amongst the peasantry. The organisation provided a typewriter to the militants in Brotas for the production of these materials. According to Oldérico, the recommendation was to destroy the brochures after they had been read. Town dwellers too received them. For example, Euval Rosa Campos, son of a Brotas merchant, remembers getting such materials. Carlos Araújo, a resident of Ibotirama (a neighbouring municipality), with whom Zequinha also discussed politics, reported having borrowed a copy of Marx's *Capital* from Zequinha. Edelzuita calls to mind a booklet she lovingly kept called *The Workers' ABC*:

It was a book instructing people ... to work without being too dependent on others [i.e. the elites], because people here at that time were almost like slaves and did not develop. [The militants advocated for] workers', people's development. And it taught us that those who worked should not be required to pay taxes. And the booklet all rhymed. It was a novel. It was described in that way: a workers' novel ... Contact with these people [militants] gave rise to so much development in my life!<sup>47</sup>

This recollection by Edelzuita shows that, despite the ultimate defeat of its attempt at revolution, the political work of the MR-8 raised emancipatory consciousness among some workers. She indicates that the political ideas she learned from the militants made her more independent, leading her to realise she was capable of doing more than she had imagined. A few years later, she became a community health worker.

Conversations around broadcasts by Radio Havana were another characteristic of MR-8's work with peasants. Raúl Castro (at the time Minister of the Armed Forces) established this shortwave radio station in 1961, with the objective of broadcasting information about the Cuban Revolution and other revolutionary political experiences around the world. Edelzuita reports that her husband Abel and Zequinha used to listen to Radio Havana together, and spent hours exchanging ideas. The attention militants paid to Castro's radio station corroborates historian Jean Sales's argument about the importance of the Cuban Revolution for Brazilian left-wing organisations.<sup>48</sup>

Public events, such as football (soccer) matches, meetings in bars, religious festivals, theatre performances and music sessions with his guitar provided Zequinha with opportunities to meet with peasants and discuss their social conditions, and to stimulate critical reflections on their everyday existence – a fundamental step in the process of political mobilisation. As sociologist Daniel Cefai points out, politics happens especially in places where people meet for the most trivial reasons in their daily lives.<sup>49</sup>

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among the peasants of Buriti Cristalino: Maria Thereza Vargas (ed.), *Teatro operário na cidade de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Secretaria Municipal de Cultura et al., 1980).

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Edelzuita Pacheco da Silva, 9 Feb. 2017.

<sup>48</sup>Jean Rodrigues Sales, 'O impacto da revolução cubana sobre as organizações comunistas brasileiras (1959–1974)', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2005.

<sup>49</sup>Daniel Cefai, 'Comment se mobilise-t-on? L'apport d'une approche pragmatiste à la sociologie de l'action collective', *Sociologie et Sociétés*, 41: 2 (2009), pp. 245–69; Portuguese translation by Bruno Cardoso,

In the bars and during the football matches that he organised, Zequinha also shared his experiences of life in São Paulo, addressing social and regional inequalities and how definitions of rich, poor, abundance and scarcity varied across regions. Olderico recounted the following story, heard from one of his cousins: 'Zequinha once told me that eating beans and rice was to be hungry. I did not understand what he meant at the time. I understood only after I went to live in São Paulo. There, I understood that if you do not have a side dish [to eat with beans and rice], you are seen as someone going hungry.'<sup>50</sup>

Zequinha also discussed the marketing of local produce in his conversations with the population: 'He was concerned [with] people organising themselves in cooperatives, uniting, participating more actively [in this matter].'<sup>51</sup>

MR-8 militants believed that they should recruit not only peasants but also urbanites to their cause. Thus, in addition to Buriti Cristalino and neighbouring rural communities, Zequinha and his comrades included the urban areas of Brotas and Ibotirama, a regional centre in the mid-west of Bahia, as sites of political action. Zequinha also had conversations with local authorities, such as Brotas's chief judge. He interacted regularly with councillor Carlos Souza, a merchant and grandson of a former mayor of Brotas. Souza recounts that Zequinha was 'very intelligent', that he knew Latin and spoke English and that they talked about politics, socialism and inequality. Carlos also reported that Zequinha gave him details of a robbery carried out against a former governor of São Paulo, an indication of some degree of mutual trust.<sup>52</sup>

Miguel Barreto reported that he frequently visited his home town of Ibotirama and played the guitar. In the intervals between songs, Zequinha would tell tales about guerrilla warfare in other countries.<sup>53</sup> Carlos Araújo added that Zequinha also talked about Francisco Julião, one of the leaders of the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues) of small-scale farmers before the coup of 1964.<sup>54</sup> Lamartine Araújo, Carlos's brother, speculated that, although Zequinha talked much about politics, he did not address issues related to armed struggle with them because he did not want to endanger those he considered 'too innocent' or 'too weak' to risk having access to sensitive information.<sup>55</sup>

Salgado reports that Zequinha also wanted to mobilise miners in the region.<sup>56</sup> Olderico recalls joining his brother in conversations with contacts in the neighbouring municipalities of Xique-Xique and Oliveira dos Brejinhos.<sup>57</sup> As shown above, the work of the MR-8 in Chapada Diamantina had a regional scope and focused simultaneously on the mobilisation of peasants, miners and urbanites. This approach can be seen as an indication that the MR-8 had departed from

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'Como nos mobilizamos? A contribuição de uma abordagem pragmatista para a sociologia da ação coletiva', *Dilemas*, 2: 4 (2009), pp. 11–48.

<sup>50</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>51</sup>Interview with Euval Rosa Campos, Brotas, 11 Feb. 2017.

<sup>52</sup>Interview with Carlos Souza, former councillor, Brotas, 13 Feb. 2017.

<sup>53</sup>Interview with Miguel Barreto, 8 Feb. 2017.

<sup>54</sup>Interview with Carlos Araújo, friend of Zequinha, Ibotirama, 8 Feb. 2017.

<sup>55</sup>Interview with Lamartine Araújo, Ibotirama, 8 Feb. 2017.

<sup>56</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

Debrayism, a widespread interpretation of the Cuban Revolution developed by philosopher Régis Debray, according to whom the peasantry would be the driving force of a revolution, with urban organisations serving only a secondary role.<sup>58</sup> Although Debrayism was an appealing tendency in Latin America in the late 1960s, it was criticised by several scholars, such as Vania Bambirra and Bert Useem, for neglecting the role of urban social movements in the Cuban Revolution.<sup>59</sup> The fact that the MR-8 did not blindly follow this appealing but simplistic political tendency can be seen as a sign of its political discernment.

While Zequinha's position as an insider facilitated his political work, the fact that he had been previously arrested in São Paulo forced him to remain inconspicuous, to avoid identification by the authorities; many of his interlocutors commented on this. Carlos Araújo recounted an episode in which a policeman passed by them and Zequinha said: 'I do not like these people.'<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Euval noted that Zequinha did not like to be photographed.<sup>61</sup> Oldérico, who was already taking his first steps as a committed militant, reported: 'For security reasons, no one was supposed to know about our activities. Zequinha ... had a [different] level of openness with each person and did not talk to them collectively, but individually [about sensitive topics, such as the revolutionary project].' That level depended on the degree of trust he developed with each person.<sup>62</sup>

Abel da Silva was part of Zequinha's trusted inner circle. His wife Edelzuita reports that Abel told her about his involvement with the MR-8 only many years after the event. A neighbour of the Barreto family, who preferred not to give an interview, when asked informally about his interaction with the militants replied: 'They wanted to convince people to create an army and go to another place.'<sup>63</sup> This 'other place', according to Salgado, was an area close to the municipality of Barreiras, near the Goiás–Bahia border.<sup>64</sup> The organisation had sent two militants to start organising an infrastructural base to implement the rural guerrilla strategy: 'They had already taken possession of a piece of land.'<sup>65</sup> Salgado wanted to send Lamarca to this area as soon as possible in order to avoid the risk of being caught in Brotas, but his plan failed.

Euval was also someone with whom Zequinha felt safe discussing the revolutionary political project in more depth:

Zequinha talked about other countries, Cuba, for example. He talked about Fidel Castro, socialist regimes. I sometimes argued with him: 'Zequinha, but

<sup>58</sup>Régis Debray, *Révolution dans la révolution: Lutte armée et lutte politique en Amérique Latine* (Paris: Maspéro, 1967); English translation by Bobbye Ortiz, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: MR Press, 1967).

<sup>59</sup>Vania Bambirra, *La Revolución cubana: Una reinterpretación* (Mexico City: Nuestro Tiempo, 1974), pp. 35–6; Bert Useem, 'Peasant Involvement in the Cuban Revolution', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 5: 1 (1977), pp. 99–111.

<sup>60</sup>Interview with Carlos Araújo, 8 Feb. 2017.

<sup>61</sup>Interview with Euval Rosa Campos, 11 Feb. 2017.

<sup>62</sup>Interview with Oldérico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>63</sup>Informal conversation with a former resident, Brotas, 10 Feb. 2017.

<sup>64</sup>Before the state of Tocantins was carved out of the northern two-thirds of Goiás state in 1988, Barreiras was close to the Goiás–Bahia state border.

<sup>65</sup>Daniel Aarão Reis, interview of João Lopes Salgado and Vera Sílvia Magalhães, 17 July 1988, Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Fundo Vera Sílvia Magalhães, Box 2, doc. 28.

wouldn't it be difficult for us to confront the Brazilian army?' He would respond by talking about the Cold War, arguing that when the United States invaded Vietnam, despite having more soldiers, they lost the war. So, Brazilian peasants could also defeat the Brazilian army. He said that the fight would not [immediately] be between government soldiers and guerrilla fighters. That would be a fight for the future. The first step would be to form teams that could go ... [to fight the government army]. Certainly, his thought was that good-quality weapons would arrive soon, and that we would finally engage in armed struggle ... For us, it was difficult to understand guerrilla warfare, but because of our friendship, I was willing to go [to fight]. And besides me, several others were also willing to.<sup>66</sup>

More than political belief, friendship with Zequinha was the main reason for Euval's willingness to engage in guerrilla warfare. In fact, as shown by other researchers, reciprocal emotions of affection and loyalty have been proven to play a key role in political involvement, especially when it comes to clandestine organisations.<sup>67</sup> Like most of the revolutionary militants at the time in Brazil, Euval was in his 20s when he was invited to commit to the group.

Salgado also worked for a short period of time in Brotas. When he arrived, Zequinha had already started his political work:

The role I played [in terms of] recruiting [peasants] was based on a political project that was already under way [led by Zequinha and Santa Bárbara]. So some of the peasants already had a certain level of consciousness, not yet political, [but] a consciousness of revolt at a certain level, [which allowed us to tell them]: 'There is a way to address your situation: fighting the dictatorship, fighting imperialism. Why do we have such [unfavourable] conditions of life here?' And we elaborated on why they were so exploited, why they had to pay taxes and the ITR [Imposto sobre a Propriedade Territorial Rural, an *ad valorem* federal land tax] ... 'Look, there is a way to address this. There is a political party, there is an armed struggle' ... I had access to some families. I used to reach out to them at night. Then, when a peasant became more involved, I would talk to the family, to his wife, to his children, and have dinner at his house.<sup>68</sup>

In this excerpt, Salgado outlines a second phase in the engagement process. In line with Regina Novaes's reflections on political mediation, we could say that,

<sup>66</sup>Interviews with Euval Rosa Campos, 11 Feb. 2017 and 23 Sept. 2018.

<sup>67</sup>James Jasper highlights the importance of reciprocal emotions of affection and loyalty as key factors in building relationships of trust, a condition for the process of identification with a movement: James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Donatella della Porta too analyses emotions in her discussion of people's individual motivations for joining clandestine organisations. According to her, emotional ties are one of the main mechanisms by which clandestine organisations can promote the enrolment of new members: the stronger the bond of friendship between the militants of clandestine organisations, the greater the importance placed by militants on political tasks in their lives: Donatella della Porta, 'Las motivaciones individuales en las organizaciones políticas clandestinas', in Pedro Ibarra and Benjamín Tejerina (eds.), *Los movimientos sociales: Transformaciones políticas y cambio cultural* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1998), pp. 219–42.

<sup>68</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.

following the work previously carried out by 'insider mediator' Zequinha, MR-8 militants sought to deepen the political debate. This second phase of engagement included dialogue with another militant, this time an 'outsider mediator'.<sup>69</sup> The fact that the conversations between Salgado and the peasants took place at night because he could not appear in public is an indication of some level of complicity between them and militants.

According to Salgado, although militants had some conversations with peasant women, their discussions of armed struggle targeted only men. 'It was a mistake of ours to think that only men could take part in the fighting. The PCB already had many women involved. I think this [bias] stems from our culture', Salgado reasoned when asked about gender preference in the MR-8's political work.<sup>70</sup> In urban guerrilla groups, there was a greater female presence. However, gender issues started to gain momentum in Brazilian social movements only in the 1980s. Despite dialogue about armed struggle being restricted to men, peasant women in Brotas attended the political education activities promoted by militants, such as the lectures and play mentioned previously.

### The Arrival of Carlos Lamarca

Carlos Lamarca's journey to Brotas in June 1971 to escape arrest led to a series of challenges for Zequinha and his group. Salgado explains that the MR-8 had not planned to invite Lamarca to Brotas at that time, since the political work there was still in its initial stages. However, due to increased persecution in Rio de Janeiro, the leaders of the MR-8 had to bring forward his move to Bahia. When he arrived in the urban area of Brotas, Lamarca was presented as a geologist visiting the region for research purposes. Once again, mining was the alibi. Nevertheless, locals were suspicious of Lamarca, since he was accompanied by Zequinha, who had no history of working in the mining sector.

Zequinha and his brothers Olderico and Otoniel found a place for Lamarca to hide in Buriti Cristalino, about 20 km from the Brotas urban region. Every day someone from the Barreto family would bring him meals. Zequinha's parents did not know their sons were hiding a fugitive, as they were not aware of their sons' political involvement with the MR-8. Olderico remembers situations when Lamarca expressed a desire to engage in ordinary conversations with peasants, but was unable to because he had to avoid seeing anyone who could report him to the police. He spent most of his time writing. In his first diary entry, Lamarca wrote: 'Today, 29 June [1971], is considered a holy day here, a day of celebration. Since I am in hiding, I will listen to some of the peasants' merry-making from afar.' Later, he narrates an encounter with a 'tough old politicised peasant companion', from whom he felt 'that revolutionary force' during their conversation.<sup>71</sup> Some

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<sup>69</sup>Regina Reyes Novaes, 'A mediação no campo: Entre a polissemia e a banalização', in Leonilde Medeiros *et al.* (eds.), *Assentamentos rurais: Uma visão multidisciplinar* (São Paulo: UNESP, 1994), pp. 177–83.

<sup>70</sup>Interview with João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>71</sup>'Diário de Lamarca', in José and Miranda, *Lamarca*, p. 222.

interviewees mentioned that other people also knew about Lamarca's presence in Brotas. It is likely that peasants like Crispin<sup>72</sup> and Abel, because of their relationship of trust with Zequinha and Santa Bárbara, knew about it too.

A friend of the Barreto family indicated that she knew that Zequinha and his brothers were taking food to someone, but 'as a secret, that she could not talk about'.<sup>73</sup> She also said that after Lamarca's arrival, Zequinha avoided appearing in public. In addition, even though the people of Brotas did not know that the newcomer was Lamarca, the arrival of a stranger made them apprehensive. Those who opposed Zequinha's political work started to spread 'rumours that what Zequinha and his companions wanted was not the good of humanity and of the peasants, but the defeat of everyone'.<sup>74</sup> With the arrival of Lamarca, residents began to suspect the presence of 'communists' in the region. A recurrent and ubiquitous anti-communist discourse ensued, effectively associating communism with the 'destruction of everything'.<sup>75</sup>

The then-principal of the local school, who preferred not to give an interview, reported informally that Zequinha inquired about becoming an English teacher. She did not hire him, however, because she was convinced that he would soon leave. She said people feared Zequinha, especially after Lamarca's arrival. Although Lamarca was introduced as a geologist, people were suspicious because they knew about Zequinha's political views and his imprisonment in São Paulo. It did not make sense for Zequinha to be bringing a geologist to the city, according to the community.<sup>76</sup> Miguel Barreto told me that his father forbade him from playing soccer with Zequinha because he was suspicious of him.<sup>77</sup>

Others, like Euval, with whom Zequinha had already discussed his political work, were not affected by anti-communist rumours. Owing to his good relationship with Zequinha, there was no reason for Euval to avoid him, nor to worry about the fact that he had been under arrest in São Paulo, nor to believe the military's narrative that he was a 'terrorist'. 'For us, it did not change a thing', Euval commented.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>72</sup>Crispin was a Black man of about 65 years of age at the time, a carpenter and farmer; later a miner. According to Olderico, he was invited to be a member of the organisation because he had seen Lamarca's hiding place. Confidentiality would be better guaranteed if Crispin became a member of the group than not. Crispin would later play a key role in helping Salgado evade the military, as we will see in the next section.

<sup>73</sup>Interview with Deodete Araujo, close friend of the Barreto family, Brotas, 21 Sept. 2018.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>Since the early 1960s, anti-communist organisations, such as the Instituto de Pesquisa e Estudos Sociais (Institute for Research and Social Studies, IPES) and the Instituto Brasileiro de Ação Democrática (Brazilian Institute for Democratic Action, IBAD), spread the idea that communism would ruin everyone's lives by imposing a dictatorship that would appropriate individuals' properties, including peasant lands: René Armand Dreifuss, 1964: *A conquista do estado: Ação política, poder e golpe de classe* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1981), a translation of his PhD thesis, 'State, Class and the Organic Elite: The Formation of an Entrepreneurial Order in Brazil 1961–1965', University of Glasgow, 1980, available at <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/4948/> (last accessed 9 Jan. 2022). Lamarca's arrival in the region reinforced this narrative. In contemporary Brazil similar anti-communist claims appear in political disputes: Vincent Bevins, 'Where Conspiracy Reigns', *The Atlantic*, 16 Sept. 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/how-anti-communist-conspiracies-haunt-brazil/614665/> (last accessed 25 Feb. 2022).

<sup>76</sup>Informal conversation with a teacher formerly employed by the municipality, Brotas, 21 Sept. 2018.

<sup>77</sup>Interview with Miguel Barreto, 8 Feb. 2017.

<sup>78</sup>Interview with Euval Rosa Campos, 11 Feb. 2017.



Despite the fact that Lamarca did not interact directly with local peasants during his short time in Buriti (June to August 1971), he wrote about the MR-8's regional work in his diary. In his first entry, he notes: 'The documents on the countryside's role in the revolution have had an extraordinary effect. Everyone is happy, they liked it ... I think they want to see the countryside as central.'<sup>79</sup> As a newcomer to the MR-8, Lamarca was celebrating the fact that there was a convergence of views between his and other militant groups regarding the centrality of rural guerrillas to the revolution. In the entry for the following day, he recorded that he would discuss 'with some comrades the documents about the countryside ... and the education plan they were developing with the peasants'.<sup>80</sup> Commenting on his writings, Lamarca's editors Emiliano José and Oldack de Miranda wrote: 'The more the militants became integrated in the region, the more they realised that reality did not coincide with their original vision.'<sup>81</sup> It was for this reason that both Olderico and Salgado reiterated that Brotas was a region only for the recruitment of peasants, not for armed action.<sup>82</sup>

In Lamarca's other diary entries, we find some evidence of his involvement in Brotas – for example, in his notes from 2 July 1971: 'I got stuck into the peasant education plan. I will participate by writing and the comrades will discuss with them [the peasants], reading and explaining. All I need to do is explain what imperialism is. I will try hard to be properly understood.'<sup>83</sup> Olderico adds that the script for the play that Santa Bárbara organised in Buriti was written by Lamarca.<sup>84</sup>

According to Freire's theory of dialogic communication, Lamarca could not hope for effective communication with the peasants without sharing his life with them: cohabitation and coexistence between interlocutors is a precondition for effective dialogue. Lamarca understood the reality of the region partially and indirectly, because he was living there and received information from local inhabitants like Zequinha and his brothers Olderico and Otoniel. However, the information they provided was not enough for Lamarca to identify the 'generating words' Freire believes to be fundamental to the process of popular education. Lamarca himself lamented the impossibility of living with the peasants: 'I only regret not being in direct contact to better adapt and start the Cultural Revolution.'<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Lamarca's alignment with the theory of dialogical action is evident in the following comment: 'We definitely have to incorporate aspects of religion in this phase of political engagement. Here ... misery is intense, religion explains

<sup>79</sup>'Diário de Lamarca', p. 223. The 'documents' which he mentions are probably a piece about the countryside and its role in the revolution by Ladislau Dowbor ('Jamil'), who was at the time a member of the militant Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária (Popular Revolutionary Vanguard, VPR) and is now an academic. MR-8 militants would have read the piece in 'Tribuna de debates', which combined Dowbor's text and the MR-8's own ideas.

<sup>80</sup>'Diário de Lamarca', p. 225.

<sup>81</sup>José and Miranda, *Lamarca*, p. 226.

<sup>82</sup>Interviews with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017, and João Lopes Salgado, 27 Jan. 2017.

<sup>83</sup>'Diário de Lamarca', p. 227.

<sup>84</sup>Interview with Olderico Barreto, 10 Feb. 2017. For the play, see the section 'The Peasants' Response to the MR-8's Political Work' above.

<sup>85</sup>'Diário de Lamarca', p. 227.

questions about everything and [the peasant] is deeply attached to it. [Incorporating religion] will require great effort from us and much political skill. It will not be easy, but it is necessary.<sup>86</sup>

Ultimately, Lamarca's presence in Brotas attracted the attention of the state's military forces, interrupting the MR-8's peasant mobilisation work in the region. Ruptures in such endeavours were the fate of other armed organisations across Latin America.

## Repression

Repression, in the form of agents of the military regime, reached Brotas in August 1971. Otoniel and Santa Bárbara were assassinated. Olderico was shot, but survived and was taken prisoner to Salvador. Salgado was in Rio de Janeiro at the time and escaped imprisonment. He had agreed to meet Crispin in the city of Milagres (about 100 km from Brotas) to check that it would be safe to return to Brotas. Crispin informed Salgado of the situation, saving him from capture. Zequinha and Lamarca managed to escape on foot, wandering from house to house before they were identified and assassinated on 17 September 1971. The military regime did not go only after MR-8 militants, it also targeted local residents, especially the Barreto family and their neighbours, as potential supporters of the 'subversives'. During their days in hiding, Zequinha and Lamarca had the support of friends who provided them with food and shelter, mainly out of a sense of kinship or friendship with Zequinha's family rather than out of political commitment.<sup>87</sup>

The military sought to use the agrarian question as part of its discourse to legitimise violence, even in a region where landlessness was not a central issue. National land struggles before the coup had led the military to assume (or to create the narrative) that any communist action in the countryside was aimed at taking land from large landowners.<sup>88</sup>

One of the state's successful strategies for bringing the population at large on side was Operation ACISO, an acronym for Ação Cívico-Social (Civic-Social Action). Through ACISO, the military distributed food, medicine and clothing, provided medical and social services and renovated a public building in Brotas. The military also benefited from government propaganda in the media, especially the campaign 'Brazil: Love it or Leave it' ('Brasil: Ame-o ou Deixe-o'), which sought to delegitimise opponents of the dictatorship through psychological warfare.<sup>89</sup>

In their competing narrative, the military took advantage of the state apparatus at its disposal to disseminate its point of view to the residents of Brotas, and to win their support, despite its violent approach. In Peru and some Central American countries, peasants who held guerrillas responsible for the violent situation in which they found themselves became involved in counter-revolutionary groups

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 227–8.

<sup>87</sup>Carlton Cruz, *Lamarca pelo sertão do São Francisco* (Oliveira dos Brejinhos: Self-published: n.d. [c. 2010]), available from the library of the Universidade Federal da Bahia, call no. 920 C957 (FCH). Carlton Cruz was a writer, artist and resident of Oliveira dos Brejinhos.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup>Nina Schneider, *Brazilian Propaganda: Legitimizing an Authoritarian Regime* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014).

allied to repressive forces: this was fundamental to the defeat of revolutionary organisations. In Brotas, however, although some peasants blamed the militants for the arrival of the military in the municipality and the consequent violence, they did not form counter-revolutionary groups. The MR-8 was smaller than Peru's Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) and other revolutionary organisations of Central America, and it was relatively easy for the Brazilian army to defeat it. However, the murder of Zequinha and Lamarca weeks after the military entered Brotas occurred owing to a peasant who informed the military of their hiding place, highlighting the effectiveness of the military's anti-militant discourse, in Brazil as in other Latin American countries.

### Final Considerations

Like other Brazilian revolutionary experiences, the MR-8's project in Brotas was interrupted in its early stages. It had lasted from early 1969 to August 1971. During this period, militants managed to promote the engagement of a few peasants and to change the ways of life of some of them, like Abel who left his job as a tax collector because of Zequinha's criticism of the government's unfair taxation policies. Nevertheless, it was difficult for the MR-8 to gain political momentum in the region. The intensity of state repression, as well as public support for the military regime, hindered the progress of revolutionary movements in the Brazilian countryside. This outcome resembles the experience of Russian *narodniki*, members of the intelligentsia who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, went into the countryside to mobilise peasants for a revolutionary socialist project, but were repressed before achieving their goal.<sup>90</sup>

I return to Wolf's question as to who it is who speaks to the peasant or, in other words, to whom it is that the peasant listens. In the case of the MR-8, the two and a half years of political work in Brotas were defined by the leadership of Zequinha, an 'insider mediator' who had the respect and trust of local residents, as well as relevant work and political militancy experience from his time in São Paulo between 1964 and 1968. Zequinha's role was fundamental to the MR-8's recruitment efforts in Brotas, since most peasants became involved with the organisation because of their trust in Zequinha, a 'son of that land', and not because of previous political experience, as was the case in other regions of Brazil. While 'outsider mediators' can build relationships of trust and establish dialogical communication with peasants, Zequinha's acquaintance with locals put him one step ahead of other, unknown militants, thereby mitigating the problem of distance from peasants to which James Scott refers.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup>Anne Pedler, 'Going to the People: The Russian Narodniki in 1874–5', *The Slavonic Review*, 6: 16 (1927), pp. 130–41.

<sup>91</sup>James Scott analyses the relationship between peasants and what he calls 'commissars', communist militants of the various revolutionary tendencies of the twentieth century who went into the countryside to recruit new supporters. Scott's contribution reflects on the challenges of the 'revolution in the revolution' – to paraphrase Debray – that is, the existence of two worlds of meaning between peasants and the 'revolutionary intelligentsia' and the different interests that each group prioritises: James C. Scott, 'Revolution in the Revolution: Peasants and Commissars', *Theory and Society*, 7: 1/2 (1979), pp. 97–134; Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?*; Wolf, *Peasant Wars*.

In a challenge to Joel Migdal's theory, which argues that the main reason why peasants participate in revolutionary processes is their pragmatic interests, those who engaged with the MR-8 did not do so to address their socioeconomic needs.<sup>92</sup> However, the literacy work led by Santa Bárbara corroborates another part of Migdal's thesis, according to which the probability of peasants welcoming new institutional arrangements proposed by the militants is greater when the state is 'structurally incapable' of providing citizens with the services they need.<sup>93</sup> In Brazil in the 1970s, state weakness was evident in education. Were it not for the arrival of agents of the military regime, literacy work could have been a way to both undermine state authority and strengthen the role of the MR-8 within the population. The importance placed by the MR-8 on literacy echoes once again the strategies adopted by the leaders of Cuba's revolution. In 1961, the revolution having already triumphed, Fidel Castro launched Cuba's National Literacy Campaign, which succeeded in reducing illiteracy to practically zero.

A final question of Wolf's remains: 'and what is it that they communicate?' As we have seen, on several occasions MR-8 militants developed dialogical communication with the peasants of Brotas by denouncing the reality in which they were living, citing issues such as excessive tax bills and the lack of peasant rights like social security, education and health. The MR-8 militants encouraged the peasants with whom they had created a relationship of trust by highlighting successful revolutions in other countries at that time.

The general profile of Brotas peasants, especially the fact that they owned the land they worked, aligns well with the definition of 'middle peasants', the group most likely to join revolutionary projects, according to the theories of Hamza Alavi and Eric Wolf.<sup>94</sup> However, as both authors underscore, the mere predisposition of middle peasants to revolution is not enough to explain their process of political engagement. It is necessary to understand the conditions under which peasants *become* political subjects, i.e. to engage in processes of collective action in order to change the reality in which they live. In the case of the MR-8, Zequinha's authority and the political work he carried out with Santa Bárbara, as well as the socioeconomic hardships faced by Brotas residents, were key factors that led some peasants to become politicised. However, the military regime cut short the militants' work in Brotas, making it impossible for them to mobilise more peasants.

Although revolutionary attempts like the MR-8's were quickly crushed, they contributed indirectly to the military regime's establishment in 1969 and 1971 of social rights for rural workers, such as pensions, paid sick-leave and funeral aid.<sup>95</sup> One factor that led the military government to extend these rights to rural workers was the national security paradigm. Through co-optation, the military sought to prevent social revolts promoted by 'subversives', as revolutionaries were called. Promoted by technocrats of the military government, rural welfare

<sup>92</sup>Joel S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics and Revolution: Pressures toward Political and Social Change in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>94</sup>Hamza Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution', *Socialist Register*, 2 (1965), pp. 241–77; Wolf, *Peasant Wars*.

<sup>95</sup>Decreto Lei No. 704, de 24 de julho de 1969 ('Dispõe sobre a Previdência Social Rural e dá outras Providências'); Lei Complementar No. 11, de 25 de maio de 1971 ('Institui o Programa de Assistência ao Trabalhador Rural, e dá outras Providências': see note 97).

policy was based on the need to achieve 'social justice', seen as a condition for maintaining 'social peace'.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the pilot rural welfare programme of 1969 was established to benefit sugar-cane workers, in response to the strike they had held the previous year in Cabo, Pernambuco.<sup>97</sup>

One major difficulty encountered by militants was their need to remain in hiding, which prevented them from showing themselves in public (Salgado and Lamarca) or revealing their true identity (Santa Bárbara). In addition, unlike other Brazilian revolutionary organisations of the time that tried to mobilise peasants, the MR-8 paid little attention to attempting to meet their day-to-day demands. According to a self-critique presented in a document dating from 1971, this approach made the MR-8's communication with peasants more difficult: 'Sometimes, due to our petit bourgeois origins, we felt like armed struggle intellectuals talking to people worried about their daily meals ... Even when we began to talk about the more concrete problems suffered by the people in each place, we often felt that our propaganda disappeared into thin air.'<sup>98</sup> The self-identification as 'petit bourgeois' stems from the fact that a significant proportion of militants came from the undergraduate student movement (university education at the time was accessible only to the privileged middle and upper classes). Ridenti points out that the MR-8, due to the circumstances of its foundation (see note 11), had more former students among its membership than did other revolutionary organisations.<sup>99</sup>

One hypothesis for why the MR-8 did not concern itself with providing social assistance services in Brotas may be the fact that Zequinha already had authority over local residents. In addition to belonging to a respected family, he had studied in a seminary, was considered to be knowledgeable and was 'a son of that land'. As a trusted insider, he did not need to provide assistance services to win the sympathy and trust of the Brotas community, unlike other Brazilian armed organisations at the time whose militants were outsiders unknown to local peasants.

On the other hand, merely being known to locals was apparently not enough to guarantee the success of the MR-8 initiative. Many peasants did not engage with the political project. Scott interprets peasants' non-engagement in this kind of situation as a result of their autonomy and resistance to external influence: peasant

<sup>96</sup>James M. Malloy, 'Authoritarianism and the Extension of Social Security Protection to the Rural Sector in Brazil', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 14: 2 (1977), pp. 195–210; Odaci Luiz Coradini, 'Representações sociais e conflitos nas políticas de saúde e previdência social rural', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 1989; Helmut Schwarzer, 'Previdência rural e combate à pobreza no Brasil – Resultados de um estudo de caso no Pará', *Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura*, 8: 14 (2000), pp. 72–102.

<sup>97</sup>The Programa de Assistência ao Trabalhador Rural (Rural Worker's Assistance Programme; see note 95), known as 'Prorural', had limitations: for example, the right to receive a retirement pension was granted only to the 'head' of each family, which in Brazil's patriarchal culture meant the man. Moreover, the retirement pension was worth only half the minimum wage. It was only with the 1988 Federal Constitution that all rural workers, including women, were given the right to retire with a pension worth a full minimum wage (Chapter II, article 7). Women began to enjoy this right effectively only in 1991, with the passing of Lei No. 8213, de 24 de julho de 1991 ('Dispõe sobre os Planos de Benefícios da Previdência Social e Dá outras Providências'). See Peter P. Houtzager, 'State and Unions in the Transformation of the Brazilian Countryside, 1964–1979', *Latin American Research Review*, 33: 2 (1998), pp. 103–42.

<sup>98</sup>MR-8, 'Orientações para a prática', 1971, p. 24, Arquivo da Memória Operária do Rio de Janeiro, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Fundo Organizações de Esquerda, Série 3.

<sup>99</sup>Ridenti, *O fantasma da revolução brasileira*, p. 115.

autonomy is expressed not only in relation to political actors, but also to religious leaders, technical experts and other community outsiders. Although Zequinha was an internal mediator, the ideas he brought came from the outside. For Scott, peasants who participated in revolutions, such as those of China, Russia and Vietnam, for example, did so because they were already in revolt and the revolutionary leaders in those countries were able to tailor their political narrative and objectives to address the peasants' dissatisfaction. In the case of the MR-8 in Brazil, the non-engagement of peasants may have been due to the absence of the environment of revolt to which Scott refers, in spite of the success of other peasant-driven revolutions of the twentieth century.<sup>100</sup>

Peasant non-engagement can also be viewed as a consequence of fear or limited understanding of the revolutionary project. The strength of anti-communist propaganda that had been widespread in Brazil since the early 1960s as a means of legitimising the 1964 coup and the military regime could have also played a role in preventing peasant involvement in armed resistance. The collaboration of some peasants who passed anti-militant information to the military could be seen as counter-revolutionary engagement on the part of the local population. However, this process occurred only after the arrival of the military in Brotas and to a lesser degree than in Peru, for example, since the MR-8 did not try to disrupt the peasants' trade with the cities, nor did it create generational conflict among the peasants, as did the Shining Path.<sup>101</sup>

How does the MR-8's experience help us understand political disputes during the military dictatorship in Brazil? In general terms, one could argue that the 1964 coup was carried out as a result of, among other reasons, a dispute over definitions of social justice. While the organisations closest to socialism advocated for an equal distribution of wealth and an end to the exploitation of the labour force, the organisations defending capitalism argued that socialism would deprive them of their freedom and raised the spectre of the beginning of a 'communist dictatorship' in the country. They therefore supported the overthrow of then-President João Goulart, seen as an associate of 'the communists'.

The 1964 coup resulted in the systematic repression of organisations that posed some threat to the capitalist order, which the military supported at the time. The military, however, could not completely annihilate opposition organisations. On the contrary, by banning most channels of democratic participation, they effectively encouraged activists to join armed organisations like the MR-8. As presented in this article, these organisations sought to mobilise workers, including peasants, to engage in left-wing revolutionary projects. In their communication with the public, militants advocated for certain social rights, such as rural welfare, which were later granted, albeit partially, by the military government.

The case of the MR-8 exemplifies the adversities encountered by revolutionary organisations in their attempts to mobilise peasants for armed resistance against

<sup>100</sup>Scott, 'Revolution in the Revolution' and 'Hegemony and the Peasantry', *Politics and Society*, 7: 3 (1977), pp. 267–96.

<sup>101</sup>Ponciano del Pino, 'Los campesinos en la guerra. O de como la gente comienza a ponerse macho', in Carlos Iván Degregori *et al.* (eds.), *Perú: El problema agrario en debate – SEPIA IV – Iquitos* (Lima: Sepia, 1992), pp. 487–508.

the Brazilian authoritarian regime of the 1970s. It also highlights the role of anti-communist propaganda in legitimising the military regime and guaranteeing its relative control over the country's rural population. Finally, the MR-8 experience reinforces the importance for political leaders of having an in-depth understanding of the local realities of the people they seek to mobilise in order to stimulate the critical spirit necessary for sustainable political engagement.

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### Spanish Abstract

Durante la dictadura militar brasileña (1964–85), el Movimiento Revolucionario 8 de Octubre (MR-8) trató de movilizar a los campesinos para su proyecto revolucionario. Este artículo analiza la comunicación entre militantes del MR-8 y campesinos en Brotas de Macaúbas, Bahía. Basado en entrevistas y análisis de documentos, el artículo documenta el papel central de José Campos Barreto (Zequinha) como líder de este proceso político. Hijo de una familia local, Zequinha contó con el respeto de los campesinos y su conocimiento de la realidad para comunicarse mejor con ellos. Mientras que el MR-8 logró algunos avances con los campesinos, su trabajo en la región fue ultimadamente interrumpido cuando agentes estatales llegaron a Brotas para capturar a Carlos Lamarca, uno de los militantes más buscados por la dictadura.

**Spanish keywords:** comunicación; campesinos; organizaciones revolucionarias; dictadura

### Portuguese Abstract

Durante a ditadura militar brasileira (1964–85), o Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (MR-8) tentou mobilizar camponeses para seu projeto revolucionário. Este artigo analisa a comunicação entre militantes do MR-8 e camponeses em Brotas de Macaúbas, Bahia. Baseado em entrevistas e análise documental, o artigo documenta o papel central de José Campos Barreto (Zequinha) como líder neste processo político. Filho de uma família local, Zequinha contava com o respeito dos camponeses e em seu conhecimento sobre a realidade do campo para melhor comunicar-se com eles. Enquanto o MR-8 fez alguns avanços com os camponeses, seu trabalho na região terminou prematuramente quando agentes do Estado adentraram Brotas para prender Carlos Lamarca, um dos militantes mais procurados da ditadura.

**Portuguese keywords:** comunicação; camponeses; organizações revolucionárias; ditadura

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