

# Heterogeneity and Instability: Theoretical–Methodological Outcomes of Three Investigations on Land and Agrarian Movements and the State

Agrarian South: Journal of  
Political Economy  
10(3) 415–439, 2021

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DOI: 10.1177/22779760211052612  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/ags](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ags)



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## Abstract

The article presents a theoretical–methodological proposal to research movements and its connections based on the associations they establish. The first investigation focuses on the transformations of the South African Landless People’s Movement, the second on interactions between Brazilian rural movements and the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform, the third focuses on the transnational ties of the Brazilian National Confederation of Agricultural Workers. We produce an ontological definition of movements and the state as collectives whose existence is defined by continuous assemblages of heterogeneous and unstable elements. Those collectives are not enclosed analytical units, but contingent and contextual. Methodologically, we suggest the

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observation of the processes in the long term to grasp the continuous constructions of those collectives, even before they reach public expression. Controversies are analytical categories for understanding which elements allow things to take the course we analyze.

### **Keywords**

Social movements, state, social theory, ontological politics, heterogeneity

### **Introduction**

This article gathers, describes, and reviews three independent investigations of our authorship on subjects characterized by heterogeneity and instability. The aim of examining these experiences is to propose a theoretical–methodological approach that embraces these features in the research outcomes. In the first of these investigations, we attempt to understand the formation of a landless movement in South Africa and the visibility it rapidly gained in the 2000s. In the second, we examine how bureaucrats, movements, and public officials structured Brazilian public policy on land reform in a volatile process involving both alliances and disputes. The third of these investigations covers the internationalization of a Brazilian rural union organization and its battles on several shifting fronts, contradicting the widespread belief that trade unions are rarely involved in transnational activism.

Gathering the three investigations, we found that collectives were rarely unified or stable in either the short or long term, nor did they conform to the analytical categories we attempted to apply in our first analyses. Our subjects were characterized by multiple, heterogeneous elements that aligned only at certain moments and under precise conditions to generate the political effect in question (land reform and internationalization), as also observed in Moyo and Yeros (2005, 2013) for the movements of land occupations and the state in late 1990s in Zimbabwe. With their distinct forms, timeframes, histories, and alliances, all combined precariously and for brief periods. We observed regular alterations in the composition and effects of the movements, unions, and state agencies we studied even during our fieldwork, leading us to conclude that their very existences are unstable.

Inspired by Mol (1999), Law (2004), and de la Cadena (2015), we came to understand these actors (Latour, 2005) as ontologically heterogeneous and unstable. As we argue throughout this article,

heterogeneity and instability contribute to our conclusion that certain movements and states have existential properties that differ from the stable ones common in hegemonic theories. Therein lies the challenge of finding ways to analyze and theorize about such phenomena, a challenge we share with Alvarez (2014, 2019), who addresses the heterogeneous composition and continuous transformation of the Latin American feminist movement. The amplification of our dialogues with the works of Escobar and Osterweil (2009), Müller and Schurr (2016), and Rodríguez-Giralt et al. (2018), among others, lead us toward bridging theories (as suggested also by Jensen, 2020) that consider heterogeneity as a constitutive part of the phenomena under study, namely actor–network theory (ANT) and assemblage theory, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987).

Our theoretical–methodological proposal is located in the larger tradition in social sciences inspired by the ontological rupture proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). In this work, the authors question the idea of society as something stabilized or characterized by an order—be it in the form of structures of domination or in the form of a body with complementary functions (Dewsbury, 2011). On the contrary, society (as well as all other things) should be conceived as an ephemeral result of aggregation of different elements at a given time and space (Marcus & Saka, 2006). The arrangement resulting from this bonding is always unstable, being in constant process of making and remaking. In this sense, the idea of agency refers to the composition resulting from this assemblage (agencement) process, always varying according to the elements that compose it. All agency is composed of material elements (human resources, physical, technological, etc.) and expressive (statements, language, laws, etc.) that are relevant not by their essence prior to the interaction, but by the connections they establish among themselves (DeLanda, 2006; Latour, 2005; Snicek, 2007).

Deleuze and Guattari's post-structuralism seeks to give emphasis on the ever-emerging and unstable conditions of the present (Marcus & Saka, 2006). Indeed, the concept of agency allows us to analyze this dynamic process of construction of the social through the concepts of territorialization and deterritorialization (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The first concerns the stabilization process of a given arrangement based on the increase in homogeneity between internal components or from the definition of external borders. At the institutional or political level, this happens, for example, with the construction of an understanding around a concept or norm. The more stable is an agency resulting from this stabilization process, the more territorialized it is.

The stabilization of controversies and disputes is fundamental for the construction of what we conceive of as social institutions (Latour, 2005). The deterritorialization would be the opposite path, characterized by the loss of homogeneity of an agency, or by its destabilization.

Inserted in this larger tradition, our proposal seeks to refine methodological and conceptual tools in order to capture the often taken for granted unstable and heterogeneous character of social movements, trade unions, and states as collectives. For that purpose, we draw on work that has already dealt with the methodological challenges of research within this approach (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004) and discuss their contribution to the construction of our research vis-à-vis other theoretical–methodological approaches to studying social movements and states. Instead of treating these collectives as stable and then analyzing their effects, we believe that describing processes of continual formation is a more suitable approach. Then, we suggest that assemblages and controversies are useful for conducting research coherent with this approach. The focus on controversies offers us a way of identifying the assemblages, a “collection of relations between heterogeneous entities to work together for some time” (Müller & Schurr, 2016), and the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that allow each of these groups to come into being.

In the first section of this article, we describe our three investigations, noting the heterogeneous and unstable aspects of these phenomena. In inductive reasoning, these investigations lay the groundwork for the article’s first output, presented in the second section: An ontological definition of movements and states as collectives whose existence involves continual assemblages of the heterogeneous, unstable elements tied up in doing politics, as described by Smitha (2018) for some of the agrarian movements in India. In the second section, we also further develop the concepts of heterogeneity and instability and, finally, suggest that these theoretical statements encompass a methodological approach based on assemblages and controversies and their changes over time.

## **The Process of Gathering Three Investigations**

In this section, we present the case studies and the different conditions in which each of these investigations was conducted, and describe how these conditions led us to develop an inductive theory and methodology.

It is important to emphasize the two methodological levels used to draw the conclusions presented in the last section. The first level is characterized by three independent fieldwork projects that will be described in the first section, carried out with different research questions, conditions, timeframes, and locations. The second is a process of gathering and reviewing the independent results under one specific new research question which drives the second part of the text: At the theoretical and methodological level, how do researchers deal with empirical findings on heterogeneity and instability? The reassessment of the data through an amplified theoretical dialogue support further methodological proposals for the analysis of heterogeneous subjects. At the fieldwork level, the projects were as follows.

Research into the South African Landless People's Movement (LPM) began in 2005 and continued until 2020 (Rosa, 2015). The primary research method was the observation of public gatherings and private meetings of the movement in four different regions of the country (notes were taken and videos were shot at 28 events). Twelve activists in attendance at the event were invited for semi-structured interviews. The research was completed with archival materials from the movement and the files of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

At the Marabá headquarters of the Brazilian National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform (INCRA), an ethnography of bureaucratic routines was done between 2011 and 2013 (Penna, 2015). Six workers were selected for semi-structured interviews and the researcher also accompanied them on their fieldwork visits to rural areas. Meanwhile, the researcher observed 14 public events and analyzed the archives of settlement and land expropriation and internal communication documents.

The CONTAG research project began in 2014 and finished in 2017 following a prior investigation with movements and organizations that attended the MERCOSUR Meeting on Family Agriculture (REAF). Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 28 activists (14 union members, 6 union advisors, and 8 activists from other organizations related to CONTAG). In the meantime, the documentary research was done in the archives of CONTAG, Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST), the Pastoral Land Commission, and at the Lyndolpho Silva Archive at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ). Six international meetings were observed, in addition to one CONTAG national conference and a course on international cooperation.

We shall now proceed to demonstrate how the reassembling and reassessment of the data allowed us to bring the three cases together to

draft possible methodological alternatives for the investigation of heterogeneity and instability.

## **A Long-Term Approach to Landless People and Apartheid**

### *The LPM and Its Activists*

Officially founded in 2001, the LPM of South Africa was an umbrella organization of the local reparations committees organized by NGOs even before the end of apartheid. These committees aimed to mitigate the effects of the Natives Land Act of 1913, which reserved 90% of South African lands for the country's white population and paved the way for the legal spatial and political segregation of blacks and whites in 1948 (Ntsebeza & Hall, 2007).

The agreements that officially ended apartheid in 1994 were consolidated in South Africa's 1996 Constitution, which laid the groundwork for a reparations policy and the redistribution of rural land in South Africa. According to the numbers outlined in this policy, ownership of 30% of these lands was to be transferred to the black population. In 2005, 10 years after apartheid had ended, the estimates on the actual percentage of land distribution varied, but all were under 3% (Greenberg, 2007).

Frustration with the administration of the African National Congress led a network of NGOs, the National Land Committee (NLC), to bring local reparations committees into a single organization. The final stage of this process was the formation of the LPM in 2001, with representatives in the country's 11 provinces.

The *raison d'être* most commonly attributed to the movement is people's frustrations with the unmet promises of land reform. Ultimately, little had been achieved in terms of countering the effects of apartheid (James, 2007; Rosa, 2012). However, by tracking the process of the movement's formation, it is possible to identify other relations that proved essential for both its configuration and its public interventions. The movement came together just a few months before the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban. During the public demonstrations that took place at the event, the LPM was out on the streets for the first time. It returned to the streets again the following year in its second public appearance at the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002, in Johannesburg.

At these events, both of which brought global attention to South Africa, international support networks joined local NGOs and individual members of the reparations committees to raise consciousness on South African landlessness. For those of us who observed the event *in situ* or archive images during our research, it was possible to note how the LMP's demonstrations at these events linked landlessness with racism, rural development, and apartheid.

This investigation began in 2005, the year of the first National Land Summit. At that event, we joined LPM marches and protests both inside the Johannesburg Convention Centre and out on the streets. At the start of our research, the movement was still reaping the fruits of 2001 and 2002, playing a central role at events as it received extensive media coverage. In 2016, at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the LPM participated in both the official forums and the alternative event promoted by social movements.

At that time, the LPM had an office in Johannesburg and a branch in the province of Kwazulu-Natal, where it operated out of the office of one of its member NGOs. The demonstrations by the movement yielded financial resources to keep the NGOs up and running along with funding for research activities on the movement.

The LPM joined the international movement network Via Campesina and began receiving visits by members of Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST). Militants from the two movements had already forged ties thanks to the activities organized by NGOs—including one based in England that provided funding for the trip by the Brazilian activists—at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

In 2006, the LPM's national office closed after internal disputes at the NLC resulted in a drastic reduction of funds. Though local NGOs continued to organize occasional national meetings using their own resources, the NLC ceased to exist at that time (Mngxitama, 2006). As a result, the focus of our research shifted to the leadership of the movement in Kwazulu-Natal where the local LPM branch remained open until 2010. That year, it was forced to close after the local NGO also lost its source of funding.

After that, local leaders continued receiving funds directly from the same NGO that had paid for the MST visits. With these financial resources, they opened a branch in another city. When those funds ran out, that branch was also shuttered, leaving only local leaders and their personal initiatives. Without the support of the NGOs, the collaborations

with the MST withered and the Brazilian movement began to focus instead on exchanges with activists in Mozambique.

The scale of the LPM's activities gradually changed as the movement transformed. Similarly, our research shifted away from public structures and events to focus instead on the activists themselves. Due to the lack of public events or large gatherings, local scholars announced the demise of the movement (Ntsebeza, 2013), which was not different from the existential crisis of the Indian agrarian movements described by Smitha (2018).

Between 2011 and 2014, we visited the homes of several individuals who had been involved in the LPM. Those who had held leadership positions or served as movement representatives continued to participate in land conflict mediations. They still identified as part of the LPM in their individual interactions with NGOs, churches, and the state. The LPM was comprised of people with connections that were never limited to the movement itself or to NGOs. Based on the context, configuration, and scale of their involvements, these individuals transported and adapted the content of the movement.

### *Following the Traces of the Movement*

By declaring the LPM to be defunct, researchers confirmed that they were no longer observing either actors or the associations they had initially assembled. No more global events—or even any national events—were held in South Africa to debate the land issue. Conflicts between the NGOs as well as the cutbacks in international funding made it harder for the NGOs to increase the visibility of the LPM. At the same time, the MST's decision to focus on Mozambique instead of South Africa led international support—and the movement's visibility—to wane.

Researchers who had followed the connections described above could no longer find the heterogeneous assemblage we had previously referred to as the LPM. It is important to note that at the beginning of our investigation, we had approached the LPM as a bundle of all the research objects described above. As a result, we wrote about the LPM as if its activists were part of a homogeneous political entity: The landless people that apartheid had yielded (Latour, 2005, p. 117).

The sociological interest in what the LPM and the NGOs each contributed was sparked after the dissolution of their collaboration. By slowly ceasing to be seen as the natural product of resistance to apartheid, the movement was transformed into a fragile and specific assemblage



localized in time and space, and began to be described in terms of the effects and stability of many other actors. Yet besides chronicling their manifestos or demonstrations at public events, it was necessary for researchers to track all of the elements that had effects on and within the movement over time and space.

In order to provide a description of these elements and their long-term effects, it was necessary to address the unstable and ephemeral nature of the connections and, when possible, find more stable elements. Our research was unable to sustain an explanation that naturally connected apartheid, frustration with the unmet promises for land redistribution post-apartheid, and the effect of the movement collective. Unlike the movement, the effects of apartheid did persist over time. It was not possible to attribute the existence of the LPM—or its eventual demise—to either of the two.

This led us to the following conclusions:

1. Although the initial sources of controversy may yet persist, the efforts to connect them ceased, or no longer yielded the same effect. In this context, it was necessary to reconstruct and describe the mode of gathering which allowed the activists to produce the movement in the first place (Carvalho, 2018; Law, 2004; Rosa, 2015).
2. The effects of other actors (whose activity later ceased) contributed to the bundling effect that enabled the brief existence of the LPM as a national movement.
3. The effects that led to the establishment and dissolution of the LMP are the result of unequal connections between heterogeneous actors that produce reciprocal effects.

The fact that our investigation tracked the movement and some of its heterogeneous elements for over a decade is what made these conclusions possible. During this period, we witnessed changes in the effects, demonstrations, and work conditions associated with this bundling of the heterogeneous elements under observation.

## **Heterogeneity, Social Movements, and INCRA**

The analytical point of departure for research into the relationships between the state and social movements has traditionally been the interaction between stable actors. The research agenda in this field has

focused on understanding the relationship between civil society actors and state actors and their effects on both public policy formation and the organizations.

Over the course of our research, it became evident that the boundaries separating the different actors are shifting and constantly under construction. In order to understand the relationships between INCRA and the movements, their heterogeneity and instability had to be considered right from the outset. The response to the research question required more than an explanation of how stable actors interact and have effects on one another. It was necessary to comprehend how these actors take shape based on their connections with one another and with a range of other actors. This configuration, in fact, is key to the actions they take in diverse contexts and moments in time.

### *Methodology: Following Actors and Controversies*

We started out by accompanying civil servants who interacted directly with organization representatives, seeking documents that provided insight into interactions with the different INCRA affiliates. The three main rural movements in the region where the research was conducted—the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG), the Federation of Family Farm Workers, and the MST—had intense, frequent dealings with different departments within the municipal government.

This interaction is multifaceted and heterogeneous. The multiple connections that the civil servants established with movement representatives varied according to the context and situation, leading the relationship types to shift. The heterogeneity exceeded the different public servant profiles responsible for executing similar tasks. It was also evident when, for example, the same civil servant connected with the same actors but in different situations or spaces (at the settlement or at the municipal office, in a more casual or more important meeting, in face-to-face situations, or in response to an official notice). Through our research at the archives of INCRA's regional office in Marabá, we were able to confirm meaningful variations over time that revealed different assemblages in the relations between INCRA and movements in different historical periods (Penna, 2018).

In order to explore this instability, we opted to treat it not as potential noise but as a relevant research datum. In terms of the analytical work, the absence of an identifiable, more or less continuous pattern made a

simple classification of the data impossible. In order to capture this, we opted for a thick description that could bring to light the heterogeneity characterizing the interaction between INCRA and the movements. It is important to emphasize that describing is also explaining (Geertz, 2008). A description capable of sketching the connections that agents make—connections that lead them to be and to act in a certain way in a certain, always temporary, context—is an extremely powerful sociological explanation, especially for an understanding of social contexts as yet unstable (Latour, 2005).

Besides tracking the actors and seeking to identify their connections, and the effects of these connections, we adopted controversy mapping as a methodological strategy. Controversies or public disputes are compelling research objects because they encourage individuals and collectives to take a position and then provide arguments and evidence to justify that position, thus revealing stances that would not always be explicit in stabilized situations, that is, situations in which pending conflicts have been resolved (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999; Latour, 2005). The study of INCRA's regional office led us to identify three major public disputes that come up in day-to-day work and which have a direct or indirect impact on the relationship between the government and social movements: The generational gap and the concept each generation has of working within autocracy, the involvement of the social movements in policy implementation, and the influence of party politics within government. Civil servants with varying levels of seniority differ in terms of their perception of INCRA's role and the meaning of working for the organization. The relationship between INCRA and land reform beneficiaries was reworked over time, as evident in the dispute between civil servants whose years of service with the institute varied.

This allowed us to confirm that INCRA's relations with the movements are central to its institutional history. Opinions on the role of the movements in the process of implementing land reform policy are strongly divided, varying from reticence to enthusiasm, and the different views of civil servants can be attributed to a normative perception of the technical aspects of their work versus what they view as politically oriented behavior. The controversy surrounding the influence of political parties on the regional office is more public than the others because it takes shape through complaints and is expressed more frequently. Some civil servants criticize the political leveraging of INCRA as opposed to the technical considerations that they believe should guide people's conduct within the public administration.

### *Movements and INCRA Over Time*

Through research into colonization and expropriation processes in the local archive, it was possible to follow the traces and clues left by the different actors with connections to INCRA over time. Between 1970 and 2012, connections with the state body shifted as INCRA itself underwent changes. Toward the end of the military regime, most of the institute's connections were with the armed forces and police, companies, and individual plaintiffs seeking land tenure regularization for plots both big and small, without the mediation of any social organizations. With the return to democracy, organizations such as trade unions, religious groups, and rural worker associations began to connect with INCRA, forming a new assemblage characterized by the recognition of organizations representing rural workers.

This new assemblage, though unstable, implied a shift in the nature of the state entity. INCRA gradually began to incorporate new actors within its organizational logic, while the connections that characterized its existence and practice change over time (Penna, 2018). We argue that in order to understand this fluid process of state formation through connections, an ontological premise is needed that treats the state as a heterogeneous and unstable object whose effects (in the form of public policies) will always depend on assemblages stabilized at given moments in time.

### **Controversies and the Transnational Activism of CONTAG**

Generally, scholars who investigate transnational activism see only limited potential for the action of labor unions (Borras & Edelman, 2016; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). However, since its founding in 1963, the CONTAG<sup>1</sup> has had articulations with other organizations internationally. Over the years, these have been expanded and transformed. Given that this actor's profile did not appear to favor transnational integration, the research questions included how CONTAG managed to build diverse transnational articulations and how to make sense of the continuously reconfigured transnational activism. In order to find answers, we systematized a set of interactions that resulted in CONTAG's transnational integration as part of our research. By starting with a broad understanding of transnationalization as practices and frameworks inspired by engagement with actors beyond national borders

(Alvarez, 2000, p. 3), the research described the experience of CONTAG *vis-à-vis* the controversies in which it was immersed (Latour, 2005).

### *Observing Controversies in Order to Describe Associations*

The research was conducted between 2014 and 2017, and sources included CONTAG documents and publications, interviews, and participant observations of its activities. By examining these sources, we identified connections and associations with international issues, themes, and actors. Later, the list of associations was reorganized to match up related topics and actions and to identify the related disputes, that is, controversies. The following five controversies were identified: (a) within the labor unions, (b) on work conditions, (c) on the easing of international trade restrictions, (d) on farming models, and (e) on the presence of women. For each of these controversies, assemblages were described, that is, a bundling of the elements and their relationship to one another, along with their transformations over time.

In the 1960s, geopolitical disputes often led to trade union controversies and also enabled access to international resources. Years later, anyone looking for elements of this sort would find no more major connections or relevant events. However, trade union connections continued to be transformed, in the 1990s and beyond, by alliances on issues like work conditions at jobs for multinational companies (sugar cane cultivation and animal husbandry, among others) or by transnational campaigns. The topics, allies, types of relationship, and types of exchanges that characterized the connections all changed, as did CONTAG itself: The member groups of the confederation now had different political backgrounds, and the power balance within the organization had changed (Medeiros, 2014).

### *From Controversies to Modes of Gathering*

Instead of describing each of the controversies herein, we will focus on the easing of international trade restrictions and farming models. The question of trade restrictions initially became relevant for CONTAG in the disputes on agricultural standards at the World Trade Organization. Soon after, Brazilian civil society joined forces against the Free Trade Area of the Americas and began working to get rural work on the MERCOSUR agenda. CONTAG was one of the collectives that brought

a new term to the table at these international debates, family farming, which reflected important changes to its political platform amidst intense national disputes over the profile of rural unions. The confederation's international profile was characterized by negotiations on better conditions for family farmers and a discreet presence at protests. With financial and political support from NGOs, CONTAG established new connections at international forums with organizations other than farmworkers' unions.

An important dispute is associated with this process. After the transition to democracy in Brazil, rural social movements emerged and formed their own international articulations. CONTAG, MST, and the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*) joined forces to establish the Latin American Coordinator for Countryside Organizations (*Coordenadora Latino-Americana de Organizações do Campo*). However, differences on certain issues—such as how to deal with MERCOSUR—later culminated in the dissolution of these associations. One of the effects of this process was that CONTAG began to search for new allies in order to influence the MERCOSUR agenda.

This led to the establishment of a regional organization, the Coordinator of MERCOSUR Family Producer Organizations (*Coordenadora de Organizações de Produtores Familiares do Mercosul* [COPROFAM]). Allied with this new actor that began to operate in—and at times, even impact—the international sphere, CONTAG was able to speak on behalf of a collective broader than its national membership. By working with COPROFAM, CONTAG helped forge a space in MERCOSUR for issues related specifically to family farming, establishing what we consider to be a new controversy for member countries on the farming model.

In the CONTAG experience, this controversy is related to the specific characteristics of family farming that must be considered in both international agreements and in the national public policies resulting from such agreements, always with the participation of the farmers themselves. CONTAG, hand in hand with COPROFAM, articulated family farming, public policies, and participation and took it to MERCOSUR. One of the effects that CONTAG and COPROFAM had on MERCOSUR was the Specialized Meeting on Family Agriculture (REAF). Through REAF, family farmers also influenced public farming policies for all member states of the trade bloc. The articulation of these three elements thus became a new “mode of gathering” (Law, 2004; Rosa, 2015). In other words, after a certain way of bundling elements was tested and bore fruits, it began to be replicated and then employed in

other disputes. Though it was not possible to know beforehand what effects it would have when associated with new elements, it was possible to use this mode of gathering as a starting point.

CONTAG took family farming, participation, and public policies and brought them to bear on other articulations; at the same time, this articulation led CONTAG to forge new international paths. Farm worker union members began to participate in international organizations such as the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries. They forged alliances with activists in other countries, joining the World Rural Forum and forming a coalition to demand that the FAO declare 2014 the International Year of Family Farming.

In debates such as these, CONTAG strengthened its international presence, although the effects of this internationalization also affected its internal workings: More union members got involved in activities abroad and new controversies intensified. In order to describe this trajectory, it was necessary to track the activities CONTAG carried out in different spaces and at different scales, without a predefined definition of transnational union action. Action here emerges as an effect of assemblages, of continual work to bring things together. When elements are joined together, they are sometimes capable of producing the effects that actors expect. When this happens, the actors make an effort to keep those elements together and then bring them to bear in new disputes, although they may not know exactly what effects these will have in new situations. CONTAG's involvement in international controversies led to new associations—between bodies, objects, debates, and ideas—that then became part of both what we understand as transnational and what we understand as farm worker union activities. The very elements that comprise CONTAG became a source of dispute and were transformed as part of this trajectory.

## **A Theoretical–Methodological Agenda for Unstable and Heterogeneous Subjects**

The aim of describing these three investigations was to reconstruct heterogeneities and changes during research processes. The joint analysis of the descriptions led us to think about movements and state through the associations they establish, associations which bring collectives into being. This suggests that movements and state are transformed in the course of their activities, as new articulations are formed with their resulting effects. As noted in the introduction, the

dialogue with ANT and assemblage thinkers is possible, as both Jensen (2020) and Law (2009) have argued, since “both refer to the provisional assembly of productive, heterogeneous, and (this is the crucial point) quite limited forms of ordering located in no larger overall order” (Law, 2009, p. 146).

We suggest that movements and states persist in the *longue durée* precisely because they are heterogeneous, unstable collectives that continuously renew their composition, associations, and effects. This leads to an ontological definition in which their very existence involves continual assemblages of the elements tied up in doing politics.

In this section, we deal with these categories both theoretically and methodologically. To start, we define heterogeneity and instability in critical dialogue with other research that also employ those concepts. Later, we summarize our understanding on how to do research on the state and movements in ways that allow their instability and heterogeneity to remain visible.

This entails viewing the unstable composition of the collectives as assemblages, following the controversies they engage in and committing to relatively long-term research.

### *Heterogeneity and Instability*

The understanding of the heterogeneity of the state and civil society is critical to literature on contemporary political activism in Latin America, as it allows social organizations to be incorporated in the processes of building democracy and in the disputes surrounding political projects (Dagnino et al., 2006). In this regard, recent studies have noted the analytical weakness of establishing rigid boundaries between the state and social movements (Abers & von Bülow, 2011). In these cases, heterogeneity refers to diverse profiles of state agencies and types of interactions between civil society organizations and those agencies (Abers et al., 2014, 2018).

In our investigations, however, we also found heterogeneity within state agencies and within the collectives we researched. In other words, beyond the empirical implications of pluralistic interactions that heterogeneity entails, the studies we conducted led us to associate this concept with the very ontological fabric of the collective actors. Heterogeneity, then, refers to the way in which we understand the makeup of these actors *vis-à-vis* the continuously changing, uneven, and unstable associations they forge both internally and externally.



As we gathered materials about the long duration of the objects, the instability was ever-present, as will be described below. In our perspective, this can be observed in periods of greater or lesser activity—in internal organization and in public expressions—and also in the engagement with new controversies that can be considered contradictory in relation to the past.

In a description of the complexity of the field and feminist movements, Alvarez (2014) articulates this connection between heterogeneity and instability, showing the tension between the widespread narrative of homogeneity within feminist waves, and the heterogeneous composition of diverse women's collectives since the 1970s. The author explains how racial and generational issues multiplied the possibilities for articulation and shed light on the inequalities within feminist articulations with the NGO agendas, international organizations, political parties, and the state. In her work, Alvarez (2014, pp. 45–46) shows that the persistence of feminist movements is owed—as we suggest in our own research—to precisely the diversity of elements and the transformations of the “articulating webs and discourses” from one moment and space to the next. These elements were also noted by Jacobs (2018) when describing the urban land occupation with agrarian purposes in South Africa.

The need to adapt the focus leads the author to also suggest a change—one with epistemological implications—to the unit of analysis as well. The focus, then, would be on the partial shared universes that are constructed in each context.

It is here where we observed a dialogue with the notion of “ontological politics” developed by Mol (1999) and Law (2004) as an epistemological position in the social sciences. We believe that the set of investigations presented here points to the need to produce specific ontological politics comprised of heterogeneous, unstable elements whose influence and repercussions vary over time.

For researchers, a wager on the ontology of heterogeneity requires a methodological stance that acknowledges the partiality or empirical limitations of our investigations. As opposed to seeking or applying a single, unified representation, to use the term of de la Cadena (2015, p. 220), we must describe the articulations that could be traced in our research while acknowledging that these also exceed our research. Our investigations and research objects will always be situated within the political effects of partial sets of connections limited in time and space (Law, 2004, p. 155). Therefore, below we further discuss how to conduct research on movements, the state and the interactions between the two

from this perspective. This is the second level of methodological discussion within this article.

## **Conducting Research: Assemblages, Controversies, and Duration**

### *Movements and States as Assemblages*

As suggested above, the practical conditions inherent to research into this type of object requires that we go back a few steps before the collective reaches the streets, or before the public policy of interest is introduced. Considering that the research objects established in the literature are heterogeneous collectives that occasionally present themselves as stabilized or homogeneous, our descriptions must return to the articulation efforts that allowed them to take shape. Therefore, it is necessary to position these heterogeneous elements in relation to one another to show how, over time, a movement or a state is continually produced.

This notion is inspired by what is referred to as assemblage in the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Different appropriations of Deleuzian assemblages struggle with their intricate philosophical underpinnings. Buchanan (2015) differentiates between Deleuze's assemblages and later appropriations he refers to as "assemblage theory." This theory, in turn, has at least two strands: One connected to ANT and the other proposing a neo-assemblage theory.<sup>2</sup>

In a critical–realist approach, DeLanda's neo-assemblage theory produces a more stable definition of assemblages as "wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 5). DeLanda suggest a Deleuzian approach to social movements, stressing their ability to articulate a politics of the virtual. ANT's version is concerned with the agential power of material objects and "uses assemblage to name a complex form of causality" (Buchanan, 2015, p. 385). This version is found in Law (2004), Latour (2005), Müller and Schurr (2016), and in recent efforts to understand activism such as Rodríguez-Giralt et al. (2018).

There are, additionally, translation issues (Buchanan, 2015; Phillips, 2006). According to Phillips (2006, p. 108), Deleuze and Guattari's *agencement* refers to an effort to prioritize "neither the state of affairs nor the statement but [...] their connection, which implies the production of a

sense that exceeds them and of which, transformed, they now form parts.” Most commonly translated into English as assemblage, *agencement* reinforces the act of bringing elements together, arranging, disposing, and combining (Law, 2004). This, we understand, in a dialogue with Law, allows heterogeneous elements to be placed in relation to one another in performances whose effects are visible and able to be described in research. Assemblages continually produce difference, which sustains the existence of the movements over time and space.

In this article, we are particularly interested in assemblages as the production of the collectives, which is why we stress the strict definition of *agencement*. In keeping with Alvarez (2019), we understand that describing how, when, and where these assemblages occur would be the most suitable procedure for dealing with and producing these unstable research objects, as noted in Penna (2018). Yet how should this description be done? A description of this sort cannot draw on the purified terms and elements of the ontology that imposed the stabilized meanings of movement and state. The movements of Tarrow (1994), for example, already exist in books, classrooms, and even some collectives: They are already stabilized and territorialized. Yet do they provide an incisive description of the relations between the movements and state agencies we have researched in Brazil, Latin America, or South Africa? In our experience, the answer is no. In researching organizations such as the LPM, INCRA, and CONTAG, we constantly stumbled on elements without precedent. In the face of surprises or empirical ambiguities, we need to draw on things and terms which the objects themselves bring to the picture. Therefore, the components of the movements contributed to the production and expansion of our theoretically stabilized political ontologies. Yet when—and how—will it be possible to adequately observe such things?

### *Controversies*

As researchers, we rarely have the time to follow collectives and their elements for a lengthy period, nor can we be constantly on alert to capture an infinite heterogeneity. Inspired by the foundational texts of the ANT, we found ourselves involved with and researching collectives immersed in public controversies, which proved a privileged space for observing and describing them. In these situations, the diverse elements at work required a constant flow of new questions and elements to feed the dispute (Latour, 2005, p. 256; Latour & Woolgar, 1979).

Our use of controversies shifts away from Latour's proposal, which translates his strong argument in favor of the controversies into a cartography of controversies (Latour, 2005). We do not focus on an understanding of controversy itself: Controversy is not the subject here. Instead, the research objects are the collectives, especially how they take shape when immersed in controversy—because controversy forces them to reveal their associations and how these associations are built. It is possible for the assembled collective, movement, or state to perpetually connect with controversies produced in various spaces. As seen in the three investigations presented herein, movements and states can be tracked *vis-à-vis* the constant assemblage of elements for engaging in controversies. In our LPM narrative, we observed that when connections became less heterogeneous, the movement stabilized and ran the risk of publicly dissolving after becoming dependent on a single relationship (with a small, homogeneous group of NGOs).

In the CONTAG narrative, the organization's internationalization points to the fact that movements that endure over time are immersed in a range of controversies, some simultaneous. When one of these assemblages produces effects the movement considers positive, it is not unusual for activists to try to replicate it in other disputes. In such cases, the associated elements may become stable for some time, but the associations are again to be transformed as soon as they engage with others in a new controversy. The same occurs at INCRA, where the actors and connections involved in building the institute evolved in step with the institute instead, forming different assemblages over time. Controversies are thus the most favorable movement for describing assemblages and ontologies in a constant process of formation for both movements and state agencies.

### *Duration*

In methodological terms, the observation and description of heterogeneities, assemblages, and controversies require that research be organized in a specific way. Like Alvarez (2014), we have noted in our studies that the longer the research period, the easier it is to trace heterogeneity.

In our research, time is what allowed us to gauge different degrees of intensity in each movement at different moments in time, along with peaks and valleys in their public visibility. It also gave us the chance to interact with different spokespersons, including some who abandoned

the movement, others who stayed, and new ones who joined several years later. Each of these spokespersons brought different elements to the investigations, had varying levels of influence and, as we saw, increased the visibility of a specific controversy. In our studies, we observed how even the same spokespersons changed their mind on certain issues and forged ties with other people, legislations, and institutions within and outside the scope of the movement or state body initially outlined.

Beyond the dedication of the researchers or solid research design, following this dynamic also depends on the availability of resources, institutional and individual research conditions, and on the collectives with which we are working. Unlike the studies by Alvarez (2014) and Rosa (2015), the investigations on CONTAG (Carvalho, 2018) and INCRA (Penna, 2015) were part of a dissertation and limited by the requirements of this academic production. In order to compensate for time constraints on data collection, fieldwork was combined with participant observations, interviews, and archival research. At certain points, documents allowed us to trace the long-term trajectories of the collectives. Through them, we were able to observe the assemblages of new elements and principally, the public controversies in which both the movements and the state bodies were immersed over time.

## Conclusion

Terms like “movement” and “state” are central to debates and investigations into the dynamic of contemporary political life. The challenge associated with applying the sociological properties usually attributed to both state and movements in our studies led us to new reflections on such research. Digressing from existing research models involved ontologically observing the states and movements as heterogeneous collectives comprised and traversed by elements that do not primarily correspond to conceptually finite sets. The fundamental premise is that we cannot take such terms as autonomous analytical units. Therefore, the first output of this article was an ontological definition of movements and state as collectives whose existence involves continual assemblages of the heterogeneous, unstable elements tied up in doing politics.

Based on this definition, we sought to come up with alternatives to analytical models anchored in organizational, institutional, and, therefore, stabilizing perspectives. At the methodological level, we

defend the need to shift the focus of work to an instance prior to that analyzed in the literature—literature that addresses similar topics *vis-à-vis* their expression as a repertoire of collective action and public policy. We thus suggest that the main focus of research should be an understanding of the elements which, when assembled in a specific and describable form, allows things to take the courses we normally observe and analyze when examining the effects of both state and movements. In this way, we explore the possibility of building studies on the uninterrupted work of gathering and unbundling the elements that continually transform the collective, enabling their existence in the middle and long term. By acknowledging heterogeneity and instability, we can study movements and state over the long term, outlining the continual assemblage of elements that engage with public controversies in different ways.

Broadly, we conclude that the more elements a movement has to engage with controversies, the more likely it is to continue existing in the public sphere. Similarly, the more connections and controversies we can add to our description, the broader the scope of our research into political collectives. The stability of associations and effects—the point of departure for most of our texts—can become more analytically meaningful when we describe the continual work of diverse actors to stay together. This opens the door to expanding the sociology of political life into places barely explored and uncertain.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


### **Funding**

Marcelo C. Rosa funded by Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq). Priscila D. Carvalho funded by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (Fapemig).

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### **Notes**

1. In 2015, as the result of a dissociation process at CONTAG, rural wage workers began to be represented separately from family farmers (Picolotto,

2018). CONTAG now has family farming members and has adopted a new name, the National Confederation of Family Farm Workers (*Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores Rurais Agricultores e Agricultoras Familiares*). Herein, we employ its former name which was in use for most of the period under study.

2. Buchanan criticizes both as misappropriations. He questions ANT's focus "on the complex and undecidable" and DeLanda's focus on the "problem of emergence"; see Buchanan (2015).

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