

EXODUS, OR AN IMAGINED POLITICAL COMMUNITY: the Landless Workers Movement and internal migration in the work of Sebastião Salgado

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RESUMO

Esse ensaio se propõe a analisar parte da produção fotográfica de Sebastião Salgado sobre o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Terra, buscando compreender as relações entre o meio fotográfico e os níveis de movimentação revelados nas imagens. Trata-se de investigar como tais imagens retratam uma “nação”, fragmentada e heterogênea, a partir da representação de uma comunidade migrante. Recusando migrar para grandes cidades brasileiras, o MST assume um caráter periférico. Tal aspecto de resistência deste grupo é foco das fotografias de Salgado. No entanto, como verificamos com a análise, há uma tensão definitiva entre “ser representado” e “representar-se a si mesmo”: o MST, por sua própria natureza política, reforça a importância da fotografia na arte de “fazer história”.

Palavras-chave: Fotografia. Migração. MST. Espaço periférico. Movimentação.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

Previously, at dawn that day, a commission assigned to the task had discovered the corpse of Antonio Conselheiro. It was lying in one of the huts next to the arbor. After a shallow layer of earth had been removed, the body appeared wrapped in a sorry shroud - a filthy sheet - over which pious hands had strewn a few withered flowers. There, resting upon a reed mat, were the last remains of the 'notorious and barbarous agitator'... They carefully disinterred the body, precious relic that it was - the sole prize, the only spoils of war this conflict had to offer! - taking the greatest of precautions to see that it did not fall apart... They photographed it afterward and drew up an affidavit in due form, certifying its identity; for the entire nation must be thoroughly convinced that at last this terrible foe had been done away with.

- from Euclides da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1902

The *Guerra de Canudos* represented a resistance to change in the beginning of the Republic in Brazil. It was a primitive rebellion carried out by a small, rustic and fanatical community gathered by Antonio Conselheiro, its leader and preacher, in a small village-sanctuary in the Brazilian northeast backlands. There, Conselheiro preached the reinstatement of the Monarchy and provoked the local government into sending four separate military expeditions. Only the fourth expedition managed to suppress Conselheiro and his supporters eternalizing his name in Brazilian folklore. It was the photograph of his corpse, however, which allowed the construction of his identity and the possibility of the historical narrative about a movement that combined social need with religious content.

This essay will look at some of Sebastião Salgado's photographs. Our main argument is that, when photographing the *Landless Workers Movement (MST)*, Salgado

is able to depict the movement of the group not only on the level of content, but also on the structural level of the image. Therefore, the *Landless Movement*, a political movement characterized by its continuous migration from place to place trying to find productive lands in Brazilian countryside, also represent a fragment of a hybrid nation, in which there are no defined boundaries across centres and peripheries. Hybridity, in this case, is defined by Bhabha (1994):

C]olonial hybridity is not a problem of genealogy or identity between two different cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition (Bhabha, 1994: 114).

In addition to this, this essay contemplates the relationship between photography and history.

From religious pilgrimages, obscure religious rites, funerals, bloodied bodies, to children and mothers, Salgado's photographs represent a diversity of subjects. Nevertheless, in some of his last publications, such as *Terra: Struggle of the Landless* (1997) and *Migrations* (2000), Salgado has focused more precisely on photographing economically and socially marginalized groups moving from place to place. As he writes in the presentation of the chapters in *Migrations*:

Latin America's recent history has been molded by the migration of millions of peasants to urban areas. The great majority abandons the country as a result of poverty, as the best arable lands are concentrated in the hands of a rich minority. Some refuse to give up: the indigenous people from the Amazon region struggle to stay in their tribal lands; in Southern Mexico, the Zapatista rebels use guns to recover the land they have lost; the Landless Movement in Brazil (*MST* or *Movimento dos Sem-Terra*) dares to appropriate private properties in spite of repression. In general, the battle has been lost (...) The consequence is the vast uncontrollable metropolises such as Mexico City and São Paulo, surrounded by slums in which the migrants crowd together, and in which urban violence represents a threat even for the most privileged^[2] (Salgado, 2000).



In many of Salgado's images, this lost battle seems to become denser, as the picture above illustrates. It was taken in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1997. As the caption explains, millions of children live in the streets of the big city, many of them sons and daughters of peasants who earlier migrated from the desolate countryside.

Lying in makeshift beds is a group of children. One holds a bottle containing glue and fixes upon the camera. Occupying part of a pavement, the group of children is the subject matter of the photograph. Yet, Salgado also frames three street cleaners and people walking on the street. On the right-hand side of the photograph, the kids sit, and, in the rest of the frame, a depiction of the everyday life in the city: walkers passing by seemingly unaffected by this reality, and cleaners on duty. The photograph shows these two poles: one static group and the other in movement. The movement is depicted and emphasized by the blurred effects in the photograph: one woman's legs as she steps and the busy brooms of the cleaners.

It is worth noting that one of the brooms is practically sweeping over the edge of the "bed" and, inches away, is the boy looking to the camera. It is as if he were about to be swept away, together with the litter thrown onto the streets.

The tension of the interception between these divergent realities is evident in this photograph. Street children are not only socially and economically marginalized, but are also unaccepted. What are, then, the representations in Salgado's composition? They are surely far from the romantic representations of Brazil, with its idyllic landscapes and mythical characters. Here, it is the contrary that is elaborated: poverty, social imbalance, urban degradation. Not the creation of an idealised space anymore,

but a differentiated space, between the growth of the cities and the abandonment of its inhabitants.

One of Salgado's preoccupations when picturing socially marginalized groups is to understand how space determines the lives of peoples and how they live, react, and change to their environment. Despite the aesthetic essence of Salgado's photographs, the social content is a statement on behalf of a social change. This dimension is not restricted to Salgado's photography, but is the purpose of documentary:

This is how documentary works... It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak... since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium... The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content (Scott, 1973 quoted in Wells, 2000: 90).

The kind of photography practised by Salgado, between documentary photography and photojournalism, has aspects of both genres^[3]. It is an engaged photography, explicitly ideological. As Wells writes it:

Photography is seen as being complicit in the discourses which function to exert social control. 'Documentation' cannot act to reveal inequalities in social life, for there can be no document that is merely a transcription of reality. Rather, as part of a discursive system, it constructs the reality that it purports to reveal. But this is not a random creation, for it is created within the ideological positions framed by the discourses which are themselves part of the system of power (Wells, 2000: 107).

Moving towards a more documentary kind of photography, Salgado composes his images within a political and aesthetic practice that fluctuates between art and denunciation. Even when working for Magnum as a photojournalist, Salgado was not forced to perform within the molds of traditional photojournalism. Recently, working independently on his own publications and moving towards a more liberated practice, Salgado has imposed his own style into the photographs and is now one of the most influential contemporary photographers^[4].

Looking at the photograph of the street children and the road sweepers in São Paulo, we can verify that Salgado depicts the different social groups exploring social subjectivity, instead of only illustrating facts. The gaze of the boy towards the camera is also a gaze towards the audience that consumes the photograph. As Scott (1973) words it, it is a "confrontation". For Stallabrass, this "looking back" aspect of Salgado's photographs is a "sign of communication and interdependence" (1997: 19). The readers of Salgado's books are reminded that "every time they buy a jar of coffee, strike a

match or climb into a car they are participating in the running of global economy in which their wealth and comfort is founded upon poverty and pain among people distant and near” (Idem).

According to Stallabrass (1997),

The military dictatorship which governed Brazil for over twenty years, particularly when led by General Emilio Garrastazu Medici, imposed resolutely technocratic policies. It was committed to swift industrialization, and sought to quiet political opposition with economic growth, and by instilling a mood of modernizing national optimism. Given this, Salgado’s concentration on the economically marginal or apparently unproductive, on the rural, on close contact with the soil and with spirits - above all, on those times when people are able to escape from work - was a political act rejecting the values of the dictatorship, and embracing what he took to be an indigenous alternative (Stallabrass, 1997: 7).

Thus, Salgado’s preoccupation is to register the consequences of the forced modernization in Third World societies. Therefore, Salgado steps into the places of the forgotten, of the ones that are hidden from the world, in the countryside and in the dirty corners of the big cities.

Salgado represents the *other*: the *other* of the First World^[5], the *other* of modernization. This *other*, which is treated as unwanted rubbish. This is the situation of most street children in the big cities of Brazil, a consequence of the waves of migration from interior regions. They are landless, either by consequence of long drought in the Backlands, or by having been removed by the land owners.

However, some of these families have not given up fighting for land. And this is the theme of Salgado’s publication *Terra: Struggle of the Landless*. Salgado goes back to places where the absence of modernization has invisibly damaged and impoverished the workers of the land.

The Landless Movement in Brazil’s countryside is described in the captions of the photographs, at the end of the book. I will quote him extensively, as he explains: Ten thousand Brazilian families live in encampments along the highways in various parts of the country. These are the families of the landless who have gradually come together to form veritable cities (...) Conditions of life are very rudimentary. Everything is lacking: water, food, sanitary facilities, schools for the children, medical attention, etc. In addition, the people live in the greatest insecurity, subject to provocations and violence from *jaçunços*, or hired gunmen, and other forces of repression organized by the estate owners, who fear the occupation of their unproductive lands by the landless. In any case, the disinherited of the earth nurse the hope of better days. And one thing

is certain: they no longer wish to flee to the cities that cannot absorb them, provide them with jobs or the conditions of a life of dignity. Shielding themselves from the threat of delinquency and prostitution in the large urban centres, they prefer to remain in the encampments along the highways and await the opportunity to occupy the land so long dreamed of, even at the risk of their lives (Salgado, 1997: 141).

In the section dedicated to the Landless Movement in *Terra*, the photographs show the development and the construction of a politically driven community pursuing a singular will. Salgado photographs this group of people and registers their *heroic* actions, such as the opening of the Estates' entrance gates, the destruction of barbed wire fences, the invasion of the lands, the raising of camps and settlements, etc., as well as moments of their everyday experience. The photographs in the book have been ordered to suggest a thread and the spectator is able to follow all the movements of the community. Salgado's photographs work as a counter-discourse from all other discourses on the landless movement, especially those of the news media which focus exceptionally on conflicts.



The above photograph is one of various taken by Salgado during the occupation of a plantation in the State of Paraná, Southern Brazil, in 1996. Salgado explains that the Giacometti plantation, the biggest in the State, had been served a decree for the expropriation of the area as a *latifúndio* (Great Estate) by the government in the 80's. "However, as the Giacometti group had close ties with the political establishment then dominant in the State of Paraná, the expropriation process was shelved" (Salgado, 1997: 142). In 1996, 3,000 families invaded the plantation and, as Salgado writes, this obliged the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCRA) to re-initiate the process of expropriation.

Here is a document that registers a community of landless workers raising camp. At the far end of the landscape the tents are being put up, while, in the foreground, people are walking down carrying their belongings, especially furniture to furnish the tents. Resembling an ant community, the photograph captures the group working together. Yet, more significant, is the depiction of movement present in the photograph, which can be seen on two levels. On the level of the image, there is the depiction of a moment of action, in which the characters are literally moving; and on the level of the event, we witness the occupation, the invasion of a piece of land.

This links to what Bhabha (1994) proposes when discussing the different voices that appear from the frontiers of the ethnocentric ideas. The community represented by Salgado is continually mobile and from the margins, it is able to break through the limits between centre and periphery:

The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices - women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexuality. For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasants and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out: 'Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks... The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses' (Bhabha, 1994: 4-5).

This is a community that imposes its marginality and, at the same time that they resist and maintain themselves in the margins, they also move around in search of land, and thus gradually disintegrate the rigid boundaries between centre and periphery.



The crowd of workers raise their work tools. This image shows an even stronger depiction of the people as a community. The description of the photograph indicates that this is a manifestation in celebration of the decree of expropriation of an area in Sergipe, North-eastern Brazil. This group of 2,800 families had been living on the land for several months, enduring hardship and hoping that the *latifúndio*-expropriation decree would come about.

Aware of this context, it is easier to understand the different expressions in the peasants' faces. Differently from the previous photograph, in which the group prevails in relation to the individual, the above photograph illustrates a careful attentiveness to each individual. Despite being an evident delineation of the struggle of a group, the character construction is also an important part of Salgado's work, in which each individual is a fundamental part of the whole.

There is a fusion of different feelings in the faces of the individuals. It is understandable that many of them have a smile on their faces, as they finally received the compensation for that they have been struggling for. However, it is also understandable that others demonstrate determination, and tiredness. After all, the granting of the land to the group was simply an act of justice.

This leads us to the discussion of another relevant aspect in studying visual culture, the question of visibility. In Salgado, the photographed clearly belong to the universe of the image to such an extent that they can evaluate the movement's political importance. The people, as a community and as a movement have the undoubted consciousness of *making* history.[\[6\]](#).

One of the major qualities of Salgado's work is that it granted the movement with an international projection. However, what is at stake in these images is the familiarity of the photographed with the apparatus. The differential aspect in Salgado is that not only the political actions are privileged. There is a balance between these important events for the movement and the representation of the everyday, in which the depiction of the individuals is so crucial.^[7]



Many of Salgado's photographs point to this construction of meaning in movement. As in this case, a photograph also taken in 1996, captures the moment in which around 12,000 landless workers occupy a plantation in the State of Paraná, in the very South of Brazil. Salgado writes:

The human river that flowed along the asphalt through the night, discharging at the gate of the plantation, stops and backs up like the waters of a weir. The women and children are quickly sent to the rear of the 'dam', while the men take positions at the front of the imaginary line to prepare for the possible confrontation with the plantation's *jagunços* [hired gunmen].

With no reaction from the *latifúndio's* small army, the men in the vanguard break the padlock and the gate opens wide. They enter. Behind them, the human river begins to move. Scythes, hoes, and banners are raised in the unrestrained avalanches of hope in this re-encounter with life - and the repressed shout of the landless sounds as

one voice in the brightness of the new day: 'AGRARIAN REFORM - THE STRUGGLE OF ALL!' (Salgado, 1997: 143).

This image is more evidence of the meaning of movement to Salgado. The space within the frame, blurred by mist and fog, is divided into two: on one side of the gate and the barbed wire fences is the land that for months the group has been hoping to gain; and on the other, the people that resisted for such a long time, ready to occupy the plantation. What is, then, the location of the people in the image? Again, it is a transitory location, as their permanence in the plantations' surroundings was a sign of resistance, until they were able to receive the right to work on the land.

However, held in this photograph is the moment of the occupation, the opening of the gates and the steps of the people towards the land. The spectator witnesses the occupation of the land, but also, and most interestingly, the occupation of the space of the image by the group. As discussed previously, there is an interesting relationship between photography and history. The people pictured carry their banners, the movement's flag, and the instrument that has been the symbol of the movement, the sickle, which as well as their everyday working tool, represents their weapon. There could be a clear dialogue between the use of the sickle and the emblem of communism (the hammer and sickle), and with some of the communist ideals.

In Salgado, there is both the innocence and naivety before the camera, and a certain militant aesthetic that shows the clear knowledge of the role of photography through history.

Salgado's photographs are an attempt to register the fragments of a nation. He does so by representing the marginalized and depicting the movements of minorities, a representation that is in essence very different from the discourses of the media, because it adds to the content the aesthetic and militant elements. In his images, Salgado carefully pieces together the in-between space of culture referring back to the hybrid spatialities of Bhabha, Spivak and Soja, where borders are blurred.

As Edward Said beautifully puts it in his *Reflections on Exile* (2001), these "crowds without hope" live on the frontier between the "us" and the "others", where lies the "dangerous territory of the not-belonging" (Said, 2001: 50). Said argues that these migrant communities are people subtly lost and with no history to recount. In this case, the *Landless Movement* would be an exception. As shown above, the images of the *Landless Movement* reveal a constant preoccupation with representation.

Salgado translates the movement of resistance from this migrant group to the level of the photograph, creating a fragment of a nation that struggles to resist, moving from place to place, but refusing to fall into the marginalization of peripheral groups in

big cities. In their peripheral countryside, they resist, literally crossing barriers and stepping into spaces that do not belong to them.

ABSTRACT

The objective of this essay is to analyse the photographic production of Sebastião Salgado of the Landless Workers Movement, aiming at understanding the relationships between the photographic medium and the levels of movement revealed by the images. It investigates how such images portray a “nation”, fragmented and heterogeneous, from the representation of a migrant community. Refusing to migrate to Brazil’s big cities, the Landless Movement accentuates its peripheral nature. Such aspect of resistance from this group is the focus of Salgado’s photographs. Nevertheless, as it is argued throughout the essay, there is a definite tension between “being represented” and “representing itself”: the Landless Movement, because of its political essence, reinforces the importance of photography in the art of “making history”.

Key-words: Photography. Migration. Landless Workers. Movement. Peripheral spaces. Movement.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este ensayo es analizar la obra fotográfica de Sebastião Salgado en el Movimiento de los Trabajadores sin Tierra, buscando comprender las relaciones entre el medio fotográfico y los niveles de movimiento revelado por las imágenes. Esta obra investiga como estas imágenes retratan una nación fragmentada y heterogénea desde la representación de una comunidad en movimiento y nomada. Rehusando migrar a las ciudades grandes de Brasil, esta obra asume un carácter periférico. Tal aspecto de resistencia de este grupo es lo centro de las fotografías de Salgado. Sin embargo, como se analiza a fondo en el ensayo, existe una tensión definitiva entre “ser representado” y “representarse a sí mismo”: el Movimiento de los Trabajadores Sin Tierra, debido a su naturaleza política, refuerza la importancia de la fotografía en el arte de “hacer historia”.

Palabras- clave: Fotografía. Migración. Movimiento de los Trabajadores Sin Tierra. Espacios periféricos. Movimiento.

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[2] My translation.

[3] Salgado became a photographer late in his career. He studied Economics in Sao Paulo and undertook a PhD in Paris specialising in development problems. Only in 1974 did he decide to become a professional photographer, joining Sygma Photo Agency. In 1979 he joined the famous Magnum agency and was recognised worldwide for his report on the famine in Sahel, in 1984.

[4] The debate across academia and the press regarding photojournalism and documentary photography is further discussed in Wells, 2000, in her account on Documentary Photography. See pages 74-83. Stallabrass (1997) clarifies: "The shunning of photojournalism and documentary photography is composed of two opposing forces. The trend in the commercial news world has been to strip such photography of its critical function, to produce a photography which reports, but only what is novel and up-to-the-minute, what is sensationalist and bloody, and to do so in flash-lit, often highly mannerist styles which change from year to year. The trend in academia, by contrast, has generally been to criticise documentary photography for being insufficiently critical, particularly of its own practice, and to move towards work which is more self-reflexive, and based on an interrogation of signs and representation. The postmodern critique of such documentary work has had some role, if only of intellectual justification, in its being driven from the mass media." (p. 3-4)

[5] Over the years, Salgado has photographed in many different countries in all continents (see *Migrations*, 2000). His preoccupation with global economy and unequal distribution of goods in the world is seen in his choice of picturing many different Third Worlds. This universality in the global economic system shows the interdependence between First and Third World and a will to overcome this position. Of his report in Sahel, Salgado comments: "Sometimes we, from the Southern hemisphere, wonder why you, in the North, think you have the monopoly of beauty, of dignity, of riches..." (Salgado quoted in Stallabrass, 1997: 10) This comment was made in response to criticisms of Salgado's style, often defined as beautifying poverty.

[6] The work of Sottili (1999) shows that since the Landless movement was created in the beginning of the 1980s, there has been an extremely high quantity of images produced on the movement all over Brazil. Mainly, there has been images produced by the media; however, the movement created their own newspaper, the *Jornal dos Trabalhadores Sem-Terra* [*The landless workers' Journal*], founded in 1984, and recruited their own freelance photographers.

[7] It is possible to perceive this everyday life depiction in Salgado's photographs of individuals, the children, the mothers and the families he portrays.