

Social movements, child participation and children's rights in Brazil*

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Abstract

In this paper, the child participation in collective actions in dialog with the academic production about the Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua (MNMMR) - National Movement of Street Boys and Girls - and the Sem Terrinha - Little Landless -, a collective of children linked to the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) - Landless Workers' Movement is analyzed. The text seeks to reveal the participation of children in each movement, in the tension between the legal provisions on the rights of the child and their concrete experiences. When seeking to understand the meaning of fulfilling children's rights in their daily lives, the perspective of rights governance, the relationship with the State and the political dimension stand out in each movement. The intent was to discuss the conceptions of participation and "protagonismo" faced by the hierarchical relations of power between adults and children, both in the organization and management of movements and in the legitimation of discourses. Thus, the work contributes to the theories of the studies of social movements and collective actions, since it demonstrates that the concepts of agency and participation cannot be taken as a priori assumptions, as they demand analysis of the conditions and contradictions for their effectiveness. In this direction, the understanding of the child as a social actor is revealed, in both movements, as a way of overcoming the victim mentality in order to occupy the place of a subject who collectively fights for his/her rights.

Keywords

Child – Social movements – Child participation – Protagonismo.

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In this paper, we analyze the children's participation in collective actions, in dialog with academic production on the *Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua (MNMMR)* - National Movement of Street Boys and Girls - and the *Sem Terrinha* - "Little" Landless - of the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)* - Landless Workers' Movement.

We seek to contribute to the understanding of the child participation in social life, considering his/her insertion in social movements and collective actions. Based on Liebel's (2012) perspective, who proposes the analysis of the child participation, not from normative texts but from concrete experiences (participation from below), we characterize each Movement and its participation in the fight for the protection of children's rights, confronted with the prevailing views in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). We observed that the child is practically absent in theories about actor and social action in the studies of social movements; in addition, there is a gap in the analysis of the child participation in collective actions of childhood studies². In this paper, we seek to have a dialog with both fields in the analysis of participation experiences.

The study was built based on secondary data, generated from the literature about the two Movements: Doctoral dissertations, papers or chapters and books. We analyzed the relationship between elements of children's agency in the Landless Workers' Movement (ARAÚJO, 2007; BARROS, 2013; CORREIA; GIOVANETTI; GOUVÊA, 2007; FREITAS, 2015), in the MNMMR (COSTA, 1998; MNMMR, 1985, 1995; PEREIRA, 2011), the contemporary theoretical framework on social movements and collective actions (DOIMO, 1993; GOHN, 1998; MELUCCI, 1996; TOURAINE, 1997) and on the rights of the children and their participation (FERGUSON, 2013; GOUVEA *et al.*, 2019; LIEBEL, 2012; PILOTTI; RIZZINI, 1995; ROSEMBERG; MARIANO, 2010).

We do not intend to conduct a comparative analysis, but, rather, to highlight the singularities of child participation in these two Movements. This paper is structured as follows: initially, we have a dialog with the theoretical references of analysis of social movements and collective actions, especially considering the concept of "actor"; then, we analyze the emergence of social movements in Brazil after the 1964 dictatorship, among which are the MST and the MNMMR; subsequently, we investigate the production of childhood studies on child participation and agency in the formulation and evaluation of the CRC document. Finally, we analyze the conceptions of child participation in each Movement, in order to highlight the discussion about child autonomy within power relations with adults.

Social movements, collective actions and children's agency

Childhood studies affirm the children's agency through the notions of social action, social actor and subject. These studies understand that children are social actors,

2- In the work *Palgrave handbook of childhood studies* (QVORTRUP; CORSARO; HONIG, 2010), there is no reference to the child participation in social movements.

active subjects in the construction of their lives, in the relationship with other children and adults and with society, even if subjected to the constraints of social structures (JAMES; PROUT, 2015). Mayall (2002) brings to the analysis of childhood the distinction established by Giddens between “actor” and “agency”. On the one hand, children would be social actors, because they act in the world. The agency, on the other hand, presupposes the ability to intervene in reality, transforming it (MAYALL, 2002). However, to Spyrou (2018), this distinction is not present in most studies in the field, with the agency being “essentialized”, considered a property of the child. According to the author, concepts formulated to analyze the actions of adults are transposed to understand the experience of children and adolescents.

Considering children as social actors requires understanding that their actions are regulated by a system of common norms recognized as valid (LADRIÈRE, 1971) and that their actions have subjectively oriented meanings in the relationships in which they participate (COHN, 1979). However, this way of analyzing social action is marked by adult rationality, from which this notion was developed. As formulated, it supposes a degree of autonomy and freedom that does not exist for this generational group. Understanding children’s collective participation experiences requires considering the tension between protection and autonomy.

In this sense, understanding the participation of children and adolescents in collective actions supported by adult groups requires a discussion of their characteristics and reach, in view of the generational condition and the asymmetries of power. It also requires the explanation of the meanings of social movements and collective actions when referring to the social participation of children and adolescents. We argue that, even when subjected to adult control, children and adolescents reveal agency in their individual and collective experiences. Nevertheless, we consider that it is not possible to carry out a direct transposition of these concepts in order to understand the children’s experience (SANTOS; SILVA, 2016). For this reason, we discuss the notions of collective action and social movement, and then indicate the way in which we understand them as referred to the *MNMMR* and the *Sem Terrinha*.

The concepts of social movements and collective actions are based on the recognition that the actors³, more or less consciously, dispute control or seek to transform their images and those of the field in which they find themselves. Touraine (1996, p. 59) argues that contemporary societies are defined less by institutions, by a central power and by permanent values or rules than by this field of disputes, whose challenge is the “social use of the symbolic goods produced in them” - which relate to the very definition of forms of social reproduction, production and social development. In this perspective, the author elevates the actor to the center of the analysis of social life, which, to him, must be understood through the multiplicity of systems that constitute it and the conflicts between the different groups. He points out, however, that the conflicts that constitute social systems do not eliminate the central social conflict, which is expressed in the struggle for control of historicity, that is, for the control of the capacity of society to

3- We will not work with Giddens’s distinction between actor and agency, because this is not present in the theorists of social movements and collective actions with which we have a dialog in this text.

transform itself. With this perspective, the author gives a central role to collective actions that may or may not become a social movement which, according to him, is the collective actor that is in dispute for historicity.

In the same direction, Melucci (1996) understands collective action as a product of heterogeneous social processes. The author recognizes that collective action is part of a field of relationships with multiple meanings and often contradictory demands. This author advocates that conflicts are multiple and can only be explained by the social relations in which they are produced.

As pointed out by Melucci (1996), complex societies have specific types of social relations that characterize their multiple systems: the system that ensures the production of societal resources and involves antagonistic relationships; the system of decisions about the distribution of these resources - the political system; the role system that governs exchanges and development, that is, the organizational system that ensures internal balance, through integration processes; and the world of life, or the reproduction system of everyday life. To him, the distinction of these levels of analysis allows to better understand the phenomena of collective action without closing them in the generic notion of social movement. This would be characterized, then, as a category that designates collective action that invokes solidarity, causes a conflict to be manifested and results in the breaking of the compatibility limits of the system in which the action takes place. Breaking the compatibility limits is understood by the author as the situation in which the action pushes the conflict beyond the limits of the social relations system in which the action is located, where non-negotiable objectives are placed and power relations are challenged.

The mobilization of the “collective action” and “social movement” concepts, to understand the phenomena analyzed in this paper, allows us to operate with the idea that the fight for children’s rights integrates multiple conflicts that include generational and class relations. This struggle brought together different individual and collective actors, at the national and international levels, in the dispute for the symbolic construction of children and childhood, and for the policies directed at them. The participation of children in social life and in the matters that concern them is one of the rights enshrined at the international level by the CRC and, at the national level, by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent - Law no. 8.069, of July 13, 1990 (BRASIL, 1990). This Statute, recognized as the expression of a new doctrine of childhood, is the result of struggles and social mobilizations that included, collectively in the *MNMMR*, children and adolescents supported by organizations that enacted in defense of their rights. Likewise, supported by the adults of the *MST*, a process of organization of the children took place, the *Movimento Sem Terrinha*, whose rights are, among other issues, the object of the actions in which they participate.

On the one hand, these two actions can be characterized as collective actions, as they manifest organization, solidarity and struggle for symbolic goods. On the other hand, that it is not a question of social movements in the sense discussed above, as they do not question the limits of compatibility of the social system of generational relations. They are, however, marked by identity processes of the generational condition and by the situation of social exclusion. They elaborate their demands and build spaces and times

for sociability and the exercise of solidarity. It is with this perspective in mind that we consider the children and adolescents of the *MNMMR* and the *Movimento Sem Terrinha* as “social actors”. On the one hand, we rely on literature referring to social studies of childhood and on research that observe that children are actors who interpret the world and, under certain conditions, are agents of transformation (MAYALL, 2002). On the other hand, we do not give this agency the same autonomy as adults. This means that we recognize the generational hierarchies that not only can give the direction of the action, but also limit actions originated from the children’s universe.

Rights of the child and social movements in Brazil

From the 1970s onwards, collective actions aimed at improving living conditions emerged in Brazil, which Sader and Paoli (1986) call the “new characters” entering the scene. Having as object the struggle for rights, the “new social movements” (GOHN, 1985) were constituted outside traditional spaces, with the idea of basic democracy with independence from political parties (ASSIES, 2016). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) constituted an important sector in this field, sharing the principles of autonomy, independence and basic democracy (DOIMO, 1993). Such NGOs developed actions that contributed to the incorporation, in the 1988 Federal Constitution, of forms of cooperation between the State and civil society (OLIVEIRA; HADDAD, 2001).

The social movements of the rural areas, in this period, took up the principles of agrarian reform prior to 1964, with collective actions of struggle for the land. In the 2000s, the social movements in the rural areas incorporated, among other themes, the concern with educational practices and issues of gender and generation (MIRANDA; FIÚZA, 2017), in a process of deepening and broadening their agendas.

At the international level, Brazil participated in the elaboration of the CRC, whose representation counted on the advisory of child protection movements (PILOTTI; RIZZINI, 1995). These movements also had a strong participation in the actions that culminated in the elaboration of the 1990 Statute of the Child and Adolescent – Law no. 8.069/1990 (BRASIL, 1990). This Statute is both an offshoot of the text of the 1988 Constitution and of the CRC, both documents being, until today, beacons of discussions and policies on children’s rights in the country.

The principle of participation and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child

It is undeniable that the CRC is a decisive legal framework in the legal apprehension of childhood. One of the novelties was the introduction of the principle of child participation. Much of the literature on the topic has focused on this principle, discussing its advances and contradictions (FERGUSON, 2013; LIEBEL, 2012; QUENNERSTEDT, 2013; REYNOLDS; NIEUWENHUYS; HANSON, 2006; TOBIN, 2013). Criticisms of the absence of children in the formulation of the text stand out (REYNOLDS; NIEUWENHUYS; HANSON, 2006), as well as the lack of definition of the concept of participation (TOBIN, 2013) and the mechanisms

for its promotion (LIEBEL, 2012), disregarding the singularity of the expression forms of the child. The participation model is especially criticized for being based on the experience of children in the countries of the Northern Hemisphere, taken as universal, not incorporating the forms of participation of children in the so-called Global South (MARCHI; SARMENTO, 2017; ROSEMBERG; MARIANO, 2010). At the same time, tensions between the principles of protection and participation are discussed (LIEBEL, 2012).

The protection principle, as formulated in the document, has been criticized for attributing ontological vulnerability and dependence exclusively to children, as if these characteristics were not present in adult life as human dimensions (LEE, 2001). Although children's vulnerability and dependence on adults are unequivocal, intergenerational relationships are characterized by an interdependence between adults and children, especially visible in situations of poverty.

On the one hand, it is observed that the privatist concept of child protection, present in the CRC document, which restricts social life to family and school spaces, clashes with experiences of circulation and participation in urban life, in work and leisure activities of the Latin American popular strata (LIEBEL, 2012; PARGA, 2004).

The principle of participation, on the other hand, is understood in the document as individual listening, circumscribed to themes understood as pertinent to the children's universe, such as school and leisure. Social participation is not considered a dimension present in the child's life in the exercise of his or her citizenship, but as a formative process for something to be carried out in adult life (MARCHI; SARMENTO, 2017; ROSEMBERG; MARIANO, 2010). To Milne (2015), the participation of children in the Northern Hemisphere was the basis for an agenda for the rest of the world without greater knowledge of children's experiences in movements in the so-called Global South.

The criticisms reflect the conditions of production of the document, which reproduced power relations between the signatory countries with marginal participation from the peripheral countries (TOBIN, 2013), which was reflected in the final text (PILOTTI, 2000).

Seeking to understand the different forms of participation, Liebel (2012) proposes to think about it not from the normative text of the CRC, but from the experiences of children in socio-cultural contexts that inform their uniqueness. Liebel (2012) notes that in the social movements for the defense of the rights of Latin American children, the term "*protagonismo*" is used rather than "participation", which highlights the children's centrality in the fight for their rights, a term that is absent in others contexts⁴ (GOUVEA *et al.*, 2019).

With this perspective, we will analyze the process of constitution of the *MNMMR* in which the children enacted directly in the definition and defense of rights, in the relationship with adults, and in the construction of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent. Then, we will discuss the production related to children of the *Movimento Sem Terrinha*, focusing on the emergence of the movement and highlighting the forms of participation of the children.

4 - Interestingly, Liebel (2012) uses the term "*protagonismo*", in Portuguese, stating that it would be difficult to translate into the English language.

National Movement of Street Boys and Girls: *protagonismo and institutionalization*

The *MNMMR* was born in 1982 and was established as an independent civil entity in 1985. It was conceived by NGOs, educators and politicians, in dialogue with children and young people in street situation and constituted itself as one of the movements that allied the struggle for political citizenship with the overcoming of socioeconomic exclusion processes. It was based on plural identities, such as gender, race, place of residence and, in the case of children in street situation, generation. Like the other social movements, the *MNMMR* established as a strategy to intervene in institutionalized spaces, in the context of the elaboration of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. The *MNMMR* was part of the “Child and Constituent Movement”, a collective action that guided the rights of the child in the text of the 1988 Constitution. As a result of this struggle, the final text, for the first time, attributed to the State the responsibility for the protection, dignity and respect for the children, expanding their rights in the recognition of the specificities of childhood (COSTA, 1998).

The emergence of the *MNMMR* is related to the significant increase in the number of children and young people in street situation in large cities and the ineffectiveness of social policies. The Movement was based on the life experiences of these children, understanding them as social actors, whose participation would be essential in the formulation and conquest of rights.

Initially, NGOs and academic research constructed a portrait of these boys and girls as deprived of childhood, sometimes associating them with criminality and sometimes depriving them of the condition of subjects (DIMENSTEIN, 1992; UNICEF, 1987). Literature on this experience indicates that children developed playful practices, as well as required protection and care from adults. In this sense, it was not a non-childhood (HUGHES; HOFFMAN, 1997), but a children's agency that confronted the dominant models (ROSEMBERG, 1993). The presence of these children on the social scene and their participation in the Movement contributes to the break with a view of child in street situation linked exclusively to crime.

In their daily lives, children developed networks of solidarity and sociability, through which they sought to defend themselves from the daily violence that was imposed on them⁵. Although most of them maintained affective bonds with the family, returning to their home of origin, they exercised freedom and autonomy, living most of the time on the streets (ROSEMBERG, 1993)⁶.

The main objective of the Movement was to build instances of organization for these actors. The *MNMMR* was structured by base groups, co-managed by the boys and girls themselves, where they discussed, among themselves and with adults, the social condition of the ones excluded; they acquired knowledge that qualified them to achieve

5- One of the main demands was the end of murder, violence and aggression of children (SUDBRACK, 2014), as well as the most diverse forms of violence and aggression caused by adults, especially by police.

6- This perspective resulted in a change in the name of these subjects. From street boys and girls, the term “boys and girls *in street situation*” started to be used in order to give visibility to the transitory character of their presence on the streets.

their rights and devised alternative projects for their lives. The Movement was organized into four projects: Conquest of Rights and Defense of Children and Adolescents; Education and Organization of Boys and Girls; Educator Training; Strengthening and Interiorization of the Movement⁷.

Based on their experience, children and adolescents demanded protection and care, and demanded the right to manage their lives, breaking with a perspective that opposes autonomy to protection and surpasses, in terms of participation, the conception pointed out by the CRC, circumscribed to the individual listening of the children.

The construction of participatory instances, especially in the meetings, made the exercise of democratic practice possible, in which children elected their representatives and developed action strategies. Evidently, such instances were crossed by intergenerational power relations, with NGOs having a decisive role in the organization and management of the Movement. The strategies for mobilizing and organizing meetings and forums often reproduced “adult-centered” dynamics, crossed by games of alterity between children and social agents, and leaders who worked in the Movement⁸.

The 1st National Meeting of Street Children⁹, in Brasília/Distrito Federal, Brazil, in 1986, gave children a voice to their demands and also to the national organization of the Movement, when its regionalization was established in five centers across the country¹⁰.

From that first meeting, the *MNMMR* concentrated its actions on the struggle for the construction of a legal apparatus that would promote the rights of children in street situation and guarantee their protection by the State. At the 2nd Meeting, held in 1989, political action in the National Congress was prioritized, with the discussion and symbolic approval of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, which took place in a voting ceremony of the Statute with strong representation in the affirmation of the child protagonist role in the formulation of the document. That day, 750 boys and girls occupied the National Congress, spoke and symbolically voted on the final text, ratified by congressmen in 1990.

Through these and other actions, the *MNMMR* participated directly in the formulation of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent. On the one hand, the Statute incorporated the basic principles of the CRC into its text. On the other hand, it built references for the policy of protection of Brazilian children in situations of vulnerability, based on the rights achieved in the 1988 Constitution. The Statute of the Child and Adolescent institutes the so-called “doctrine of integral protection” of children and adolescents, overcoming the punitive logic and giving them the status of citizens.

7- In 1992, the *MNMMR* counted on “[...] 90 structured local commissions, 139 base numbers of boys/girls and programs, about three thousand activists, and three training centers for street educators. And there were more than 400 assistance programs linked to the Movement” (FALEIROS, 1995, p. 89, our translation).

8- At the 5th Conference on the Rights of Children and Adolescents, held in 2005, the “Open Letter of Participating Adolescents” was produced, in which they demanded that these events took on a more playful character, as well as they had greater decision-making power (LAZZARETTI DE SOUSA *et al.*, 2010).

9- In 1984, with UNICEF support, several meetings were organized that culminated in the 1st Latin American Seminar on Community Alternatives for Assistance to Street Boys and Girls, in Brasília/DF, an important mobilization landmark to create the *MNMMR*. Based on successful experiences, the objective was to educate/mobilize/raise the awareness of boys and girls to the participation in the debate about their rights (PILOTTI; RIZZINI, 1995).

10- The Movement was structured in commissions at the local, state and national levels, with 100 local commissions, 23 state commissions and a National Council.

The process of formulating the Statute of the Child and Adolescent allowed to question the concept of participation present in the CRC, revealing collective strategies for the participation of the child. The Statute indicates as a fundamental right of the child the participation in family and community life, without discrimination (article 16, V); the participation in political life, within the legal limits (article 16, VI); and the organization and participation in student entities (article 53, IV). The *protagonismo* in the conquest of the rights of children and adolescents, understood as political actors, signals a model of participation as a dimension inherent to their social experience¹¹.

The Statute of the Child and Adolescent also instituted the criminal non-liability of children and young people under the age of 18, as well as the creation of bodies to monitor and implement policies for children, with the participation of civil society. The creation of Protective Councils, autonomous municipal public bodies, made up of elected members of civil society, responsible for monitoring and referring cases of children and adolescents in deprivation of rights and in conflict with the law, stands out. The creation of the Councils for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, made up of representatives of the public power, civil society and the third sector, responsible for supervising, debating and monitoring compliance with the Statute¹², is also noteworthy.

Such instances are constituted as organs of the system in order to guarantee the rights of the child in Brazil. In some cases, they encourage the participation of children, through “children’s conferences”, in which the rights of children are based on their own voices. However, these initiatives are still an exception in the Brazilian context - which confirms the challenge of recognizing children as social actors, as advocated by the legal framework.

The creation of the Protective Councils and Child Rights Councils institutionalized new models of governance for the rights of the child. The Statute of the Child and Adolescent, while imputing to the State the protection of children in street situation, with the creation of spaces and instances of care, attributes to civil society the local and national monitoring of the implementation of policies. A governance model is affirmed that reinforces the role of a State focused on social well-being, combined with democratic and regionalized management. However, as stated by Pilotti (2000), the effectiveness of the CRC in Latin American countries focused on the construction of legal frameworks, with excessive formalization that paid less attention to the structures of domination that support inequalities.

Field studies indicate the challenge of networking and strengthening of the system that guarantees rights. In the current context of social and political crisis, we witness the emptying of child protection programs and pressure from groups to end criminal non-accountability.

The most recent data indicate a rapid deterioration of children’s living conditions in Brazil after 2016, resulting from the economic recession, the scrapping of policies

11- Recently approved, Law no. 13.257, of March 8, 2016 - Legal Framework for Early Childhood -, according to its article 4, item II, provides that public policies aimed at early childhood must also, “[...] include the child’s participation in defining the actions that concern him/her, in accordance with his/her age and development characteristics” (BRASIL, 2016, our translation).

12- It is worth noting the recent visibility of the theme of children’s rights and the role of representatives in the Protective Council in the election for its members in 2019. The issue gained prominence in the media and in the public debate, reactivating mechanisms of civil society participation and reflecting the polarization present in the elections for the national and state Executive.

and the dismantling of social protection networks, a situation that worsens dramatically with the arrival of the Bolsonaro government, who already presented, on his agenda, the dismantling of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent and the destruction of social movements, issues that are contemplated in his government. Thus, it is possible to observe the fragility of the conquests of rights by the child, in a country where democracy is still recent and the socio-racial inequality is historical and persistent.

The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and children's rights

The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) results from the social struggles that took shape in Brazil in the 1970s (ARAÚJO, 2007), being structured in 1984 (BARROS, 2013). The *MST* is the main social movement fighting for Agrarian Reform in Brazil. It has a set of articulated actions that involve direct political clashes, land occupations belonging to large landowners and, more recently, to large agribusiness companies (ROSSETO, 2016).

With the development and consolidation of its actions, this Movement also works on the symbolic construction of recognition of its forms of struggle, through cultural practices, rituals and forms of sociability for valuing the land, life in the countryside and the culture of the populations in rural areas, with the historical objective of building the socialist project of society (ARAÚJO, 2007).

According to Barros (2013, p. 20, our translation), in the symbolic scope of the production of individual and collective social identities, "[...] being and acting as a Landless in struggle is one of the main ways that the peasants found for the construction of their stories".

In research that heard children from a Landless camp (CORREIA; GIOVANETTI; GOUVÊA, 2007), it was observed that the children's experiences with adults and with each other made the understanding of their own life contexts and the meanings of the collective struggle for land possible, accompanying decision-making situations, which include situations of confrontation with the police and landowners and, also, the ongoing legal procedures. Thus, the participation of children in the *MST* can be apprehended by their position in the family, which is the subject and beneficiary of the conquest of land, when it occurs. However, internally, the *MST* will be confronted with the issue of the participation of women, young people and children, the latter as a subject with particularities - which includes their own languages for expressing their needs and desires (FREITAS, 2015).

The childhood experience, marked by the poverty that characterizes the Brazilian rural areas, becomes a theme of struggle and symbolic production within the Movement. The issue of the absence of schools will also bring the discussion of children's rights to school in line with the agenda of the *MST* struggle, although, for the Movement, from the beginning, education goes beyond the idea of school education (BARROS, 2013). The right to education as the principle of the *MST* is understood in studies on the Movement as part of the struggle for land and Agrarian Reform. The *MST* claims the right to school education in the Agrarian Reform settlements, articulating the struggle for land with

the struggle for access to knowledge, denouncing the exclusion of workers from basic fundamental rights.

Education in the broad sense is, therefore, the gateway to the discussion of the rights of children as singular subjects of the *MST*. The analysis of the literature on education in the *MST* indicates that it has a double meaning: the achievement of living conditions for working families in the countryside, and as part of the struggle for the construction of the socialist project of society.

The “in the skin” experience and without any protection resources, especially from violence and poverty, constitutes the experience of being a landless child (BARROS, 2013, p. 34). Thus, when discussing the participation and struggle for the rights of these children, it is important to consider their insertion in a movement for the struggle for land and for the transformation of society, in a social experience that seeks to form, in children, subjectivities that incorporate the struggle for land as part of the social practice of their group of belonging, that is, the childhood of the countryside (BARROS, 2013).

The *MST*, while fighting for school education, formulates a specific pedagogy for children, developing publications aimed at children, such as the *Jornal* and *Revista Sem Terrinha*. Barros (2013) identified the emergence of a concern with the education of children by the *MST* based on the demand that children have specific space for their activities at the Movement’s congresses, which led to the creation of *Cirandas Infantis*¹³.

Cirandas Infantis fulfill two functions: providing continuity of interrupted school learning for the participation of families and their children in Congress and favoring their specific organization in the Movement (BARROS, 2013). In this sense, participation is a central category, since, in favoring participation, the *MST* expects children to be trained to take part in the struggle for land - which does not mean an action exclusively for the future.

The child is conceived as an agent that enacts alongside adults in the struggle for schools, in the implantation of the so-called “itinerant schools” and they are subjects of an education that aims to strengthen the Landless identity and the belonging to the *MST* (BARROS, 2013). The conception of the child as a political subject is observed, although, ultimately, it is the adult leaders who create the spaces and define their goals. Thus, the apprehension of children’s collective action cannot abstain from the analysis of intergenerational relations in a process of mutual recognition and reciprocity (MELUCCI, 1996).

The *MST* organizes *Cirandas Infantis* and Encounters of the *Movimento Sem Terrinha*, which are educational spaces in which children are provided with experiences of reflection on the living conditions of the Landless and the condition of the children of this group, including the knowledge of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent. In these experiences, through different languages, children express their views on their condition and the relationship with adults, producing manifestos addressed to the *MST* itself or to other social segments and the public power (ROSSETO, 2009). Communication actions, in general, have a team composed of adult activists, who make them viable. Publications are

13- *Cirandas Infantis* were created in 1987 with the aim of enabling the participation of parents, especially mothers, in the political spaces of the *MST*. They are educational encounters with active participation of children. The name also characterizes the conception of Early Childhood Education in the movement.

also produced, containing interviews with the children, texts, drawings and illustrations produced by them (BARROS, 2013).

In a study on the 1st National Meeting of Landless Children, Gouvea *et al.* (2019) analyzed how, in certain aspects, the event reproduced the dynamics of the adult Movement, by focusing on plenary activities that hindered children's speaking and listening. This element also reveals contradictions and limits on child participation, even when children are conceived as subjects of rights. As Liebel (2012) states in his analysis of the movements of working children in Latin America, children's forms of communication are more pragmatic and less discursive, combining leisure and reflection, in a more agile manner, without, however, losing effectiveness.

The children's agency is also observed in research that focus on everyday life. In a study that discusses the various forms of participation of children from 7 to 10 years of age in a rural settlement and in the urban periphery of the same municipality, Carvalho and Silva (2013, p. 96, our translation) discuss the participation based on the observed living conditions. The authors state that "[...] there is no room for non-participation, but for understanding the different ways of positioning oneself in the game of social relations". They problematize participation in different interactions of children with adults and between them, revealing both situations of insertion in family life and in the productive life of the settlement, as well as among children during play. In this perspective, the study identifies the participation of children at home and at school, described as actions of both collaboration and influence and resistance in the distribution of responsibilities. According to the authors, "[...] in some moments, very traditional forms of age relation, of adult control over the child are updated; in others, there is the emergence of empowered child subjects and on an equal footing with the adult subject" (CARVALHO; SILVA, 2013, p. 111).

Other works also emphasize the presence of children in the political struggle as a condition resulting from their presence in families who are camped or settled (ALVES, 2001 as cited in ROSSETO, 2009, p. 80). Although children do not participate in decision-making, they accompany their parents and witness situations of preparation for land occupations, which involves tensions and changes in their daily lives.

If there are characteristics of the children's experience of the MST that are difficult to find in other urban or rural environments, there is no homogeneity of experiences. These depend on the material and symbolic context, including the marks of power relations. It is only possible to problematize the notion of rights of children linked to the MST and who have the identity of the *Movimento Sem Terra* when it is taken into consideration that they participate in training processes and are encouraged to political action in the name of the foundations of the movement struggle for land and for social transformation.

It seems appropriate to expand the notion of participation, including the consideration of its multiple forms that appear as collaboration, influence and resistance in the circulation and hierarchical or equal distribution of responsibilities (CARVALHO; SILVA, 2013). The presence of children in struggles for rights does not necessarily guarantee participation in decision-making, but promotes it, as they are placed in situations of reflection on oppression, and at the same time that, in this process, intergenerational hierarchies are strained.

Final considerations

When analyzing the participation of children in two collective actions, we sought to understand the “meaning of making children’s rights in their daily lives”, in order to apprehend the tensions between global and local formulations of rights (LIEBEL, 2012; REYNOLDS; NIEUWENHUYS; HANSON, 2006).

The participation of children in the *MNMMR* occurred at a time of redemocratization in the country and of conquest of rights, when the Movement focused its efforts on the elaboration and approval of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, and later started losing strength. In the case of the *MST*, its growth occurred in a later period (2003 to 2016), when the Movement built partnerships with the State, guaranteeing its institutionality and permanence.

Child participation also took on singular meanings. The *MNMMR* affirmed, as a principle, the direct participation of boys and girls in street situation, in favor, with the support of social educators, of them taking a leading role in actions related to the process of building the rights of the child in Brazil. The condition of mobility, with less adult control, enabled them to build mastery of public spaces, expand social relations and the right to manage their lives, in processes of reflection between them and with adults, breaking with a perspective that opposes autonomy and protection. In this sense, we consider that the condition of social actor (MARCHI; SARMENTO, 2017; TOURAINE, 1996) was revealed in a more evident way in the context of overcoming the victim mentality in order to occupy the place of the subject who collectively fights for his/her rights. Evidently, child protagonist role is strained by the hierarchical relations of power between adults and children, both in the organization and management of movements and in the legitimation of discourses.

In the case of the *Movimento Sem Terrinha*, although in more protected conditions by the families and leaders of the *MST*, the situation of being able to organize themselves in a process of reflection on their rights internally to their communities and, especially, in relation to the rights of children and adolescents assured by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, allows these children to build the identity of a child belonging to a social movement of struggle and to a way of production and reproduction of life, marked by the experiences of occupying and conquering land. The construction of their own guidelines, even with the collaboration of male and female educators, favors the identity of collective actors in the reflection and fight for their rights, as the principles that guide such educational actions are based on conceptions of emancipatory education. It should be noted that studies reveal limits on the possibilities of effective expression of children’s points of view, especially with regard to children’s languages.

As for the protection principle, it is observed not on an individual basis, as elaborated in the CRC. This principle is subject to the logic of social movements. Both movements confront the norms and practices that privilege protection to the detriment of the action of these subjects. Such tension may indicate that it is possible to move towards a greater balance between the two dimensions of the right: that of protection and that of the possibility of acting as a collective actor.

As for the governance of rights, the two Movements seek to build autonomy in the relationship with the State and, at the same time, demand from the public power material and institutional conditions to sustain their actions, mobilizing actors and institutions.

Both Movements present educational projects that confront and seek to go beyond the limits of the typical pedagogies of regular schools. On the one hand, the *MNMMR* educational project is based on a pedagogy based on Paulo Freire's assumptions, with the development of a social education that combined the creation of conditions for the return to families and insertion in regular school, along with the other children. The *MST*, on the other hand, sought to formulate a differentiated school project, which values cultural identity and knowledge about agriculture and sustainability, maintaining a vision of education that goes beyond school education, recognizing it in the diverse experiences of children and adults in collective actions.

In both cases, it is possible to observe a horizontal logic in the governance of rights, in which adults and children mobilize agents and instances in the debate and in the claim of rights. Although limited to organizational logic and "adult-centered" models, the presence of children in the social scene inaugurates, in the Brazilian context, a perspective of governance of the right, with the presence and participation of children *from below*, in the controversial roles of subjects and objects of power.

Theorizations of the studies of social movements and collective actions demonstrate that the concepts of actor, agency and participation cannot be taken as *a priori* assumptions, but that they require analysis of the conditions and contradictions for their effectiveness. Thus, the concept of "social actor" refers to a rationality and the possibility of subjectification, which demands to be problematized when discussing the participation of children in collective actions. To what extent does such rationality, in the terms in which it is defined, disregard the different expressions of infantile rationality? How is the subject's autonomy thought in relation to the child, necessarily inserted in a generational order that confronts it?

We believe that the analysis of child participation experiences in these two collective actions indicates the need for advances in theories, both in the field of childhood studies and in social movements and collective actions, which we sought, even if in a preliminary way, to contemplate in this text.

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