


Environmental issue, land appropriation and emergence of new political actors in contemporary Brazil

Questão ambiental, apropriação de terras e emergência de novos sujeitos políticos no Brasil contemporâneo

Leonilde Servolo de Medeiros* 

ABSTRACT

In Brazil, the emergence of environmental issues has a strong link with the emergence of new themes and political actors in rural areas and with contemporary manifestations of the agrarian issue. In this article, I seek to provide an overview of the relationships between land appropriation, the struggles of the populations that live in those lands, and the progressive articulation of these struggles with environmental issues. We begin with a historical contextualization and subsequently explore the formation of new political actors and identities around land uses. Next, we address contemporary impasses of land and environmental conflicts in the face of the expansion of agribusiness, financialization, and land grabbing.

Keywords: agrarian issue; land market; traditional populations; socio-environmental conflicts.

RESUMO

No Brasil, a emergência da questão ambiental tem uma forte interface com o surgimento de novos temas e sujeitos políticos no meio rural e com as manifestações contemporâneas da questão agrária. No artigo, busco fazer um apanhado das relações que foram se constituindo entre a apropriação da terra, as lutas das populações que nelas vivem e a progressiva articulação dessas lutas com as questões ambientais. Iniciamos com uma contextualização histórica e, na sequência, exploramos a formação de novos sujeitos políticos e identidades em torno dos usos da terra. A seguir, abordamos os impasses contemporâneos dos conflitos fundiários e ambientais frente à expansão do agronegócio, da financeirização e do processo de incorporação de terras.

Palavras-chave: questão agrária; mercado de terras; populações tradicionais; conflitos socioambientais.

The emergence of the environmental issue in Brazil has a strong link with the emergence of new themes and political subjects in rural areas and with contemporary manifestations of the

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*Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. E-mail: leonilde@ufrjr.br.

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agrarian issue. In effect, it is not possible to separate the forms of interaction with nature from the land issue, both in its rural and urban aspects. It is in the daily struggle for land to inhabit, live, plant, create, or reproduce ways of life that some of the central dimensions of the environmental issue are outlined. As this dossier proposes, it is crucial to reflect on the role of so-called traditional populations and indigenous peoples as agents of environmental preservation, but also of defending threatened ways of life and questioning the advance of land commodification. They are the ones who, through their mobilizations, have put the issue on the agenda and drawn the attention of different segments of society and government bodies to the need to review our concepts, dating back centuries, that separate man from nature.

If, until at least the middle of the last century, Western societies were driven by the idea of progress and belief in the promises of a continuous development of productive forces and the growing dominance of man over nature, clear signs began to appear around the 1970s of the emergence of new themes to be faced and which would have profound implications on the way in which the “environment” came to be read and problematized (Acselrad, 2022). At the international level, the framework is the United Nations Conference on the environment, held in 1972 in Stockholm, and the growth of the so-called environmentalist movements (Almeida; Premebida, 2014). Since then, the environmental issue has become a public problem, in particular, due to social movements that have placed it on the agenda not only in Europe, as is often suggested in the literature, but in the most different parts of the globe, based on criticism of hegemonic notions of development.

The holding of Eco 92 in Brazil had a strong impact on the perception of the topic in the country, in a context in which both conflicts around deforestation and the emerging demands of the so-called “forest people”, as well as criticism of the green revolution, had already gained visibility. With a strong presence of social movements and non-governmental organizations, the debate around the need for new keys to understanding the relationships between man and nature emerged as a challenge to be faced.

In this article, I seek to provide an overview of the relationships that were formed between the appropriation of land, the struggles for the survival of the populations that reproduce there, and their articulation with environmental issues, giving specific meanings to a debate that gained strength since the last decades of the last century. We begin with a historical contextualization and subsequently explore the formation of new political subjects and identities around land uses. The next step is to address the new faces of land and environmental conflicts in the face of the expansion of agribusiness, the land market, and its financialization and foreignization.

Historical context

The process of occupation of the Brazilian territory, as the literature never tires of highlighting, was marked by the deforestation of areas of native vegetation, starting with the coastal ones, with the aim of transforming them into large farms, generally destined for export monoculture (sugarcane, cotton, coffee, cocoa, to mention the best known) or, towards the backlands, cattle raising. Thus began a long process of private appropriation and progressive transformation of lands inhabited by different indigenous peoples into merchandise. According to Lígia Osório Silva,

in addition to those effectively used productively on plantations, large extensions of land were appropriated, sometimes to guarantee future explorations, characterizing a large-scale migratory culture, and others as store of value. This pattern of occupation was explained, in part, by the predatory nature of agriculture practiced in the colony, based on slave labor and the use of rudimentary techniques, which quickly depleted the soil (Silva, 1997, p. 16).

The same author points out that the continuity of this pattern of colonial exploitation and the absence of legislation that regulated access to land in the period between the country's Independence, in 1822, and the institution of the Land Law in the mid-19th century (Law no. 601 of 18 September 1850) resulted in the seizure without any control and the multiplication of large estates¹.

The Land Law established in its first article the prohibition of “acquisitions of vacant land through means other than purchase” and, in the second article, harsh penalties for seizures: eviction with loss of improvements, risk of imprisonment and fine, in addition to payment for damages caused. However, even with these interdictions, the seizures did not cease, being the basis of what is known today as “land grabbing”, a phenomenon that is intertwined with the formation of private property (Silva, 1997)². The state's difficulty (or lack of interest) in controlling access to land contributed to this. Already then, however, some authors with national political expression, such as José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva and Joaquim Nabuco, drew attention to the environmental devastation resulting from this model, but without great impact (Pádua, 2002).

1 Not by chance, the Land Law was approved two weeks after the Eusébio de Queiroz Law, which prohibited the slave trade, and simultaneously with the first experiments by coffee growers with European labor. Faced with the imminent end of slavery and the arrival of settlers, it was essential to create mechanisms that barred free access to land ownership (Martins, 2010).

2 Land grabbing was also carried out by farmers without resources, in more remote areas. But, in a perverse cycle, they were being expelled by “*grileiros*”, a phenomenon that still recurs today (Martins, 2010). Likewise, *quilombos*, formed during the time of slavery, or black communities that remained on land abandoned by owners, were also configured as possession of the land.

This situation of land appropriation by those who had the capacity to buy or take possession of them (and then legally register them) remained throughout time, maintaining land concentration and soil exploitation based on a predatory pattern, which always led to the search for new, fertile areas for the expansion of export agriculture (Martins, 2010). Linked to it was the expropriation, displacement, or even physical destruction of the original populations, which should either be integrated into national society or, in case of resistance, be decimated. In other words, colonization was carried out under the aegis of violence in the name of progress.

At the beginning of the 20th century, by decree nº 8,072 of 20 June 1910, the Service for the Protection of Indians and Location of National Workers (SPILTIN) was created, with the objective of “pacification and protection of indigenous groups”, as well as the establishment of colonization centers based on backcountry labor. These functions were separated by Decree-Law 3,454 of 6 January 1918, but the idea of the need for protection in relation to indigenous peoples, considered as legally incapable, that is, non-citizens, remained. The replacement of the SPILTIN by the National Indian Foundation (Funai), in 1967, already during the military dictatorship, maintained this conception, which lasted until the 1988 Constitution.³

Farmers who lived as squatters on land that was disputed by large farmers or even speculators were also expropriated, using violent methods when there was any resistance. Despite the successive conflicts over land and peasant mobilizations that took place in different parts of the country and that marked the 20th century, the growing organization that gave them prominence in the 1950s and early 60s and the intense debate surrounding land redistribution as a condition for development⁴, the concentration of land ownership remained untouchable, given the strong political influence and control of large landowners over the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary powers.

The business-military regime, which began with the 1964 coup, made a clear choice for a reading of the land issue that defended the technological modernization of large properties, and the encouragement of their expansion into border areas considered not yet occupied, through cheap credit mechanisms, tax exemptions for large businesspeople interested in investing in land in new areas, and encouragement of both public and private colonization, leading, as President Médici declared when announcing the National Integration Program – PIN (Decree-Law no. 1106 of 16 July 1970), “men without land

3 About the indigenous guardianship process, see Lima (1995); Oliveira Filho (1999); Ferreira (2013). See also https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/O_que_%C3%A9_pol%C3%ADtica_indigenista.

4 Several meanings of development appeared in the debate, but all of them insisted on the importance of stimulating industrialization and modernizing agriculture, whether through the elimination of the so-called unproductive large estates, by dividing property among those who lived and worked there, or by its technological modernization.

for lands without men”. The motto “integrate so as not to hand over” was also part of this process, progressively subjecting the border not only to a developmental logic, but to its conception as a crucial space for national security⁵.

In addition to the occupation and private appropriation of land in the Amazon, encouraged by the state, the occupation of the *cerrados* was also encouraged, which, through mechanisms of cheap public credit, facilitation of land appropriation and research, would be progressively transformed into a “sea of soy”, attracting capital from industrial, service, and financial sectors to the region (Delgado, 2012)⁶.

At this time of occupation of the “border”, the logic was to cut down the forest and use it for cattle raising or planting. At the same time, it was about expropriating local populations which, as already mentioned, were made up of both native peoples and populations that took shelter there either to escape slavery, still in the 19th century, or mixed-race populations that lived in these areas as squatters with varied ways of life, but which had the common trait of conducting their ways of producing and living under different patterns of relationship with the land, and not in its appropriation as a commodity. In the name of development, the presence of these populations was once again denied (Ianni, 1992). In addition to the change in production processes, the modernization of agriculture caused the expansion of migration processes, of different natures, both between rural areas and from there to urban centers.

The processes of advancing land commodification implied, as already pointed out, its predatory occupation, reiterating the model that had been reproduced since the colony. Side by side, there is a process of encouraging the mobility of populations to occupy new areas, through public and private colonization projects (Tavares-dos-Santos, 1993), but which involved a new social group: the so-called “southern settlers”, whose origins were successful small landowners, descendants of Italian and German migrants. Thus, the profile of the ideal settler was established: familiar with technologies, in search of land on which the family could reproduce. Throughout the 1970s, migrations to the states of Rondônia, Pará, and Mato Grosso were encouraged. As a result, the “new lands” began to be occupied by farmers who sought to reproduce in these regions, within the logic of the military regime of creating a prosperous rural middle class, attached to property values

5 At the end of 1967, the report of a project to build seven large lakes in the Amazon region, a project by the Hudson Institute, in the United States, appeared on the pages of national newspapers, seen as a threat to national sovereignty. In the following years, many measures were taken to plan the occupation of the region.

6 The occupation of the *cerrados* would be impossible without the research carried out by the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), created by Law No. 5,851 of 7 December 1972, and by the Brazilian Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Company (Embrater), created by law 6,126 of 6 November 1974.

and whose symbol of success was the persistent work, seeking good harvests that would provide economic conditions for purchasing more land. This process also produces forms of racialization of the local population and migrants from the Northeast who flock there in search of work and who were considered lazy, unaccustomed to hard work.⁷

From these actions, with support from the state, a new layer of producers was formed which, by the end of the 1970s, would be consolidated and form the basis of what we know today as agribusiness. What began to be known as agroindustry was strengthened, marked by the integration of industrial, commercial, and financial capital, towards a modern, technified agriculture, based on the intensive use of chemical inputs and seeds improved in laboratories and which, through the forms of processing products, allowed them to reach distant markets. This involved industrial freezing processes, proprietary packaging, and also increased use of preservatives (Goodman; Sorj; Wilkinson, 1990).

However, these transformations were (or are not) simple, nor linear, since the occupation of these “new” areas (for capital) happened, in several places, with strong resistance from both indigenous peoples and the populations that occupied these territories without property titles and which were being threatened with expropriation or effectively expropriated by new land deals. In the context of strong repression (in the countryside and in the city) that marked the business-military regime, segments of the progressive Catholic Church began to give voice to these groups. In this context, the creation of the Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi) in 1972 and the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in 1975 are emblematic. Cimi, according to an account on its website, positions itself as an agent that favored, in those times when the military government defended the integration of indigenous peoples into comprehensive society as a single perspective, the articulation between villages and indigenous peoples, promoting large assemblies, “where the first contours of the struggle to guarantee the right to cultural diversity were drawn”⁸. The CPT emerged during the Meeting of Bishops and Prelates of the Amazon, called by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), as a response to the situation experienced by rural workers, squatters and pawns, especially in the Amazon, exploited in their work, subjected to conditions analogous to slave labor, and expelled from the lands they occupied⁹. These organizations, made up of priests, bishops, and lay people linked to liberation theology, will act in defense of these groups emerging on the political scene and collaborate decisively in their organization.

7 This process is easily visible in agribusiness cities, where in peripheral areas and hidden from those who pass by the roads, popular neighborhoods proliferate where the so-called “Maranhenses” and “Bahians” live, generally responsible for manual and poorly paid work.

8 Available at: <https://cimi.org.br/o-cimi/>. Accessed 13 April 2024.

9 Available at: <https://www.cptnacional.org.br/sobre-nos/historico>. Accessed 13 April 2024.

Although at that time these processes had not yet been announced under the sign of environmental issues, a profound transformation was clearly taking place in the use of land and in the appropriation of territories, which imposed profound changes in ways of life, spread unknown diseases, created pauperized and degraded urban centers.

A particularly emblematic case of these forms of resistance is the emergence, in the mid-1970s, of the struggles of rubber tappers, populations largely from areas affected by droughts in the Brazilian Northeast, who were taken to work in native rubber plantations, mainly in Acre, at the height of rubber exploitation and that remained there when the rubber plantations fell into decline. At this time of facilitating the occupation of land by interests linked to big capital, especially coming from the Center-South, areas of native rubber plantations began to be sold to farmers interested in raising cattle, which would imply deforestation and expulsion of those who lived there. The reaction did not wait and manifested itself through collective resistance (“draws”), in which groups of rubber tapper families put themselves in front of the machines to prevent the advance of deforestation (Paula, 2016). The murder of Wilson Pinheiro, a unionist from Brasileia, in 1979 and, almost ten years later, that of Chico Mendes, a union leader from Xapuri, projected these conflicts nationally and internationally, giving them new connotations: from the fight against expropriation, the demand to keep the forest standing, in conjunction with environmentalism in full bloom, especially in European countries¹⁰. In the early 1980s, Chico Mendes defended the idea of creating extractive reserves, which deviated from the traditional model of agrarian reform, based on the division of renovated areas into lots. Extractive settlements and reserves maintained units of territory where there was no formal division of land and where rubber tappers lived with the forest and used it, extracting products for sale from it, but preserving it as a condition for their survival.

In these ways, the environmental discussion began with the fight against deforestation. From the Brazilian government’s point of view, it was about building territorial management programs, which would lead to their reduction, through the creation of the National System of Conservation Units (Law no. 9,985 of 18 July 2000), that is, delimitation of areas to be preserved, generating new fields of dispute: was the human presence in these areas possible or a deleterious factor?

But there are other sides to the constitution of the environmental issue as a public problem, among them the criticism of the green revolution: in the regions of former occupation, in the Brazilian Southeast and South, based on initiatives by groups of farmers and agronomists, the denunciation of harmful effects of agricultural modernization that was taking great strides and the experimentation of agricultural practices derived both from accumulated experience

¹⁰ In the midst of the fight to contain deforestation, Chico Mendes articulated a broader alliance with indigenous peoples, chestnut growers, and other groups that depended on the standing forest for their economic and cultural survival: the Alliance of Forest Peoples (Paula, 2016).

and from research. These experiments, sometimes called biodynamic agriculture and sometimes alternative agriculture, opened the door to thinking about other forms of agriculture based on some local farming traditions, which did not fit into the dominant pattern, but which did not represent delay but rather the possibility of other production models. They are the roots of a broad movement known, since the 1990s, as agroecology.

Thus, the environmental debate gains another front, which will begin to be faced by social movements: that of healthy food and dietary diversity, valuing the enormous variety of foods that come from extractivism or traditional farms. The topic not only of security, but also of food sovereignty, was brought up for debate.¹¹ Furthermore, the reconfiguration of the peasantry not as a representation of backwardness, but as a bearer of new agricultural possibilities. Not by chance, in a recent interview, Gilmar Mauro, leader of the MST, states that “carrying out Agrarian Reform, therefore, is not just about feeding the people, it is about ensuring that this planet is taken care of, as an Agrarian Reform today will have to discuss agroecology, agroforestry, organic production to produce healthy food and preserve nature.”¹²

Formation of new subjects and identities

Already in the period of redemocratization, the struggles for recognition on the part of social groups that fought for land and preservation as a condition for the reproduction of their ways of life began to have an important place in the political scene, side by side with, in areas of older occupation, occupations of properties considered unproductive and struggles for better working conditions on farms, which resulted in significant strikes throughout the first half of the 1980s, especially in sugarcane-producing areas.

It is in this context of reinvigoration of social struggles in the countryside around old demands (agrarian reform and labor rights), that new characters emerge, who did not fit into the existing demands and who will bring to the public new faces of the struggle for land, often articulating it with environmental issues.

One of its expressions is the struggle to remain on traditionally occupied lands, around which particular ways of life have developed. In addition to the case of the rubber tappers, already briefly presented, the rural black communities that existed in different parts of the country and that took advantage of the legal instruments available to guarantee their permanence, based on the Land Statute and the Civil Code, from the category of squatter and the claim of the right to usucaption. Struggles for access to specific areas, of-

11 To this end, the articulation of emerging social movements with international organizations such as Via Campesina, created in 1992, and which, as the name indicates, gave centrality to peasant proposals, was central. See, among others, Desmarais (2007) e Vieira (2011).

12 Available at: https://mst.org.br/2024/04/11/fazer-a-reforma-agraria-e-garantir-que-esse-planeta-seja-cuidado-afirma-gilmar-mauro/?utm_smid=11236334-1-1. Accessed 11 April 2024.

ten already privately appropriated, also became visible: this is the case of the babassu plantations, marked by the struggles between the babassu coconut harvesters and the chestnut plantations, generating successive conflicts, especially in the face of the threat of felling the palm trees and native trees, but without necessarily claiming ownership of the land, but rather free access to it for gathering. Another situation that emerged was that of areas known as background and closure pasture, where collective animal husbandry was carried out, especially in the state of Bahia. In coastal areas, *caíçaras* began to organize themselves to fight for access to land and sea, a condition for the reproduction of artisanal fishing threatened in particular by large tourist investments, as was the case on the coast of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, radically transformed by the construction of the Rio-Santos highway. It is important to note that these forms of land disputes reveal long-standing forms of life and land use, but not recognized in legal codes (Almeida, 2006).¹³

One of the effects of this emergence and the struggles of these new categories is their legal recognition, albeit partial, in the 1988 Constitution (Brazil, 1988): in it the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to their territory appears (Chapter VIII)¹⁴ and, in the Transitional Provisions, Article 68, definitive ownership to the remnants of the *quilombo* communities that were occupying their lands, with the state having to issue the respective titles. Although only these two categories are mentioned in the Constitution, the door was opened to a set of demands for the recognition of different social groups, with different customs and all of them marked by particular forms of land use, the vast majority of which are threatened by the transformation of that good into merchandise. These emerging rights drove other demands for social and political recognition.

Despite the mobilizations and demands that marked the post-Constitution period, it was only in 2007 that a National Policy for Traditional Peoples and Communities was established (Decree 6,040 of 7 February 2007). In Article 3 of this decree, traditional peoples and communities are defined as

(...) culturally differentiated groups that recognize themselves as such, that have their own forms of social organization, that occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral, and economic reproduction, using knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted by tradition.

13 It is worth mentioning the population displaced because it was affected by major works, such as hydroelectric plants (Itaipu, Tucuruí, Sobradinho, Itaparica, for example), which generated the Movement of People Affected by Dams and which affected both peasant groups and indigenous peoples.

14 It is notable in the 1988 Constitution the article that defines as “the exclusive competence of the National Congress: (...) XVI – authorizing, on indigenous lands, the exploration and use of water resources and the research and mining of mineral wealth”, showing an already existing problem that will generate increasingly intense conflicts in the dispute over access to mineral resources.

This definition is in line with the provisions of the 1988 Constitution, which recognized cultural rights “of indigenous and Afro-Brazilians peoples, and of other groups participating in the national civilizing process” (Article 215, paragraph 1), defining these rights as forms of expression; ways of creating, doing, and living; scientific, artistic, and technological creations; works, objects, documents, buildings, and other spaces intended for artistic-cultural manifestations; urban complexes and sites of historical, scenic, artistic, archaeological, paleontological, ecological, and scientific value (Article 216) and indigenous territorial rights (Article 231). It is also linked to changes in international guidelines, as is the case with Convention 169, of the 76th International Labor Conference in 1989, the first binding international instrument that specifically deals with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples (Monteiro; Vasconcelos; Treccani, 2019).

In 2016, by Decree no. 8,750, of 9 May, the list of what was considered traditional populations was expanded: in addition to indigenous peoples and *quilombola* communities, were formally recognized as such *terreiro* peoples and communities of African origin; Romani people; artisanal fishermen; extractivists; coastal and marine extractivists; *caiçaras*; *faxinalenses*; *benzedeiros*; *ilhéus*; *raizeiros*; *geraizeiros*; *caatingueiros*; *vazanteiros*; *veredeiros*; evergreen flower pickers; *pantaneiros*; *morroquianos*; Pomeranian people; *mangaba* collectors; babassu coconut breakers; retirees from Araguaia; background and closure pasture communities; *ribeirinhos*; *cipozeiros*; *andirobeiros*; *caboclos*; and youth from traditional peoples and communities. In other words, a vast list of populations with particularities in their ways of living and organizing themselves and who use them to demand recognition and access to land, not in general, from the property category, but as a space for the reproduction of ways of life and customs, in a territory, marked by forms of use that preserve it, as a condition for the permanence of these cultural forms. As a general rule, a land from which they run the risk of being expelled, given the advance of different forms of capital that intend to put it to other uses (agriculture, tourism, forestry plantations, or even speculative).

According to Svampa (2019), this is an eco-territorial turn, which brings together different perspectives and which, in the case of Brazil, was expressed in a broad articulation expressed in the Unitary Meeting of Workers and People of the Countryside, Waters and Forests, held in August 2012 and whose motto was “for land, territory, and dignity”. Despite the difficulties of articulating and building common causes, between such diverse social segments, this meeting was remarkable in terms of affirming demands that represented the different groups involved. It was possibly the first national event that brought together indigenous peoples, traditional peoples, fishermen, rural workers of the most different types, with a strong peasant presence (by then legally classified as family farming).

In addition to these aspects, it is worth remembering that the 1988 Constitution (Brazil, 1988) introduced limits to full property, ensuring that it must fulfill a social function (Chapter 1, Article 5, item XXIII, which defines individual and collective rights). According to the constitutional definition, the social function is fulfilled when the rural property meets, simultaneously, according to criteria and degrees of demand established by law, the following requirements: rational and adequate use; adequate use of available natural resources and preservation of the environment; compliance with the provisions that regulate labor relations; exploitation that favors the well-being of owners and workers (Article 186). Failure to comply with these items opens the possibility of expropriation for the purposes of agrarian reform. Even though this is the specific purpose and does not necessarily have a relationship with traditional peoples and communities, an impasse arises related to the need for adequate use of natural resources and the environment, as a criterion for validating property. As in the previous article of the Constitution (Article 185) it is defined that productive lands cannot be expropriated, a barrier was created for expropriated populations to access the lands they used. This generated a debate, still ongoing, about the time frame for the presence of these populations. It is still a subject of dispute, as seen today in the controversy surrounding the difficulty of demarcating indigenous lands, which are often partially occupied by farms.

It is not just deforestation, but a confrontation between territorial rights guaranteed by the Constitution, whose guarantee involves the withdrawal of land from the market (Sauer, 2016) and the increasing commodification of this asset, through land grabbing mechanisms. At stake is the permanence of forms of land use that depend on a certain relationship with a preserved environment to survive.

New aspects of land and environmental conflicts: the expansion and financialization of the land market

If, until the beginning of the 1980s, the agrarian issue had as its axis the diagnosis of land concentration and the proposal of redistributing land based on an agrarian reform¹⁵ which aimed to eliminate large estates considered as a symbol of backwardness in the countryside, in recent years new themes have been unveiled, based both on structural changes in the Brazilian rural environment, and on the emergence of new actors, demands and forms of struggle in the political scenario, but without failing to place the issue of land appropriation at the center of the dispute.

15 We do not have space to explore this topic here, but it is important to highlight that the expression has, over time, gained different meanings and adjectives, the understanding of which is fundamental to understanding what is actually at stake and what are the limits and possibilities of the competing projects.

As already pointed out, the processes of expropriation of those who live on the land are linked to the forms that the land market takes at different moments in our history. In recent years, it is not just about the border, but about land speculation in a context of business expansion where land is used for allotments, for tourism, for cattle breeding, for export agriculture, reforestation, but also for speculation, through a growing process of financialization. These transformations and new subjects that emerge on the public scene indicate the limits of thinking about the agrarian issue in the strict terms of the causes that, since the 1950s, have been summarized in the motto of “agrarian reform” and “land for those who live and work on it”.

As Karina Kato and Sérgio Leite point out, in the 21st century, the agricultural sector began to be boosted, always with strong support from the state, with the entry of new capital, including financial capital. The authors draw attention to the fact that

These financial networks cross countries and make it more difficult to identify and hold actors, particularly financiers, responsible for the economic, social, and environmental impacts they cause. Additionally, financialization encourages abstraction between agricultural commodities and their physical forms and production bases, driven by the increasing use of derivatives whose valuation is increasingly disconnected from their material basis, accentuating the instability of agricultural markets and placing speculative pressures on real markets and in food prices, with serious effects on the environment and food security (Kato; Leite, 2020, p. 470).

Still according to the authors, the resources raised in the financial market are applied, with support from the state, in productive projects through partnerships with companies and specialized producers and are directed to the so-called border areas, where there is still an abundance of public land, but which are occupied, in most cases, by so-called traditional populations. They increasingly become victims of violence, as shown by data collected and published since 1985 by the CPT.¹⁶ Matopiba is a good example. The region whose name is derived from the combination of the initials of the names of the states that compose it (parts of Maranhão, almost the entire state of Tocantins, south of Piauí and western Bahia) and an area with predominance of the Cerrado biome, has been marked since the 1980s by the advancement of soybean and corn crops and, more recently, cotton. It was made official by decree 8,447 of 6 May 2015, which created an Agricultural Development Plan, whose purpose is to “promote and coordinate public policies aimed at sustainable economic development based on agricultural and livestock activities that result in improved quality of life for the popu-

¹⁶ CPT annually publishes *Countryside Conflicts Brazil*, a publication with detailed and methodologically careful analysis of different forms of conflict in Brazilian rural areas. They can be obtained at <https://www.cptnacional.org.br/index.php/publicacoes-2/confitos-no-campo-brasil>.

lation”. This, in a passage of the decree, is explicitly named as rural producers and rural middle class.¹⁷ In other words, lands are being privatized, through more sophisticated mechanisms, but which in essence repeat what was pointed out by Ligia Silva in her analyzes of the Land Law of 1850 (Silva, 1997).

It is unnecessary to insist on how much these mechanisms put environmental preservation and any perspective of sustainability at risk (Acselrad, 2022). It is no coincidence that they provoke intense political disputes, related to issues such as land regularization and legal security (of private property), as well as the tension between property rights and the social function that it must perform.¹⁸

Final thoughts

The intense mobilizations of rural populations, starting in the 1980s with the Alliance of Forest Peoples, the Cries of the Amazon in the 1990s, and which developed into the Cries of the Land Brazil, the marches of indigenous peoples that gained expression through the Free Land Camps, the resistance and national organization of the *quilombola* peoples, the background and closure pasture peoples, the disputes over the exploitation of babassu and chestnut groves, among others, gave visibility to hitherto (un)known populations in public spaces and the Brazilian legal system. There is a confluence of localized struggles and large mobilizations that converge on centers of power, especially Brasilia, seeking to pressure public authorities for their full recognition. Without a doubt, these mobilizations were crucial for affirming the cultural and ethnic diversity of Brazilian rural areas and for drawing attention to the fact that the preservation of their ways of life goes hand in hand with the struggle for environmental preservation/recovery. They show an environment not separated from man, but in a permanent interaction with different ways of life. A recent expression of this is the election of Ailton Krenak into the Brazilian Academy of Letters, the recognition of the reflections of Davi Kopenawa and Nego Bispo, whose works are increasingly read and the subject of reflection in academia and beyond.

However, these demands are faced with the growing expansion of land business which, according to Karina Kato and Sérgio Leite, has gained new dimensions in recent decades: financialization and, with it, growing foreignization, in the process of land grabbing that

17 Available at: <http://pesquisa.in.gov.br/imprensa/jsp/visualiza/index.jsp?jornal=1&pagina=2&data=07/05/2015>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

18 Debates regarding this are recurrent in the National Congress, seeking to reaffirm the right to property, trying to reverse environmental legislation. Kluck (2020) draws attention, for example, to a proposed law (which ended up being removed from the agenda) that envisaged removing the Legal Reserve from the Forest Code, in the name of property rights. This is Bill 2,362/19, authored by Senators Flávio Bolsonaro (Republicanos/RJ) and Marcio Bittar (MDB/AC).

is taking hold internationally in recent years (Kato; Leite, 2020). Far from the traditional landowner, which literature linked to backwardness, land ownership linked to the financial market emerges and that is valued by the increasing appropriation of natural resources in new agricultural fronts, the privatization of water use, and both legal and illegal mining.

As a result, the territorial rights conquered are constantly threatened by the slow demarcation of indigenous lands, *quilombola* territories, *caíçarás*, background and closure pasture communities, etc. Not by chance, as this recognition implies taking land off the market, giving it another meaning. In this logic, the discussion of the environmental issue is firmly anchored in the right to property, which is ensured through security mechanisms and state repression. As Dardot and Laval (2017) point out, they are the expression of ongoing processes of spoliation and privatization of common goods, not only in Brazil, and which are at the heart of the environmental issue.

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