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Peasant Farming in the Southern Tracts of the Amazon: The Reluctant Alterity of Agribusiness

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Abstract

This article examines the main tendencies and perspectives of peasant family farming (PFF) in agricultural frontiers such as the Amazon. The ontological features of PFF are discussed, in particular the multiple associations with, and subsumption to, agribusiness. Due to national politico-economic pressures, the Amazon was reinvented half a century ago as a vibrant agricultural frontier that attracted a vast contingent of migrants due to coordinated government plans and, in more recent years, the cultivation of export-oriented crops. One very intriguing feature of this dynamic geography is that small family farming represents the Other of capitalist agriculture, but it functions as a hesitant form of alterity that both resists and fulfils agribusiness.

Keywords

Agrarian, agroecology, agri-food, Brazil, frontier, Mato Grosso, soybean, subsumption.

“Et que sera un monde sans paysans?”

[*And what will be a world without peasants?*]

Henri Mendras (1984: 363)

“ – Todo lo que se relaciona con el alimento del hombre es barbarie (...)

Y más bárbaro lo que hacen: siembra de maíz para vender...

Por eso el castigo...”

[*Everything that is related to human food is barbarism (...)*

And more barbarous what they do: sowing corn to sell...

Hence the punishment]

Miguel Asturias (2005[1949]: 231)

1 Introduction

Our intention here is to discuss the main tendencies and perspectives of peasant family farming (PFF) in the southern tracts of the Amazon region, specifically through a case study in the State of Mato Grosso, which has been greatly transformed in recent decades due to colonization projects and the advance of intense agribusiness production. There already exists

a vast literature on the impacts of economic development and on natural resource disputes, however it is less common to find texts that synthesize trends and critically review the lessons learned. Most publications invoke and reinforce a basic agrarian model built around policy-making, internal migration, land management, and mounting socio-economic inequalities. While those pressures remain important, there is insufficient attention to the politico-economic specificities of agrarian capitalism in situations of rapidly consolidating agricultural frontiers under the influence of hegemonic agribusiness. Our departure point is the need to question the lived relations at the frontiers of agrarian capitalism, as in the case of Mato Grosso where small family agriculture is both under serious pressures towards specialization, but also creatively develop survival and reaction strategies. Instead of a focus on the rich and rapidly growing literature on peasantry and agrarian trends, our goal is to understand the interface between different agricultural sectors in the context of regional development and landscape change. Agrarian capitalism cannot be narrowly blamed for the problems of PFF in the Amazon, but the main source of problems is actually the entelechy of the spatial frontier, which has evolved through a convoluted transition from pre-capitalist relations of production to dramatic processes of privatization, commodification, and financialization. More recently, since the turn of the millennium, new spatial rationalities, combining an idiosyncratic agenda of environmental governance, poverty alleviation, and neoliberalizing practices, have deepened frontier-making and further restricted the alternatives available for PFF.

There is a recurrent debate among social scientists about the need to properly study the diversity of social groups in the Amazon beyond the more common focus on indigenous groups, what includes various forms of peasants (see Nugent 2002). In that context, our aim is to help to remove PFF from the invisibility and the derogatory treatment that it has received. The present discussion is based on fieldwork in the north of Mato Grosso, which involved seven fieldtrips between 2013 and 2016 (focused on the wider process of agribusiness expansion) and a fieldwork campaign specifically dedicated to small family farming in 2018 (which involved two visits to the region and engagement with a range of stakeholders in three agrarian reform areas: Gleba Mercedes, Zumbi dos Palmares, and Terranova). The last campaign comprised 24 semi-structured interviews with farmers and other family members, municipal and state authorities, union leaders, civil servants, rural school teachers, agronomists and researchers, cooperative administrators, and politicians; also informal discussions and walks in the fields with family farmers and attendance of public meetings. Almost all the respondents were originally outsiders who migrated to Mato Grosso in search of economic opportunities and better livelihood conditions. The majority of present-day small family farmers moved to the Amazon or are first-generation descendants of poor migrants, increasingly intermarried and interrelated with previous residents (most with indigenous ancestry). Semi-structured interviews were complemented with analysis of documents, statistics, websites, leaflets, public presentations, and newspaper articles found in university libraries and in the archives of public agencies and private organizations. Our approach was to learn about the specific geographical trajectories and historical agencies of peasants, avoiding normative ideas of capitalist development, but contrasting and comparing groups, times, and spaces. First, let's revisit the ontological dialectics of approximation and distancing between PFF and capitalist agriculture.¹

¹ PFF in Brazil today is an eclectic category that includes European descendants, slave descendants (*quilombolas*), squatters or partners in large farms, agrarian reform settlers, indigenous groups, and traditional extractivist communities, who together represent 84.4 percent of the rural households in Brazil (4.37 million units), but who hold only one quarter of agricultural land (80.25 million hectares), according to Medina et al. (2015). Of family farmers in Brazil, 62.31 percent have a total income of less than the minimum wage and no

2 Peasant Family Farming Dynamics

The role, the persistence, and the prospects of PFF—famously enunciated at the end of the nineteenth century as the ‘agrarian question’ of capitalism—have repeatedly intrigued many analysts. PFF eludes the reductionism of conventional political economy, typically focused on the primacy of the class struggle between proletarians and capitalists. At the same time, neoclassical economics underscore the supposed efficiency and the aggregate value of agribusiness production. Yet, despite all the activity of modern, input-hungry agribusiness in large-scale farms, most food, jobs, and valued relations in the countryside continue to be associated with PFF, which comprises 98 percent of all farms in the planet, holds at least 53 percent of agricultural land, and 53 percent of the world’s food (Graeub et al. 2016). FAO and other multilateral organizations have accordingly highlighted its contribution to food security and regional/local development. That was further reaffirmed when the United Nations declared 2014 the International Year of Family Farming. However, PFF is not an easy concept due to the diversity of social formations and politico-economic conditions, including contrasting land sizes, economic outputs, technology, land ownership, or insertion into markets (as pointed out by Shanin 2006, peasants form the majority of humankind, and this will remain so well into the current century). The very expression ‘family farming’ is a misnomer, considering that PFF is neither necessarily conducted by a family, nor it is only about land cultivation (it increasingly involves a number of other economic and non-economic activities). PFF is actually becoming a post-family activity, even in very low-income areas, as in the Amazon, considering that it is often to have the children and/or the wife living in the city to have access to education and urban jobs. Given that there are increasingly other sources of income, although food production remains important, it is also often involved in more-than-agricultural activities.²

PFF is a broad envelope that contains a huge diversity of groups, from relatively wealthy producers in Western countries, to indigenous communities in the Andes, pastoral tribes in Africa, and rural societies in Asia.³ According to Wolf (1966), what differentiates peasants from ‘primitive societies’ is the production of a surplus, beyond bare subsistence, that is normally appropriated by the dominant political group. Yet, it is not trivial to come up with a satisfactory conceptualization that embraces peasant economy, family farming, and peasant laborers. Many of definitions of peasant farming seem largely tautological, as they tend to presuppose most of what needs explaining, such as the daily operation of family farming and the important insertion in property relations and market transactions that define an increasingly capitalistic world. Although the ownership of land (different from the proletarians, who do not own the means of production) and the centrality of family labor (typically unpaid, although there is the occasional use of paid labor) are commonly used to define the peasant economy, there are several difficulties to understand small family farming in the contemporary, capitalist world. One is that family farming, in the form of family units of production, predates capitalism (the normal analytical model has to do with European feudal relations, but comparable systems of production existed and continue to exist around

more than 12.77 percent benefit from agricultural policies; eighty percent of family farms dispose of less than one fiscal module (the average property is 18.37 ha).

² The Brazilian Law of Family Farming (Law 11,326/2006) defined it as small units (with less than four fiscal modules, defined locally), reliant mainly on family workforce, with income predominantly from the farm and management by the peasant family. This legislation has important similarities with the legal definition of PFF in countries such as Argentina, Chile, USA, and Uruguay.

³ Interestingly, La Vía Campesina, which is the most emblematic mobilisation of peasants in the world today, never attempted to resolve these conceptual controversies, but the social category ‘peasant’ is taken for granted and politically handled as a unifying concept.

the world). A related difficulty is that both capitalism and agriculture in the twenty-first century are, to a large extent, different than in the early and middle-twentieth century when most of the authoritative literature on the agrarian question was published. Capitalism remains capitalism, but the strategic connections between state and private operators have evolved significantly. That is particularly true in relation to state institutions that guarantee and legitimize land and nature grabbing, but also in relation to various forms of national and international assistance to family farmers.

As it is well known, a literature devoted to the agrarian question and small family farming resurfaced in the 1960s, and triggered a massive debate about class identity, ways of life, economic specificity, units of production, land tenure, and cultural formations (an overview can be found in Brookfield and Parsons 2007; Shanin 1987; Wolf 1966). Critical scholars have oscillated between the so-called Marxist and Chayanovian perspectives, with multiple variations, while Bernstein et al. (2018) emphasize the need to incorporate new topics, such as gender, culture, and ecology. The majority of the publications, revised by Garner and O Campos (2014), focuses on the size of the property, kinship relations, diversification, family land ownership, labor use and management, production basically to provide for subsistence needs, the indivisibility of production among family members, pluriactivity, as well as supposed environmental, social, and cultural functions of small family farming. It is common to try to explain family farming from the perspective of farming in general making use of criteria such as productivity, level of investment, mechanization, economies of scale, land property, and opportunity costs (e.g. van Vliet et al. 2015). Some in the North American tradition even differentiate between subsistence or peasant farming (considered backward and decadent) and family farming (which is supposed to be more receptive of ‘modern’ technologies and intensification of production), while there is often also particular attention to the sources of income, which are expected to come predominantly from the farm unit, and reference to PFF’s joint ownership of the means of production and labor power.

It is important to identify the core elements of this controversy about the pillars of peasant family farming. According to Friedmann (1980), PFF can be situated as a process in a perpetual state of flux, but necessarily retaining a configuration, rationality, and positionality that contrasts with capitalist agriculture. The key explanation, thus, lies in the ‘form of production’ simultaneously based on the internal characteristics of the farming unit and on the external characteristic of the social formation. Vergés (2011) agrees that today there are not two, but only one mode of production—capitalism—which dominates and integrates the whole economy (what directly contrasts with Chayanov’s description of a unique peasant economy). PFF is characterized by non-capitalist internal relations, but it is fundamentally submitted to capitalist rules (especially the valorization of capital) and, more importantly, it results from the very reproduction of capitalism. Brookfield and Parsons (2007) make clear that family farmers retain individual control over the land they work (as owners or tenants), produce commodities both for sale and for subsistence, utilize mainly family labor mobilized through kinship and interdependent relations, and have a partial engagement with markets. Likewise, for Shanin (2006), small-scale farmers produce mostly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of political and economic obligations. This group is therefore characterized by four independent, but mutually reinforcing facets: 1) the peasant family farm is a multidimensional unit of social organization; 2) land husbandry is the main means of livelihood; 3) there are specific cultural patterns linked to the way of life of a small rural community; and 4) the ‘underdog’ position, that is, the domination of PFF by outsiders.

This fundamental dialectic between capture by capitalist relations of production and an internal rationality that is more-than-capitalist (and, quite often, anti-capitalist) has great analytical relevance to understand the insertion of PFF into an agri-food sector increasingly dominated by the agribusiness model. PFF is affected, hassled, and undermined by

agribusiness, but without being completely absorbed by market-based relations (to the extent that family farmers are able to resist the pressures). The contested landscape of contemporary agriculture and the growing reliance on agribusiness-based production systems has resulted in high levels of unsustainability and high health and environmental impacts (De Schutter 2017), which leaves uncertain prospects in terms of public health, rural development, and food security. Although there are many intersections and hybridities between these two main agri-food paradigms, a significant proportion of urban and rural populations around the world increasingly consume low-quality food produced with the intense use of agro-chemicals, genetically modified crops, and heavy machinery (Clapp 2018). It is basically a tension between agriculture as a source of food and custodian of socio-cultural traditions (agriculture-cum-food) to a model of input-intense, capitalistic, agricultural production targeted to national or international markets (agriculture-cum-agribusiness), as discussed by Ioris (2018a). Mainstream agri-food system and governance mechanisms are highly path-dependent and resistant to reform, which indicates the need for critical and innovative studies to question the basis and consequences of agriculture dualisms unfolding at different scales and with complex repercussions for consumers, communities, ecosystems, and national economies. Peasant family farming provides the basic elements of resistance and contestation that inform a critique of the powerful ideological and material praxis of agribusiness hegemony.

Having briefly examined the tensions and interconnections between PFF and agribusiness farming, our focus in the next section is on the distinctive features of agricultural frontiers, as in the case of the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, where both agricultural categories have been growing, despite many politico-economic obstacles, as crucial components of the wider process of frontier-making promoted by the national state since the 1960s. It led to the formation of a new group of small family farmers—the colonos—who partly replaced and inherited important technological and sociological legacies from previous forms of peasantry established during colonization or at the time of the ‘rubber boom’ (see Adams et al. 2009). Colonos are individuals who attempted to take part in the dream of a better life in the frontier, but who in the majority of cases failed to see that dream realized. As much as agribusiness, frontier peasants are the product of regional development promoted along the lines of the configuration of new frontiers. Frontier is a new space, but its novelty is partial and qualified, considering that it brings back the worst of the past lived in the original economic centers. The interplay between ‘core’ and ‘frontier’ areas is revealed through the perverse ‘law of scarcity-abundance,’ which synthesizes the general tendency to deal with mounting scarcity in central areas through the pledge of abundance at the frontier, although in practice new rounds of scarcity emerge in both areas due to the spatial dynamics of capitalism (Ioris 2018b). The mechanisms of convergence and differentiation will be analyzed in the next section.

3 Peasant Family Farming at Amazon’s Agricultural Frontiers

The Amazon continues to capture the global imagination and to stir debates about regional development, natural resources, socio-cultural impacts, and environmental degradation. It is today one of the crucial arenas for the expansion of global capitalism and the experimentation of national economic agendas. One of its most striking geographical features is the perennial opening and closing of spatial frontiers associated with social, political, and ecological struggles (Little 2001). Particularly the Brazilian section—containing around 80 percent of the vast river basin area—has been bewilderingly transformed since the 1970s by the construction of large hydropower dams, fluvial navigation routes, and high rates of urbanization, but the economic sector with more widespread and persistent effects on the

landscape continues to be agriculture (Martins 1995). Land has always been an object of dispute in the Brazilian Amazon, mainly due to the availability of ‘natural’ riches (Almeida 1992) and the expectation of future rents from land speculation (not so much from production; see Ioris 2016). To a large extent it has followed the wider controversies about land access and social inclusion of rural populations in Brazil, but there are also specific attributes of the agrarian question in the Amazon—where PFF was relocated and transformed as part of frontier-making.

For a long time, there was scant recognition of the existence of the peasantry in Brazil due to the prevalence of monocultures and extractivism since the colonial period (Caldeira 2017). Gradually, more authors started to pay attention to the economic relevance of small production units—the free peasantry—functioning side-by-side with plantation farms, as well as cattle ranches, and responsible for the supply of food for the latifundia and the urban settlements (e.g. Queiroz 1976). Academics were also provoked by the intricate campaign for agrarian reform that occupied a central position in the Brazilian political debate during most of the last century. The struggle for land was part of the wider confrontation of class privileges by those historically excluded from country modernization. As in other countries, PFF did not easily fit in the (conservative) plans of industrial growth and social transformation launched in the first decades of the twentieth century (Welch 2010). After great political turbulence in the 1950s and 1960s, fueled by the operation of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), a military regime took power (on April 1, 1964), and retained the direction of agrarian policies in favor of the old elites (Fabrini and Roos 2014). The regime made a small gesture towards public opinion with the introduction of the Land Statute, but in practice the priority was the support of commercial, large-scale farming and the promotion of colonization projects (Bruno 1985). The dictatorship pressed forward an agenda of national security, infrastructure expansion, and land grabbing in the Amazon funded by foreign loans and rationalized by Cold War fears of foreign invasion and socialist upheavals. It was, basically, a crude process of social engineering that attracted peasants and workers to colonization projects along the new motorways. At the same time, the state was subsidizing large-scale land grabbing by corporations and private individuals.

The initial formation of the Amazon peasantry (with the characteristics recognized by Shanin 1987) actually occurred due to the arrival of settlers coming from the northeastern region during the so-called rubber boom (1860-1920), which promoted a miscegenation with the indigenous peoples, and shaped heterogeneous social groups known today as *caboclos* or *ribeirinhos* [riparian dwellers] (Hébette 2004). The intermingling of different groups produced what Nugent (1993) describes as ‘hyphenated’ (hybrid) identities. However, the military regime post-1964 introduced regional development plans that led to the gradual incorporation of the Amazon (considered in the official discourse as ‘no man’s land’) in a conservative and elitist process of economic modernization (that culminated in recent years in the consolidation of agribusiness and the construction of large hydropower schemes). In the 1970s, the attempts to develop the Amazon brought to the region a new character who barely existed before: the *colono*, a new type of peasant primarily associated with public or private colonization schemes.⁴ Most colonos had Italian and German ancestry, and moved from the southern Brazilian states, especially from Rio Grande do Sul, due to the impoverishment of the family and the scarcity of land. According to Foweraker (1981:68), the *colono* “moves when the farm can no longer provide subsistence for all members of the family,” even if they still hold some small tracts of land. The expulsion of the rural poor was also related to the

⁴ *Colono* - literally, a colonist, not in the sense of colonial occupation, but rather with economic settlers who were or became peasants.

advance of Green Revolution and the growing scarcity of land for the reproduction of PFF in Rio Grande do Sul.

Despite the rhetoric of opportunities and the promise of a better future, the frontier was characterized by wastage of resources, socio-ecological impacts, and high levels of violence and criminality, suggesting that the main purpose of the frontier was not agricultural or economic, but political and ideological. It was formed—at the expense of public money, local ecosystems, and the hardship of most people involved—fundamentally for the extraction of economic and political rents (Ioris 2016). It was part of the construction of an image of Brazil as a big economic and geopolitical player, and the government used, and continues to use, regional development to increase its political legitimacy and mitigate politico-economic demands in the consolidated areas in the south and east of the country. The frontier was an important component of the wider mobilization of labor and resources to increase a national version of global capitalism that was, basically, a compromise between old and new economic elite groups. It was an orchestrated attempt to divert political pressures away from disputed areas and to minimize the growing contradictions of conservative economic policies. As discussed by Watts (2013[1983]), in a milieu of not fully developed capitalism the economy in the region was not separate from the state; the two overlapped. There was no relevant economic activity outside the sphere of direct state influence and all processes of production, commercialization, and consumption depended on the action of the state (which started to change in later decades with the deeper commodification of nature and market-based values and relations; see below). In the receiving areas, as in Mato Grosso, a similar socio-spatial hierarchy was set in place (that largely replicated the configuration in the original areas) with large-scale landowners at the top (cattle ranchers or plantation farmers, typically receivers of generous state subsidies, free land, and very friendly contractual terms) and a vast mass of peasants (colonos) placed in agrarian reform schemes (private and public) along the roads being opened through the forest.

The experience of Terranova, in the north of Mato Grosso, illustrates the many ramifications of the attempt to organize new peasant groups in the context of the agricultural frontier. The Terranova Program, described by Santos (2008), was organized in 1978 by the cooperative Coopercana aimed to relocate peasants from Rio Grande do Sul who were forced out of the Kaingang indigenous reserve illegally occupied 20 years earlier (Schwantes 1989). It benefited from the construction of the road BR-163 (Cuiabá-Santarém), which had devastating consequences for the local indigenous people Kren-Aka-Rôre. It comprised 435,000 hectares divided in 1,600 lots, initially with 100 ha, later reduced to 50 ha (only half of it could be deforested), plus two hectares for the residence in six agro-villages (Tonneau and Sabourin 2007). The new farmers received support and credit from the government, but there was growing frustration in relation to the unfulfilled promises, logistical difficulties, lack of public services, and absence of a market. There were also disputes between farmers and the cooperative, as well as completion between families. Soon the farmers were heavily indebted and struggling to survive. Around 80 percent of those who arrived in the first phase of colonization in 1979-1981 returned to Rio Grande do Sul (Cunha 2006). Those who managed to remain in the area secured the dream of their own piece of land, but it was different from the original plan and cost a much higher price. Desconsi (2011), who conducted ethnographic work on the families of southern migrants, and moved to Mato Grosso, also demonstrates that those families who remained on their piece of land improved their material circumstances, but without changing their subordinate social condition. Although marginalized in socio-political and economic terms, these groups of migrant colonos continue to be recruited to bring progress to Mato Grosso, and invoked to legitimize the agricultural frontier.

What happened in Terranova was similar to most other colonization schemes in the Amazon where there was too much reliance on a capitalist space produced by the state. The footprint of land use was primarily based on the expansion of the area, taking place in cycles related to waves of government support, rather than on the intensification of production (Brondizio 2009). The frontier was conceptualized and promoted as a realm of opportunities for all, while in effect the main driving-force of the frontier was the relatively easier access to public funds (Oliveira 1989). Both peasants and large-scale farmers, despite major class differences, shared this same ambition: move to the frontier in order to benefit from the availability of concessions, land, and resources. In the process, both the apparatus of the state was pervaded by the subjacent agrarian question and, more importantly, the process of agrarian change reflected disputes and power imbalances between large-scale and peasant farmers that directly shaped state action (Rodrigues and Joanoni Neto 2018). Legislation, official plans, and public policies had to respond in different directions, and ended up bringing the old agrarian disputes from elsewhere to the Amazon (Torres and Branford 2018). The organization of PFF at the economic frontier was, basically, the result of external processes shaping the region, such as internal migration, national development policies, and the transference of social institutions from core politico-economic areas. After settling in the region, there was a gradual and partial commodification of products, labor, and land in highly heterogeneous ways. In periods of production crises, there was a resurgence of old practices and ancient techniques brought from their original areas, mixed with regional practices that they had to learn from those previously living in the area (such as the use of resources from the rainforest, the cultivation of local plant species, and adapted housing construction techniques).

It is quite remarkable that in the process of frontier-making formal land ownership was not necessarily the only, or even the main, goal. In a context of uncertain rules and fuzzy property boundaries, land tenure tended to be tentative and conditional. The same government that encouraged people to come to the frontier was unable to guarantee steady assistance and fully enforce private property institutions. Campbell (2015) describes the genesis of private property in the Amazon as something that is conjured and that both reconstructs the past and anticipates the future. Nothings is really settled, but land tenure can evolve according to political disputes and the emergence of opportunities. Government action helped to create the contingency of land ownership, considering that the main objective of the military technocracy was to reduce social tensions in the south (as in the case of those who migrated to Terranova), and foster a new developmentalist cycle through tax reduction associated with projects in the Amazon. Those who held official property titles can be forced out when someone stronger appears with a similar document granting ownership of the same area. Small-scale farmers had to keep their options open, frequently moving to other locations or enlisting in new government projects.⁵ Their main aspiration was not merely land ownership (something for the peasants historically difficult to secure and maintain in Brazil), but the realization of the frontier dream, whatever that meant and according to the circumstances of each family, time and location. That produced high levels of risk and the need to be part of and operate through networks to develop a range of survival strategies, including jobs off the property and time spent as wildcat gold miners (from time to time a new mining area is located and attracts large contingents of people).

The socio-political landscape of PFF at the frontier was, and continues to be, a story of struggles, advances, alliances, and setbacks that evolves according to special agrarian capitalist circumstances (for the uncomfortable sense of misplacement underpinning the

⁵ In more recent years, family farmers have even incorporated new discourses, such as environmental conservation, in order to make the most of government projects and internationally-funded schemes.

agricultural frontier, see Ioris 2017). The ability of the state to fund public schemes quickly deteriorated and was diminished by the macroeconomic turbulence during the 1980s. Colonization projects introduced in Mato Grosso struggled to survive, and entered a phase of economic and organizational decadence. The colonos coped with the odds that belittle smallholder production, and tried to respond to official programs and incentives the best they could, but such initiatives were often discontinued or mismanaged, undermining their ability to act ‘rationally’ (Brondizio 2009). Many lost their piece of land (regularly or unofficially occupied), and either returned to their original places, moved to other locations, or were proletarianized. Those who maintained a rural property incorporated capitalist features in different levels, establishing particular forms of engagement with the regional economy and the political system. Also in some areas around the urban centers, better-equipped groups of family farmers specialized in some crops (such as vegetables, irrigated maize, milk, etc.) and managed to gradually accumulate capital and purchase nearby land. Specialization of peasant farmers reveals the pressure to ‘modernize’ along the lines of input-intense technologies, specialized production, and growing market insertion. Established in 1995-1996, the National Program of Family Farm Support (PRONAF) nurtured the modernization of PFF as an attempt to advance a new paradigm of rural development through an easier access to credit and various other supporting schemes.⁶

Public policies and legislation introduced in the last two decades, such as PRONAF, have essentially tried to bring PFF to the domain of mainstream agriculture through the enunciation of the new category of *agronegócio* (literally, small agribusiness) in an attempt to capture the concerted ideological attempt to redefine PFF. Even the president of the union of rural workers of Sinop affirmed, “Our future is to make the most of the agribusiness opportunities available for family farmers.” In another interview with a senior researcher of Embrapa (the federal public agricultural research corporation) in Sinop it was argued,

The main problem of family agriculture in Sinop is the ‘lack of entrepreneurial inclination’ [*falta de aptidão empresarial*]. There are apparently great opportunities to improve the production of fruits and vegetables in the north of Mato Grosso, considering that more than 80% is still imported to the region, but the argument is that most local peasants are unprepared to become business-like farmers. For the researcher, the key problems faced by PFF are not the ability to produce or the conditions to produce (land, water, technology, labor), but the need to stimulate production champions, leaders, as models for the others to follow and to reduce dependency from the state. According to the same interviewee, the frontier situation forces the small family farmers to become entrepreneurs.⁷

In a graphic interview with the head of rural development of the Sinop city council, it was added that PFF continues to struggle and

what is lacking is more professionalism, investment in food supply chains, less politics and more economic autonomy of the producers, soon abandon and move to the cities... Agrarian reform projects are archaic, only focused on land allocation and

⁶ In practice, the history of the programme has revealed uneven results, unremitting operational problems, and aggravated regional and intrasectoral inequalities (Wanderley 2014).

⁷ To a large extent, it replicates processes registered in the post-war years by Cândido (1964) in small farming areas of São Paulo, then occupied by a combination of indigenous and European migrant groups, and increasingly influenced by the consumption of industrialized goods and the need to work outside the family plot. Ironically, the hard life of most families studied by Cândido led them to aspire a better situation, “re-enacting conditions suggested in retrospective utopias” in Paraná, São Paulo and “even in Mato Grosso” (pg. 157).

not on production; we cannot give land for free, opportunism of more than 80% of those who take part are not really producers... I apologize for what I am going to say, but if I could I would drive over the settlers along the roads [waiting for land in agrarian reform projects]. These are not farmers, but criminals (April 2018).

Along those lines, the most representative experience of entrepreneurial small family farming in the region today is the commercialization of production by the cooperative Coopernova (a branch of the aforementioned Coopercana, which obtained autonomy in 1987). The great majority of the more than 2,000 associates are located in numerous agrarian reform projects in several municipalities. Due to a combination of market opportunities and a fierce business mentality, the directors of the cooperative promoted the expansion and aggressive market insertion of agro-industrial production (especially dairy and processed food). In our travel in the region, it was easy to identify family farmers supplying milk to Coopernova; those more technified also sell fruits and make use of irrigation. On the one hand, these farmers claim that milk production, despite the routine of daily hard work, is an interesting activity because of the constant flow of cash (one operational challenge is to maintain production during the dry season to avoid price reductions during the rainy season). On the other hand, the strong business orientation of the cooperative is often criticized by the associated farmers on the grounds that it has eroded the previous relation of partnership and the dialogue with cooperative directors. New sources of income are now available, but many feel that it has led to the alienation of cooperative members and over-exploitation of labor work in order to meet the quality and quantity demands of the more entrepreneurial cooperative. That was expressed in the following interview:

It is a lot of hard work with the cows, every day, needs to have a lot of determination, otherwise you don't stay in the game. I used to be a lorry driver, but I am trying my best to remain here. Milk production is not easy, and to maintain the farm one has lots of expenses, and annoyance. Sometimes I think about leaving, returning to my lorry [his previous job] (Coopernova associate, April 2018).

The pressure for a more entrepreneurial family agriculture has directly affected the perspective of colonization and agrarian reform projects.⁸ The first Regional Agrarian Reform Plan of Mato Grosso covered the period 1986-1996 already aimed to reduce pressure for land through market-oriented approaches. An emblematic repercussion was the 'market-friendly agrarian reform' [*reforma agrária de mercado*] project launched in 1997 with World Bank support. Through loans to the Brazilian government, land was acquired and transferred (sold) to small family farmers. The objective was to streamline land distribution and reduce populism and transaction abuses. One emblematic example was the agrarian reform in Gleba Mercedes⁹, in the Sinop region, involving 35,000 hectares, (relatively large) plots of 70 hectares and around 500 families organized in nine rural nucleuses (Peripolli 2017). Despite the high expectations with such an 'alternative' model of agrarian reform, the project was seriously undermined from the outset (Teixeira 2006), with accusations and evidences of the ill-selection of the recipients of land tenure, done through a lottery system that allowed urban dwellers and the general public with no agriculture connection to apply (Francio 2011). As a result, after the wood was cut and sold to the wood mills, many sold their plots and failed to use the land for agricultural production. Cases of illegal fire were also common in the

⁸ Data obtained from INCRA for December 2017 indicated the existence of 548 agrarian reform projects in MT, with 82,424 families and covering 6,023,371 ha.

⁹ This was part of the original 500,000 hectare requested by Mercedes-Benz in 1968 in the context of the scramble for the Amazon.

agrarian settlements of Gleba Mercedes, requiring special control by the fire brigade (Peron 2010). In recent years, there is renting out to the more capitalized neighbors and agribusiness farmers, especially for the cultivation of soybeans. All those factors have seriously contributed to the bad image of the farmers of the Gleba Mercedes project by the urban population and the agribusiness sector.

Once divested of the more political agenda, as in the case of ‘market-friendly agrarian reform,’ PFF has been reinvented as the extension of agribusiness, playing the subordinate role of food supplier, reserve of labor and reserve of land. One important institutional change that demobilizes peasants and aggravates land commodification has been the concession of private land titles by the government (which happened in Gleba Mercedes in 2017), celebrated by mainstream politicians as proof of autonomy and an important step towards easier rural credit. Although some peasant families expressed satisfaction with the regularization of their private property, they also acknowledged in the interviews that it will certainly lead to mass selling and concentration of land in the hands of the wealthier neighbors and agribusiness farmers. Another important connection between the commodification of land in areas like Gleba Mercedes is the commodification of water for hydroelectricity, urban supply, and irrigation (several large hydropower schemes are being constructed along the Teles Pires River). What happens in Mato Grosso is part of national policies in favor of agribusiness expansion, suppression of land demands by peasants and indigenous groups, reduction of environmental conservation constraints, and the renewed advance of extractivism and infrastructure projects.¹⁰ One major knockback was the publication of legal decree in 2016 (MP 759/2016 [known as the *MP da Grilagem* (Provisional Decree of Land Grabbing)], converted into Law 13,465/2017, and further regulated by three additional decrees signed on 15/Mar/2018).¹¹ All that have facilitated the regularization of public land occupied by large-scale owners and streamlined the transfer of property deeds to the farmers, invigorating the land market and facilitating socio-economic concentration in the hands of agribusiness players.

4 The Reluctant Alterity of Agribusiness

What interests us most of all in this section is to reflect upon the ontological differences and continuities between present-day PFF and agriculture practiced for the market (i.e. agribusiness). From the brief overview above, it is possible to discern the internal complexity of contemporary PFF and the politico-economic pressures to reduce it to capitalist agriculture in areas of agricultural frontier. There is an enduring ‘friction’ (Tsing 2005) between economic and social universalisms that clash, and end up reconstructing local cultures and idiosyncratic processes. The agricultural frontier is a dynamic social space where family farming is reorganized on the ruins of migrants’ past experiences, combined with the practices of the original, indigenous inhabitants and multiple demands for modernization. Specifically in relation to our case study, after an initial phase in the 1970s and early 1980s, which was heavily reliant on the state apparatus, there has been a drive to incorporate the products and the operation of PFF into an agribusiness-centered regional economy, particularly in Mato Grosso, which has become the showcase of Brazilian agribusiness. The language and the rationalization by social groups involved in this transition to a market-based economy incorporate pre-capitalist beliefs and practices, as well as new forms of transgression and emerging, even disturbing, moralities (Taussig 1980). One very intriguing feature of this evolving geography is that small family farming certainly represents the Other

¹⁰ The landslide victory of right-wing politicians in the 2018 general election is a disturbing indication of the power of agribusiness and its ideological, economic, and political influence.

¹¹ Law 13,465 was challenged in the Supreme Court by the Public Prosecutor (ADI 5,771).

of capitalist agriculture, but it functions as a hesitant form of alterity that both resists and fulfils agribusiness.

The politico-economic literature can be of particular assistance, if tempered with sensitivity to frontier-making. First of all, there are certainly clear-cut boundaries between the agribusiness model of production and many of the strategies adopted by peasant farmers. This is what Fraser et al. (2018) considers a dialectics between mutuality/use values and markets/exchange values. Nonetheless, due to the multifaceted penetration of capitalism and the great diversity of peasants, the same literature amplifies significant confusion about the multiple features of PFF. For instance, Wolf (1966:36) differentiates between peasants and entrepreneurial farmers, but also treats intensive small farming in Western countries as ‘neotechnic peasants’ with an agriculture that is “rationalized and transformed into an economic enterprise which aimed primarily at maximal outputs.” To avoid conceptual misunderstandings, it is useful to emphasize that the most crucial attribute of small family farming is not really the size of production, the family nucleus, or the techniques of farming, but the politicized relation between peasants and the expanding capitalization of agriculture. This separation has taken place in concrete historical, spatial, and political contexts, leading to the “genesis of the capitalist farmer” due to the combination of new technologies, favorable supports, the usurpation of common land, and also the impoverishment of “the mass of the agricultural folk” (Marx 1981[1894]:905-906).

When Marx situates the encroachment of capitalist relations on agriculture in time and space, he provides an important distinction to help us understand the role of small family agriculture. Marx highlights the specific relations of production and exchange that arise from the investment of capital on land, clearly distinguishing between peasant agriculture, which is pursued as livelihood, and capitalist agriculture focused on profit making. Landed property is “transformed by the intervention of capital and the capitalist mode of production... The assumption that the capitalist mode of production has taken control of agriculture implies also that it dominates all spheres of production and bourgeois society” (Ibid:751). Nonetheless, the growing pressures for industrialization and by large-scale agriculture do not mean the disappearance of the “small-scale peasant ownership,” which continues to play an important role in modern economies (Ibid:942). But this sector has unique socio-economic features because the peasant is the proprietor of their land and most production is consumed by the producers instead of traded as a commodity. There is a continuum between, on one extreme, ‘traditional’ subsistence farming and, on the other, highly capitalized, digital- and biotechnology-based agribusiness production. Crucially, at a certain point in this spectrum there is a qualitative transformation from peasant to agribusiness farming, what can be described as the effective and functional subordination and subsumption of labor peasant to capital. As theorized by Marx, subsumption is an effort to annul the political, economic, and socio-cultural uniqueness of PFF, although the process is not absolute and many discontinuities remain (see Wanderley 2003).

Subsumption is a concept that Marx originally developed to explain the control of labor by capital during the expansion and consolidation of capitalist relations of production, but which has great applicability to explain the transformation of agriculture-cum-food into agriculture-cum-agribusiness at an economic frontier. The argument was developed in notebooks written in 1863-1866, and published as an appendix to Volume 1 of *Capital*. The labor process is subsumed under capital and the process of production becomes “the process of capital itself,” as in the case of the peasant who is employed as a day laborer for a farmer (Marx 1976[1867]:1020). This is the stage of formal subsumption, when capital incorporates and gradually intensifies existing labor practices to increase the extraction of surplus value. Marx notes that high levels of subsumption do not necessarily mean that the life of the worker immediately deteriorates, but life is more dynamic and complex, as much as the

laborers are more versatile and responsive. In his words, “What a gulf there is between the proud yeomanry of England of which Shakespeare speaks and the English agricultural laborer!” (pg. 1033) Interestingly it is quite revealing that Marx includes an old and intriguing quotation, which shows that the author did not neglect changes in agriculture and farming when thinking about subsumption: “*Agriculture from subsistence... changed for agriculture for trade...*” (Young 1774 in Marx 1976[1867]:1035). It means that under pressures for the commercialization of agriculture and commodification of nature, there is a gradual transformation of the labor process and of its actual conditions, a “complete revolution” in the mode of production, what leads to the real subsumption of labor under capital.

The most relevant implication for our purposes here is that agricultural frontiers, as in the Amazon, because of fragile institutions, ideological pressures, and the persistent subordination to core economic areas, are spaces where subsumption can more easily flourish (even though, due to the availability of natural resources peasants can also find escape routes and withdraw from market transactions more easily). Particularly in the eastern and southern parts of the Brazilian Amazon, land has been legally and illegally appropriated by companies controlled by international financial capital, with the enclosure of common areas, expropriation of local communities, the intensification of market pressures, increased conflicts, and environmental damage (Frederico 2018). Yet, it is also pertinent to observe that in most cases the subsumption of PFF doesn’t imply the separation of the producer from the means of production; in other words, it doesn’t mean a full proletarianization of peasants, but mainly their insertion into the sphere of capitalist relations still as peasants. Subsumption happens because the balance between the internal characteristics of family farming and the external influence of capitalist agriculture has crossed a threshold and is disrupted in favor of capitalist relations of production. It is only at this stage that production for production’s sake is accomplished and PFF begins to fade, subsumed under agribusiness. This process is certainly not new and in the early twentieth century Chayanov (1991[1927]:7) already stated that it turns the autonomy of small agriculture producers “into an economic system controlled on capitalist principles by a number of very large enterprises, which in turn are under the control of the highest forms of finance capitalism.”

Despite mounting controversies and class-based inequalities, the subsumption of PFF to capitalist agriculture has been advocated by numerous authors as something not only inevitable but highly advantageous to wider society in terms of economic intensification and rural development. Mendras (1984) famously announced that, under the inexorable pressures of industrial civilization in the Western world, the peasantry (as a unique way of life) ceased to exist and what remained were peasant producers (i.e. entrepreneurial family farmers), subordinate to market rules and the technological rigor of production. The period between 1945 and 1975, particularly in France, was called the ‘Thirty Glorious Years,’ when people were tacitly excluded from agriculture due to an increasingly automatized production and additional management schemes. The word ‘farmer’ even replaced the expression ‘peasant,’ considered rather obsolete (however, more recently the word ‘peasant’ has been rehabilitated and has again more positive connotations). According to this line of reasoning, it is because of their partial connection with markets and a high degree of imperfection that PFF struggle to survive in capitalist societies (Ellis 1988). Likewise, Mellor (2017) sees a great future for “small entrepreneurial farmers” (not subsistence peasants) in terms of poverty reduction and rural development, while Graeub et al. (2016) make a distinction between family farmers who are well-endowed and well-integrated into markets and those who lack sufficient credit or who are land-poor and require social safety nets. Abramovay (1990), among other Brazilian scholars, has applauded the transition from PFF to entrepreneurial family farming under the belief that these will be able to benefit from technical innovation and flourish in the

free market economy. This pro-subsumption position was influenced by the apparent success of the small units of production boosted by dedicated state interventions in the European Union and the Brazilian peasants who Abramovay considers ruined and backward.

The subsumption of PFF to agribusiness has been encouraged in Brazil not only because of market pressures, but also through the very official programs designed to support peasant farming. PRONAF, in particular, became a mark of the Lula government (2003-2010) and introduced a series of incentives focused on preferential commercialization, formation of strategic stocks, seed provision, etc. (Cazella et al. 2009). The related Food Purchase Program (PAA) guaranteed priority markets for the products of small family farmers in an attempt to stimulate the local economy and improve food security. The scheme represented a great boost to some segments of family farmers because the legislation stipulated that 30 percent of food purchase was reserved, although in practice it never reached more than 15 percent due to the difficulties of peasant farming to respond (B. Fernandes, pers. comm.). In spite of its ambitious goals, the PAA program suffered from a series of operation problems and significantly declined after 2013 because of the growing scarcity of public funds; in any case, PAA only benefited 4.2 percent of the universe of family farmers in Brazil (Grisa and Porto 2015). Closely related with PAA was the National Program of School Food (PNAE) that also secured a share of market for small family farmers who supplied the municipal school system. Schemes like these are described in the literature as ‘institutional markets’ given that they represent an attempt of the state to control food trade and supply (it should be noted that all markets are in effect institutionalized and follows social norms and customs).

Regardless of the enthusiasm of many, these so-called institutionalized markets are circumstantial attempts to shield the perverse influence of agri-food corporations and their supply chains rather than an effective mechanism to contain agribusiness pressures. A related weakness is that pro-poor government initiatives strongly depend on political backing and can be quickly eroded with government changes (exactly what happened in Brazil in 2016 after the removal of the left-wing president Dilma by the national congress). As a result, the softened path of subsumption associated with institutionalized markets is likely to be overtaken by the stronger pressures exerted by the agribusiness sector, which tends to aggravate inequalities and maximize risks.

5 Wrapping Up: Disconcerting Prospects

Agricultural frontiers in the Amazon are hotspots of agrarian transformation, and intensely reveal old and new development trends. Significant contingents of family farmers have moved to Mato Grosso and other parts of the region since the 1960s, and have taken part in the organization of a new peasantry that replaced, through various forms of violence, the previous peasants and indigenous peoples. A significant proportion of those who migrated to the region lost their land and either returned to their original places, moved to urban centers or were proletarianized in agribusiness farms. Among those who succeeded, new challenges appeared due to the affirmation of the power of agribusiness and the exponential growth of soybean, cotton, and maize production, together with irrigated crops and agroindustry. Overall, it represented a mounting pressure for the subsumption of PFF to the rationality of agribusiness, only circumstantially mitigated by various government programs (which at any rate operate with similar pro-subsumption goals). The absence of a fully developed capitalist mode of production, as observed by Marx (1976[1867]), did not preclude the subsumption and exploitation of peasant labor, particular in these areas of agricultural frontier where both capitalist and non-capitalist relations are in a state of flux. Those circumstances have really evolved through a double process of subsumption: the agricultural frontier being subsumed to

the hegemonic socio-political and economic influence of central areas, as much as PFF simultaneously being subsumed to capitalist relations across scales.

It is important to realize that the subsumption to market relations has been instrumental for the very success of export-oriented agribusiness. The mounting risks associated with agribusiness farming, increasingly affected by environmental degradation, pesticide-related diseases, and labor scarcity, needs escape routes that are obtainable in the universe of PFF around large-scale properties. There are cases, as in the agrarian reform community Zumbi do Palmares in the north of Mato Grosso, where PFF not only produces significant amounts of food, but also guarantee the maintenance of vicinal roads and public schools to families living in neighboring farms. The pressure of subsumption is furthermore an attempt to deny small farmers the prospect and the possibility of resistance and reaction to market demands. What is meant by resistance includes a variety of strategies, ranging from moments of open confrontation (as in the case of the occupation of land by landless groups) to the more common acts of passive defiance and the formation of location-based networks around kinship and friendship (see Scott 1985). The subsumption of PFF to the requirements of agribusiness is never complete, but meets the opposition of peasant farmers who retain the ability to adapt, are highly diversified (in terms of production and activities), and who know better how to cope with local conditions and natural cycles of production, as well as how to develop strategies that make little sense before capitalist players (over exploitation, engage the family, relations of loyalty, and retribution, etc.).

The intricate Brazilian experience of approximation and distancing from agribusiness has parallels with what has been happening with peasants all over the world. Contradicting pessimistic predictions along the twentieth century, there has been a revival of peasant struggles for their social emancipation and legitimate right of access to land and food in a context of mounting domination of financial capital and neoliberalism (Herrera and Chi 2018). Small farmers maintain an ‘inconvenient’ and resilient autonomy that is not at all easy to erode; they exhibit an internal logic (beyond romanticism) and a flexibility that is difficult for the reductionist operations of capitalism to incorporate. The behavior of peasants in response to onerous socio-economic relations follow normative attitudes that Thompson (1993:188) famously described as a “moral economy,” what is not political “in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of common weal.” That is, family farming, through various survival strategies (beyond the pressures to expand and modernize) is not the residual or marginal category of farm operations left behind by modernization, but a conscious economic strategy and approach to rural life (Machum 2005). Still, the interplay between survival, resistance, and opportunities are even more intense in areas like the ones in the Amazon studied here, where agrarian questions and the ability of peasants to respond to challenges are directly related to the range of inequalities and alliances that result from the specific circumstances of frontier-making.

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