

# Class Dynamics of Rural Transformation in Brazil: A Critical Assessment of the Current Agrarian Debate

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## Abstract

The election of Jair Bolsonaro represents the culmination of a conjuncture featuring the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarian neo-liberalism in Brazil. This article analyzes the role played by dominant and subaltern rural social classes in a process that brought the country to this situation by critically assessing the current Brazilian agrarian debate. A segmentation of distinct class fractions within the categories of *patronal* agriculture and family farming is proposed. The origin and significance of the institutional ambiguity that marked Brazilian agri-food policies, as well as the reasons behind their dismantling, are explored. The agrarian question remains the key to understanding the contradictory dynamics of Brazilian capitalism and the challenges of its national formation.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to offer a critical agrarian perspective on the process that brought Brazil toward increasing instability and crisis in the recent years. The deceleration of economic growth and the rising fiscal problem<sup>1</sup> had already begun by the end of the first Dilma Rousseff administration (2011–2014), reversing the upward trajectory experienced during the two terms in which Lula (2003–2006, 2007–2010) led the coalition headed by the Workers' Party (PT). But the situation worsened when the reelected Dilma (2014–2018) was impeached under the pretext of carrying out additional credit operations not foreseen in the budget planning. The 'coup of 2016' threw the country into uncertainty. Her vice president Michel Temer, of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), took over her office in alliance with the main center-right opposition party, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB). Thereafter, the deconstruction of symbolic policies of the PT governments and the implementation of an aggressive neoliberal agenda were prioritized.<sup>2</sup> This redounded to the convergence of conservative and reactionary forces that rose to surface after the protests of June 2013 around the 'right-wing populist' Jair Bolsonaro, of the hitherto inexpressive Social Liberal Party (PSL), who was elected the new Brazilian president in 2018 with an 'authoritarian neoliberal' platform (Bruff & Tansel, 2019).

It is well known that large landowners and agribusinesses strongly supported Bolsonaro.<sup>3</sup> However, the role played by rural social classes in the process that brought Brazil to this conjuncture is not clear. The argument made in this article is that there exists a misunderstanding of the class dynamics of recent rural transformation in the Brazilian agrarian debate. Methodologically, I seek to understand this complex reality by assessing the main political and intellectual controversies underway. Throughout the PSDB (1994–2002) and PT governments (2003–2016), two cardinal rural social categories were consolidated, with their respective political projects, priority markets, and institutional apparatuses: *patronal* agriculture (PA)<sup>4</sup> associated to agribusiness expansion, mainly oriented to the export market, and assisted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA); family farming (FF)<sup>5</sup> associated to rural development, mainly oriented to the domestic market, and assisted by the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA). Nevertheless, this binary

opposition has proven insufficient to account for the structural heterogeneity of Brazilian agriculture, or its political implications.

The 'ruralist bloc' (*bancada ruralista*, or agribusiness parliamentary front), comprising of the traditional landowners' unions and the agroindustrial associations, extols the productivity and innovation of an undifferentiated agricultural sector through slogans such as 'agro is tech, agro is pop, agro is everything', 'one agriculture only', and 'all farmers are part of agribusiness'. There are several intellectual streams aligned with this perspective, but the authors of the 'seven theses on the Brazilian rural world' are probably the most active voice in defense of such discourse in the academic field; they argue that family farming is an absolutely meaningless category, not justified by any theoretical or empirical criteria, since differentiation between rural producers is only a matter of size and scale, not of class, and hence the agrarian question is just an excrescence of the past (Alves & Rocha, 2010; Buainain, Alves, Silveira, & Navarro, 2013; Buainain et al., 2014; Navarro & Campos, 2013; Navarro & Pedroso, 2011). Contrarily, several intellectuals have contributed to assert the key distinction between wage and family labor relations in rural production, a critical perspective on agribusiness expansion, a multidimensional, territorial approach to rural development, and a critical policy analysis, underscoring the 'diversity and heterogeneity' of Brazilian agriculture. However, rural social movements and family farming unions struggling for agrarian reform, rural development, and food security/sovereignty, as well as policymakers amicable to these causes, have not been able to utilize this knowledge critically to appraise the situation, counterpoising the attacks of the right, and renewing their political agenda (Abramovay, 1992; Delgado, G. C., 2012; FAO/INCRA, 1994; Guanziroli, Buainain, & Di Sabbato, 2013; Heredia, Palmeira, & Leite, 2010; Lamarche, 1993; Mattei, 2017; Schneider & Cassol, 2014; Aquino, Gazolla, & Schneider, 2018; Veiga, 1991).

This article aims to evaluate critically the current agrarian debate by contrasting the aforementioned perspectives with empirical evidence and theoretical literature and provide a class analysis of recent rural transformation in Brazil focused on the interplay between structures, actors, and institutions. The article is organized in three main sections. In the first section, class dynamics and policymaking are discussed within the framework of 'the agrarian question'. In the second section, a segmentation of the distinct class fractions within the categories of PA and FF is proposed. In the third section, the origin and significance of the institutional ambiguity that marked Brazilian agri-food policies, as well as the reasons behind their dismantling, are explored. A conclusion then indicates directions for future research.

## **The Agrarian Question, Class Dynamics, and Policymaking**

Within the ambit of Marxist political economy, there is a longstanding debate on the agrarian question. Byres (2016) identifies three ‘problematics’ of the agrarian question in classical Marxism: the ‘political’ (Engels), related to the alliances, coalitions, contradictions, and conflicts between the peasantry and other social classes (landowners, bourgeoisie, workers) in the processes of social change, capitalist transformation, and modern state-building; the ‘sociological’ (Kautsky and Lenin), referring to the forms, extent, and barriers to capitalist development in agriculture from the introduction of private property of land and wage labor and its effects on the social reproduction and differentiation of farmers; and the ‘economic’ (Preobrazhensky and Bukharin), dealing with the extension, appropriation, and transfer of agricultural surpluses (labor, food, raw materials, financial resources) to support capital formation, industrialization, and structural transformation of the economy. In the end, Byres (2016) centers his analysis on the different (national) ‘paths’ of ‘agrarian transition’ (from above, from below, or otherwise) from pre-capitalist to capitalist social formations, achieved basically through processes of large-scale industrialization.

Bernstein (2006) goes even further with the industrialization fix by contesting the contemporary relevance of the agrarian question, claiming that it has been rendered redundant by globalization. The ‘agrarian question of capital’ is dead because in poor countries today any possibility of industrialization relies on global capital through foreign direct investment. What may still exist are just fragmented ‘agrarian questions of labor’ (unemployment, precariousness, living conditions), while land struggles no longer have the systemic character they had until, what Wolf (1984) called, the ‘peasant wars of the twentieth century’. However, Byres (2016) himself argues that Bernstein’s view expresses an unacceptable ‘analytical closure’, based on ‘world-system determinism’, that rules out a phenomenon of the historical agenda a priori, on theoretical grounds, making it pointless to be investigated empirically.

Moyo, Jha, and Yeros (2013), in contrast, adopt a methodological position in which the agrarian question is kept ‘open’ for empirical research to fulfill its role. The agrarian question, hence, should not be restricted to the Eurocentric and economic concern with industrialization. While the latter is important, along the twentieth century, the agrarian question has progressively incorporated (e.g., with Mao Zedong, Frantz Fanon, and

Amílcar Cabral) the concern with conquering and deepening national liberation and sovereignty in contexts of struggle against colonialism and dependence from imperialist domination. Not surprisingly, in Brazilian critical social thought, there is a solid tradition (e.g., with Caio Prado Júnior, Celso Furtado, and Florestan Fernandes) linking the historical deferral of agrarian reform with the impasses of the national formation and economic, social, and political development (Sampaio Jr., 1999). The combination of the agrarian and national questions in contemporary Brazil is thereby closely related with the obstacles imposed by the large landowners, land concentration, and agribusiness expansion for a more autonomous development of the country in order to overcome its subordinate insertion in the international economy and geopolitics.

Class dynamics and policymaking are crucial issues within this controversy. Bernstein (2010) holds an orthodox Leninist view on rural class dynamics, which asserts the disintegration of the peasantry via social polarization (proletarianization vs. accumulation). For him, in capitalism today, there are no peasants anymore, but petty-commodity producers (PCM) that combine the reproductive functions of both labor and capital. Thus, PCM reproduction is also subject to social class differentiation: the poor farmers are doubly afflicted by the low level of consumption and the difficulty of maintaining their means of production; the middle farmers have to strive to successfully achieve the simple reproduction requirements of their dual condition; and the rich farmers are able to achieve expanded reproduction by hiring wage labor and accumulating capital. Although insightful, the problem with this approach is again its abstract deductivism and analytical closure replacing concrete, open empirical inquiry.

In order to overcome this problem, Long and Ploeg (1994) shift the discussion to the ‘metamorphoses’ of the peasantry into a complex and heterogeneous FF. Underlying this process is the ‘commodification’ and ‘institutional incorporation’ of agriculture by markets, science, and the state. They resignify the Marxist categories by restoring ‘agency’ to farmers and accounting for different ‘commodification degrees’, defined from the ratio between the *quantum* of exchange values mobilized through markets and the use of values reproduced internally to the unit of production. In addition to the capitalist form of ‘wage labor commodity production’ (WCP) and the typical peasant form of ‘domestic subsistence production’ (DSP), Ploeg (2009) maintains the existence of two other social forms, both covered by the category FF: ‘simple commodity production’ (SCP) and ‘petty commodity production’ (PCM). ‘The essence and the main differences between them do not reside so much in the

relations of property' but 'in the (different) ways in which production, distribution and appropriation of value are ordered' (Ploeg, 2009, p. 16). As shown in Table 1, rather than relying on abstract, deductive tendencies, the aim is to characterize typical, but not concretely pure, historical 'paths' through which commodification of FF takes place, contradictorily coevolving with the development of capitalist agriculture.

Class reproduction is thus a process embedded in the wider social context, as expressed in politics. Gramsci (2002) is the chief authority on this subject in Marxist thought, with his concepts of state, civil society, and hegemony. Yet, when the class nature and character of the state in policymaking come under discussion, Poulantzas' (2000) contribution is significant. For him, the state is a condensation of the relation of forces among classes and class fractions of society, forming a complex of institutional apparatuses such as the law and bureaucracies. Under the discourse of representing the 'general interest of the nation', the bourgeois state creates an 'isolation-effect' and an appearance of 'relative autonomy' that masks the truly prioritized class interests, organizes the hegemony of a fraction of the dominant classes over other dominant classes and class fractions, and disorganizes the dominated classes. Within the 'power bloc', the hegemonic fraction eventually articulates the competing interests and consolidates its capacity to elaborate, implement, and obtain the priority benefits of state policies (e.g., macroeconomic, social, foreign, and agri-food policies).

The problem with Poulantzas' approach is that any policy that benefits the subaltern classes or class fractions—for example, peasants or family

**Table 1.** Social Forms of Rural Production

Forms of Production/ Commodified Elements	Capitalist (WCP)	Simple (SCP)	Petty (PCP)	Subsistence (DSP)
Outcomes and products	Virtually all	Virtually all	Major part	Surpluses only
Resources and inputs	Virtually all	Major amounts	Moderate amounts	Tiny amounts
labor force	Always, as a rule	Quite often	Just occasionally	Virtually never
Interest	Expanded reproduction	Simple reproduction	Simple reproduction	Simple reproduction
Goal	Profit	Income/profit	Income	Survival

**Source:** Elaborated by the author, based on Ploeg (2009, p. 20).

farmers—can only be explained as a mere ‘concession’ of the ruling classes. The subaltern classes are then, not only, by definition, excluded from the control of the state institutional apparatuses through which policies are implemented, as they appear to be largely devoid of agency or an active role in class struggle. A remedy to this is to return to Gramsci (2002) and taking seriously the role of ‘organic intellectuals’. As mediators, they take part in a ‘war of position’ by producing normative ideas and policy benchmarks capable of translating the interests of the subaltern classes as ‘common sense’ and part of the ‘general interest of the nation’, thus altering the relation of forces with the hegemonic classes and conquering certain spaces in the institutional apparatuses of the state (Grisa, 2010).

## **Rural Social Classes and Structural Heterogeneity in the Brazilian Agriculture**

The intellectual perspective associated with the interests of PA and agribusiness attempts to combine concepts of neoclassical economics (cost-benefit rationality and total factor productivity), economic sociology (capitalist sociability and monetization of social life), and Bourdieu (social hierarchies). This theoretical *mélange* appears mainly in the writings of Zander Navarro. The problem is that by not indicating how such disparate approaches could be articulated in any theoretically coherent and consistent manner, what remains is a crude economism with a shallow sociological veneer.

In a long essay prior to the ‘seven theses’, after spending dozens of pages complaining the lack of studies on rural social differentiation in Brazil and claiming the centrality of Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* for such endeavor, Navarro and Pedroso (2011) simply decline to undertake the class analysis so dear to the French sociologist, under the excuse that this analytical field is too controversial and inconclusive, and that their objective is primarily empirical. Eventually, the whole sociological discussion gives way to the economic argument that FF, as established in law by criteria that they considered to be ‘non-economic’, ‘is absolutely meaningless and unjustified’ (Navarro & Campos, 2013, p. 5), and that ‘only criteria of income, economic scale, and area extension should segment the action of government policies directed at small producers’ (Navarro & Pedroso, 2011, p. 110). Furthermore, the distinction between family and wage labor is misguided, as ‘the justification for this criterion

is merely ideological, which refers us to the Marxist tradition' (Navarro & Pedroso, 2011, p. 110).<sup>6</sup>

The classification effectively used by this group is that elaborated by Alves and Rocha (2010). They convert the gross value of production (GVP) into a monthly minimum-wage equivalent (mmw)<sup>7</sup> to express the 'opportunity cost' of agricultural labor. For not having declared income or land area, 15 per cent of rural establishments were a priori excluded from classification. Of the remainder, 11.36 per cent with more than 10 mmw were responsible for 86.65 per cent of the GVP, and 0.62 per cent with more than 200 mmv alone produced 51.19 per cent of the total, while the 88.64 per cent with gross income of less than 10 mmv produced 13.35 per cent of the GVP, and the 66.01 per cent with less than 2 mmv produced only 3.27 per cent of the total. This brutal concentration would confirm the supremacy of the elite of 'modern agricultural production' and the irrelevance and unfeasibility of the rest of the rural masses as (family) farmers, because they are simply 'rural poor', half of them in the Northeast region, for whom it 'is necessary to buy time' with socio-assistentialist policies until part of them can migrate and be absorbed into the cities (notwithstanding structural issues left undiscussed).

The intellectual perspective associated with the interests of FF, in contrast, asserts that there are scientific theories supporting the distinction between PA and FF, that the latter has specificities justifying it as a distinct social and normative category, and that although there may be some arbitrariness at the cutoff points, the classification criteria inscribed in law (see endnote 5) are quite reasonable (Schneider, 2010). Therefore, any classification must recognize that there is a clear class division, depending on the predominant labor relation (wages in PA and kinship in FF), and that within each category, there are fractions or segmentations.

Looking at the set of branches that form 'agribusiness' in the sense of Davis and Goldberg (1957) through Poulantzas' (2000) class lenses, it is possible to conceive a myriad of bourgeois fractions that accumulate capital from the 'intersectoral relations of agriculture': financial (institutional investors), industrial (machinery, inputs, and food processing firms), commercial (trading and retail firms), and services (logistics, advisory, and others). These segments may belong to the 'international' bourgeoisie (of imperialist or emerging countries), the 'associated' bourgeoisie (local partners, brokers, and managers of foreign capital), or the 'internal' bourgeoisie (branches with local bases of accumulation and their own interests projected abroad, such as the 'national champions', firms in meat processing, agricultural machinery, sugar and ethanol, pulp and paper, among others). A somewhat mythical, anti-imperialist



'national' bourgeoisie is virtually nonexistent in Brazilian society, let alone in agribusiness (Boito & Berringer, 2014). The task here, however, is to analyze the composition of dominant and subaltern rural classes themselves based on previous works that contain conceptually insightful empirical typologies, using official data from the 2006 Agricultural Census (CA)<sup>8</sup> with distinct variables and criteria (Table 2).

In 2006, 809,369 rural establishments in Brazil were classified as PA, that is, 15.6 per cent of the total. They concentrate 84.4 per cent of the land area and produce 66.8 per cent of GVP, but employ only 25.6 per cent of the labor force (Aquino et al., 2018). By the Food and Agriculture Organization/National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (FAO/INCRA) methodology (Guanziroli et al., 2013), it would consist of 630,648 establishments, 12.1 per cent of the total, with 68 per cent of the land area, 63.9 per cent of the GVP, and 21.2 per cent of the employed persons.

PA, the Brazilian rural dominant class or agrarian bourgeoisie, could be distinguished in two large segments, both understood as wage labor commodity producers (WCP). The first segment, capitalist *patronal* agriculture (CPA), corresponds to the media image of 'agro is tech', with high productivity and capital-intensive production, specialized in commodities and integrated with agro-industrial complexes, international markets, and financial circuits, but generating few jobs and high environmental costs. This segment is made up of less than 1 per cent of the total of rural establishments, but produces more than half of the total GVP of Brazilian agriculture.<sup>9</sup>

The second segment, latifundist *patronal* agriculture (LPA), keeps alive the old patrimonialist logic, with low productivity and technology, using the land as store of value and instrument of domination, and only reproducing itself, thanks to spurious forms of competitiveness such as debt forgiveness, land grabbing, and labor precariousness. Of the 4,290,482 self-declared rural properties in the INCRA, 112,463 are classified as large property, controlling 319 million hectares. Of these, 69,233 properties on 228.5 million hectares are considered unproductive. That is, 53 per cent of the large landholdings, which control 40 per cent of the land in Brazil, correspond to the traditional unproductive latifundia (INCRA, 2019).<sup>10</sup>

FF, alongside rural wage earners (the agricultural proletariat<sup>11</sup>), forms the Brazilian agrarian subaltern class. It comprises 4,367,902 rural establishments, 84.4 per cent of the total, with only 24.3 per cent of the land area but 33.2 per cent of the GVP, and 74.4 per cent of the employed persons (Aquino et al., 2018). By the FAO/INCRA methodology, it

**Table 2.** Classifications of Family Farming and *Patronal* Agriculture in Brazil

Authors	Key Variables	Typology
Aquino et al. (2018)	Management of the establishment; land area of more or less than four rural tax modules; family members employed and whether or not permanent and temporary wage labor; total gross income and shares of agricultural income (composed income strata)	<p>Group A: settlers of agrarian reform</p> <p>Group B: gross income of less than R\$3,000, at least 30% of agricultural activities</p> <p>Group C: gross income between R\$3,000 and R\$16,000, at least 60% of agricultural activities</p> <p>Group D: gross income between R\$16,000 and R\$45,000, at least 70% of agricultural activities and up to two permanent employees</p> <p>Group E: gross income between R\$45,000 and R\$80,000, at least 80% of agricultural activities and up to two permanent employees</p> <p>Non-PRONAF group: incomes above R\$80,000 and more than two permanent employees</p> <p><i>Patronal</i> agriculture—as defined by law</p> <p>EAFE: essentially agricultural family establishments—production value—total revenue ratio more than 50%</p> <p>FEMl: family establishments with multiple income sources—value of production—total revenue ratio between 20% and 50%</p> <p>RRFE: rural residents family establishments—value of production—total revenue ratio less than or equal to 20%</p> <p>FEWl: family establishments without agricultural income—value of production—total revenue ratio equal to 0 (non-sales)</p> <p><i>Patronal</i> agriculture—as defined by law</p>
Schneider and Cassol (2014)	Management of the establishment; land area of more or less than four rural tax modules; family members employed and whether or not permanent and temporary wage labor; gross value of production/total revenues (pluriactivity and multiple off-farm income sources)	

Guanziroli et al. (2013) Management of the establishment; land area of more or less than 15 rural tax modules; family members employed and whether or not permanent and temporary wage labor; total net income/regional daily agricultural labor value (opportunity cost of labor)

Type A—total income  $> 3$  daily agricultural labor value  
Type B—daily agricultural labor value  $<$  total income  $\leq 3$  daily agricultural labor value  
Type C—daily agricultural labor value/2  $<$  total income  $\leq$  daily agricultural labor value  
Type D—total income  $\leq$  daily agricultural labor value/2  
*Patronal agriculture—by default*

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**Source:** The author.

would consist of 87.9 per cent of the establishments, with 32 per cent of the land, 36.1 per cent of the GVP, and 78.8 per cent of the labor force. FF is distinguished in three main segments, understood as simple, petty, and subsistence commodity producers (SCP, PCP, SCP).

The first segment, entrepreneurial family farming (EFF), with a high degree of commodification, above-average land area and high income, is intensive in capital, technology and use of credit; employs permanent labor; and tends toward strong productive specialization and monocultural activity. EFF corresponds to type A of Guanziroli et al. (2013), which makes for 8.7 per cent of all establishments (9.9% of FF) and produces 25.1 per cent of total GVP (69.5% of FF). As for Aquino et al. (2018), EFF joins together two subgroups (group E and the group not receiving credit from the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming, PRONAF). They account for 6.7 per cent of all rural establishments (7.9% of FF) and produce 16.4 per cent of total GVP (49.4% of FF). The standard of living of this segment, with an average monthly gross income of R\$6,602, equivalent to 18.9 minimum wages plus food production for self-consumption and rent-free housing, is quite comparable to that of the Brazilian urban middle class.

The second segment, commercial family farming (CFF), with a moderate degree of commodification, average land area, and reasonable income, accesses technology and credit; occasionally hires labor; and tends to greater productive diversification and pluriactivity. Based on the classification of Guanziroli et al. (2013), this combines two subgroups (B and C) with 29.7 per cent of all establishments (33.8% of FF) and 8.7 per cent of total GVP (24% of FF). According to Aquino et al. (2018), CFF combines would combine three groups (A, C, and D) with 31 per cent of all establishments (36.7% of FF), and 15.1 per cent of total GVP (45% of FF). There is a non-negligible internal disparity within this segment. Its upper stratum (group D) reaches an average monthly gross income of R\$3,074, equivalent to 8.8 minimum wages, and its lower stratum (groups A and C), which includes agrarian reform beneficiaries, earns an average monthly gross income of R\$965, equivalent to 2.8 minimum wages. Added to the advantage of self-produced food and rent-free housing, the living standards of the lower and upper strata are roughly comparable to the non-skilled and skilled urban working classes, respectively.

The third segment, peasant family farming (PFF), with a low degree of commodification, below-average land area and low income, hardly accesses technology and credit, produces for subsistence, and concentrates the bulk of rural poverty. It is captured by type D of Guanziroli

et al. (2013), accounting for 49.5 per cent of all establishments (56.2% of FF) but only 3.6 per cent of total GVP (10.1% of FF). For Aquino et al. (2018), PFF is formed by group B, making for 46.7 per cent of all establishments (55.3% of FF) but only 1.7 per cent of total GVP (5.2 per cent of FF). The monthly average gross income of this group is just R\$116, equivalent to less than 1/3 of a minimum wage. For Schneider and Cassol (2014), within this large segment are probably included a major part of the 237,926 ‘rural residents’ and the 1,307,940 ‘establishments with no agricultural income’, whose production is not marketed, basically providing for self-consumption, plus the 530,000 establishments with ‘no land and/or no GVP’, most of them depending on social programs, pensions, and income transfers to survive.

There is still much empirical work ahead to refine this approach methodologically. However, it is theoretically surprising that through an adaptation of Ploeg’s (2009) manifestly Chayanovian framework, the current configuration of Brazilian rural class structure resembles, *cum grano salis*, the Marxist classics of the agrarian question. On the one hand, CPA is similar to Kautski’s *junker*-like ‘large agrarian exploitations’ fully integrated with modern agroindustrial capital, while LPA suggests the old Ricardian ‘agrarian rentiers’ refashioned in the age of financialization and global land grabbing. On the other hand, EFF would not be misunderstood as a *kulak*-like ‘rural petty bourgeoisie’ subordinated to agroindustrial capital, while CFF could be seen as a renewed version of the late Lenin and Bukharin’s ‘middle peasants’, perhaps not necessarily polarizing but yet heterogeneous; and PFF, as a mass of farmers in precarious conditions but not fully proletarianized, are the ‘poor peasants’ of our time. Nevertheless, this characterization is somewhat distinct from contemporary radical agrarian orthodoxies in Marxist political economy (e.g., Bernstein, 2010), which raises important policy and political implications, as will be seen.

## **Institutional Ambiguity and the Conservative Turn in Agri-food Policies**

During the Brazilian re-democratization years (1985–1989), agrarian reform returned to the political agenda, after having been badly defeated. But the aftermath of this conflict epitomized the future paths of both the agrarian right and left in Brazil, giving origin to the dualistic and ambiguous institutional architecture for agri-food issues constituted throughout the PSDB and PT governments.

On the one hand, the forces against agrarian reform—Brazilian Rural Society (SRB), National Confederation of Agriculture (CNA), Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB), all led by the truculent Democratic Ruralist Union (UDR)—showed cohesion in defending and ratifying their common interest: the class monopoly on concentrated landed property. However, the modernization of agriculture and rise of agribusiness of previous years and the subsequent liberalization and deregulation of the economy brought about significant turns. First, the properly capitalist fraction (PCA) of Brazilian agriculture, now fully integrated into industrial and finance capital, became hegemonic and surpassed the latifundist fraction (LPA). At discourse level, the old values of tradition and conservatism were incorporated and resignified within a new narrative about technical competence, productivity, profitability, competitiveness, and entrepreneurship. Their strongest argument relates to the ability of agribusiness exports to sustain the country's balance of payments while the other sectors face a retreat.<sup>12</sup> Second, while traditional LPA associations continue to play an important role, new forms of political representation emerged, through CPA's product and multiproduct associations (soy, rice, coffee, orange, meats, etc.), headed by the Brazilian Association of Agribusiness (ABAG), and a reinvigorated Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB) (Bruno, 2017).

Manufacturing a 'modern' public image to remove the negative identification of agribusiness leading to environmental, health, and labor problems (deforestation, overuse of agrochemicals, precarious work conditions) became a primary concern. Marketing campaigns aimed to dilute and conflate the boundaries of agribusiness into the whole society, compromising the latter and disclaiming its own accountability. Among the main scientific institutes operating as 'organic intellectuals' of agribusiness and PA are the Centre for Advanced Studies in Applied Economics (CEPEA/ESALQ), with a comprehensive work of calculating the 'Agribusiness gross domestic product (GDP)' and the 'GDP of the Agroindustrial Chains'; and the Agribusiness Knowledge Centre (PENSA/USP), with an analysis focused on value chains governance and the importance of property rights for the efficient allocation of resources, as well as researchers widespread through other institutions (e.g., the 'seven theses'). These interests and ideas are voiced by the so-called ruralist bloc, a supra-party front rooted in all regions of the country. Ruralists are a numerical 'minority' of population but have the largest parliamentary representation, gathering 225 of the 513 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 32 of the 62 seats in the Senate. They reproduce in the National Congress the intransigence and intolerance practiced by former UDR in order to delegitimize

the demands of subaltern populations and social movements (rural landless workers, indigenous people, *quilombolas*) whose civil rights, inscribed in the Federal Constitution, are denounced as infringing the legal security of their property rights, seeking to take over their territories and convert them into a business asset. In addition, there is a growing convergence and mutual support among the ruralist bloc and the conservative moral platform of the 'evangelical bloc' and the public security and war on drugs platform of the 'bullet bloc' (Bruno, 2017; Delgado, G. C., 2012; Herédia et al., 2010).

On the other hand, new social movements and organizations emerged on the political scene as representatives of the interests of the subaltern rural classes, successfully rebuilding their flags of struggle and enlisting support in civil society. The National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG) had been incapable of offering concrete answers to the demands and mobilizations in the struggles for access to land and recognition of small farmers, both causes supported by the priests and laypersons of Liberation Theology and the Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs). The Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) became the main voice in the land struggle, with its new repertoire of 'occupations' and 'encampments' attracting public attention and pressing the state to expropriate unproductive latifundia to form 'rural settlements'. As the latter grew in number, especially after the landless massacres in *Corumbiara* (1995) and *Eldorado dos Carajás* (1996), the MST also started to organize the production of 'settled farmers', first through failed collectivist experiences, and then through credit, agro-industrialization, and commercialization cooperatives (Medeiros, 2015). From the country's south to the north, there was a process of 'takeover' (via elections) of several CONTAG unions, creating the National Department of Rural Workers (DNTR) in the newly founded Unified Workers' Central (CUT). In the mid-1990s, CONTAG was affiliated to CUT, DNTR was dissolved, and all engaged in 'building a sustainable and solidary rural development project', in which agrarian reform is put as a means to strengthen 'family farming' and 'differentiated policy' as a goal to be sought from the state. 'The hands that feed the nation' soon became the slogan identifying FF with food security.<sup>13</sup> Discontent with the alliance to CONTAG, resettlement beneficiaries departed from CUT to form the Small Farmers' Movement (MPA). Other movements, led by the MST, created the Brazilian section of *La Via Campesina* (LVC), which defends the 'peasant project' and 'food sovereignty'. Also disgruntled, former DNTR members formed a new union that soon got nationalized, the Confederation of Family Farming Workers (CONTRAF), leading CONTAG to disband

from CUT. Recently, wage earners left CONTAG too and founded the National Confederation of Rural Workers (CONTAR). And failing to 'takeover' the leadership of OCB agro-industrial cooperatives, a new cooperative movement arose. It is organized in networks though credit, production, work, and commercialization branches, all represented by the National Union of Family Farming and Solidarity Economy Cooperatives (UNICAFES) (Medeiros, 2010; Picolotto, 2014).

The 'organic intellectuals' of rural development renewed their analytical approaches, contributing to resignify the terms of the agrarian debate and to legitimize FF as a category. Veiga (1991) and Abramovay (1992) helped to consolidate the distinction between peasants and FF and to show historically and theoretically their key role within a new development project with wealth and income distribution, democracy, and sustainability. Lamarche (1993) offered a typology that emphasized continuity rather than rupture between the peasantry and FF. And the FAO/INCRA (1994) project, coordinated by Carlos Guanziroli, offered a methodology to differentiate PA and FF, and a typology that became the benchmark of the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (PRONAF). After this 'pioneering phase', many research groups engaged in the debate, with special mention of the postgraduate programs of Development, Agriculture and Society (CPDA/UFRRJ) and Rural Development (PGDR/UFRGS) (Schneider, 2010).

The two sides gained ground in the state apparatuses, both in the PSDB governments, hegemonized by the associated, neoliberal fraction of the bourgeoisie, with the support of the middle class, and in the PT governments, hegemonized by the internal, neo-developmental fraction of the bourgeoisie, with support of the working class (Boito & Berringer, 2014). Throughout the whole period, agribusiness has enjoyed a privileged space within the power bloc (Sauer & Meszáros, 2017). However, FF has been able to advance its own space, trying to challenge the neoliberal hegemony of PA and to affirm the rural development project, thanks to the role played by rural social movements and farmers' unions in the PT governments, even appointing cadres to the state bureaucracy, as with the MDA (Delgado, N. G., 2012). Handling with this reciprocal interaction between conflicting class interests and organic intellectuals' ideas in the process of institutionalizing policy-making, the state found itself responsible for coordinating, mediating, and 'arbitrating' the disputes in the name of 'coalition governance' (Grisa & Schneider, 2015). According to Ploeg, Ye, and Schneider (2012, p. 178), this 'contradictory coexistence seems to trigger and require vagueness so that the [rural development] agenda is not perceived as too radical or



challenging and can [pragmatically] maintain an aura of legitimacy. Overall then [rural development] has a tendency to create new forms of duality'. However, this uncertain relation of forces within the power bloc to secure the hegemony on the state apparatuses—Gramsci's (2002) 'unstable equilibrium of compromises', recalled by Poulantzas (2000)—engendered ambiguity and distrust in political loyalties, sparking increasing contestations. Such pragmatism, relying on continuous negotiations to accommodate the latent contradictions, reached its limits in April 2016, when Dilma was impeached.

In May 2016, the intellectuals of the 'seven theses' handed over to agribusiness leaders a document, which proposed the promotion of agriculture as the 'salvation of the Brazilian economy'. In early July 2016, agribusiness representatives presented to President Michel Temer a 'Confidence Manifesto to the Brazilian Government', and a week later, Temer attended a traditional dinner meeting at the Agriculture Parliamentary Front headquarters. Soon the government placed urgent measures that indicated a new political and ideological pact with 'agribusiness': debt renegotiation and forgiveness; wanton rules for approving and regulating new agrochemicals; flexibilization of labor legislation, reinstating tolerance with precarious conditions; legalization of grabbed lands and land market deregulation (including FDI); weakening the capacities of the National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI) to demarcate and title indigenous lands and conservation units; loosening restrictions of environmental licensing; and so on. Most important, Temer extinguished the MDA, among other institutes and ministries, by the requirement of the ruralist bloc. Its attributions were eventually allocated to a special secretariat under the Chief of Staff (*Casa Civil*), including INCRA and all its competencies. This was followed by a drastic cut in resources for rural development policies: the territorial development programs were simply phased out and the budget for agencies executing various programs had their resources reduced to close to zero, including those of technical assistance and rural extension, food acquisition from family farming, expropriation of estates for agrarian reform and creation of new rural settlements, education of the countryside, recognition and indemnification of *quilombola* territories, among others (Mattei, 2017a; Niederle, Grisa, Picolotto, & Soldera, 2017; Soldera, 2018).

Once Jair Bolsonaro took office, administrative decrees were launched, shifting to the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA) responsibilities from FUNAI for indigenous land demarcation and INCRA for *quilombola* territory regularization, as if there were no conflicts of interest involved—or rather explicitly meeting the interests and

demands of the ruralist bloc.<sup>14</sup> Alongside these controversial but largely expected measures, the most ignominious was the termination of the National Council of Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA), closing a key space of dialogue between civil society, academia, and the government around health, sustainability, human rights, and other food-related issues. A few months later, Bolsonaro also extinguished 35 federal councils, committees, and commissions with significant presence and active participation of civil society, including the National Council for Sustainable Rural Development (CONDRAF).

Obviously, the extinction of MDA, CONSEA, and CONDRAF was not a mere attempt to rationalize administration and contain public spending to help with the fiscal crisis. The aim was to deny recognition to FF as a social category and to food security, agrarian reform, and rural development as policy benchmarks. However, the breakdown of the dual institutional framework that has evolved for over 20 years is not due exclusively to government changes and the assaults of the right. In the assessment of the very rural social actors and intellectuals associated with the perspective of FF, there were criticisms of the contradictions and limitations of the policies piloted by the MDA (Soldera, 2018). It is widely pointed out that the agrarian reform policy was insufficient to reduce the inequality in land distribution and the power of the agrarian elites (Mattei, 2017; Sauer & Meszáros, 2017). It is recognized that PRONAF agricultural policy played a key role in democratizing access to credit, but its resources are increasingly concentrated in the south and southeast regions, the better-off segments of FF, and a few commodities such as soy, corn, and coffee (Aquino & Schneider, 2015; Grisa, Wesz, & Burschweitz, 2014). And while the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) and the National Program of School Feeding (PNAE) are widely acclaimed for innovatively connecting FF production with food security through the construction of ‘institutional markets’, their budget and coverage are too small in the face of the sheer needs for socioeconomic ‘inclusion’ (Grisa & Porto, 2015; Triches, 2015).

However, apart from the limitations and contradictions of these policies raised by the very FF intellectuals seeking to improve them, PA and agribusiness representatives and intellectuals also began to criticize this policy benchmark aiming to overthrow it. The recurrent data on the concentration of 85 per cent of the GVP in 8 per cent of rural establishments was used to indicate the ineffectiveness of such policies to integrate economically the poor farmers (Alves & Rocha, 2010). And the *patronal* union, CNA, commissioned a study that proposed another classification on PRONAF’s credit access. According to its criteria, only 64.4 per cent

(and not 84.4%) of the establishments with 22.9 per cent of the GVP (and not 36%) would be ‘qualified’ to receive agricultural policy, while the ‘non-qualified’ should be provided with socio-assistentialist policy (FGV/IBRE, 2010). Faced with this interpretative divergence, an intermediate group, corresponding to almost a million establishments, responsible for a large portion of the GVP, was identified as a ‘rural middle class’. This stratum would be better represented by the logic of a technologically modernized, productively specialized, market integrated, and not exclusively family labor employing, entrepreneurial farming. By emphasizing the importance of ‘middle producers’ and questioning the productive capacity of FF, this conservative narrative creates a new dualism, no longer between PA and FF, but between ‘productive and efficient’ and ‘unproductive and inefficient’ farmers. This distinction influenced the creation of MAPA’s Middle Rural Producer National Support Program (PRONAMP).

Seeing this attempt by MAPA to advance its social base, the MDA had itself fallen into this discourse and sought to provide a response by launching the More Food Program in 2008 and increasing the income threshold for PRONAF, aiming to include more ‘middle producers’. This had raised objections from FF’s own field: while the LVC’s movements mocked the targeting of such a segment by calling it ‘little agribusiness’ (*agronegocinho*), academics criticized it for reinforcing credit concentration in a small number of establishments of the ‘FF elite’ (Aquino et al., 2018; Niederle et al., 2017; Soldera, 2018). For Picoletto (2012), these episodes of dispute in a polarized political field exemplify what Bourdieu calls a ‘symbolic struggle’ for the classification of the social world. However, this dispute contradictorily led to a convergence of the actions of both ministries through a conventional, productivist logic that prioritizes those better-off establishments to the detriment of the majority of FF segments that still lack differentiated policies to enter into a vigorous rural development dynamic (Soldera, 2018).

The main lesson to be drawn from this analysis is that the whole discussion is based on a profoundly misleading and mystifying understanding of the rural class structure and class struggle in the countryside. The government’s pragmatic politics of ‘arbitrating’ the coexistence of two irreconcilable agri-food projects along ‘the line of least resistance’ found its limits in a conjuncture of economic and political crises and a very large structural barrier represented by the extremely unequal agrarian structure and the powerful and intransigent rural dominant class. In this context, the official policy of support to the ‘rural middle class’ was

mistaken, to the extent that it provided ammunition to delegitimize FF and the MDA.

The MDA, in turn, having incorporated the government's delusion,<sup>15</sup> fell into MAPA's game and alienated most of its social base. The bulk of PRONAF's agricultural credit was appropriated mainly by the EFF, leaving the PFF with the crumbs and without a structural policy of agrarian reform, while the CFF did not receive a comprehensive rural development policy to spur a diversified production model and the construction of 'new, nested markets' (Ploeg et al., 2012). Finally, the progressive rural social forces also fell short of being able to counteract the institutional and bureaucratic deviations and the ultimate reactionary backlash. Despite the renewal of LVC's platform around the rural–urban alliance for food sovereignty, the fact that social programs of income transfer such as *Bolsa Família* made the lives of the poor PFF less desperate may have ironically contributed to hinder the MST's mobilization capacity, while the CFF unions, like CONTAG and CONTRAF, tended to routinize their practices and to reiterate demands for credit policies with merely functional adjustments (interest rates, amounts, thresholds), failed to formulate and propose a bolder, innovative rural development agenda, which ended up reinforcing the bureaucratic logic of doing 'more of the same' (Grisa & Schneider, 2015; Soldera, 2018).

## Conclusion

This article offered a critical agrarian perspective on the factors that brought Brazil toward increasing instability in recent years, resulting in a conjuncture of economic and political crisis that led to the coup of 2016, and the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarian neoliberalism. By assessing the main controversies of the agrarian debate, it provided a class analysis of recent rural transformation in Brazil, focusing on the interplay between structures, actors, and institutions. The article went beyond the binary opposition between PA and FF and proposed a segmentation of distinct fractions within each category. The origin and significance of institutional ambiguity of the Brazilian state agri-food apparatus was reviewed with a focus on the organization and representation of interests of the dominant and subaltern classes and the formulation of ideas and policy benchmarks by their respective organic intellectuals. The reasons behind the institutional disruption and the conservative turn in agri-food policies were sought in the narrative disputes and mistaken interpretations of the rural class dynamics.

The intention here has been to renew the research agenda on the rural class dynamics in the Brazilian agrarian debate. The most immediate task is to advance and refine the proposed empirical typology by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, especially with data from the latest agricultural census and regionalized case studies. But if any general conclusion is possible, it is that the agrarian question still matters. Brazil has a consolidated capitalist agricultural sector and a still significant industrial structure, which attests that its agrarian transition ‘from above’ via ‘conservative modernization’ has already taken place. Today, the ‘economic’ problematic of the agrarian question has more to do with the role of agricultural and extractive sectors in the process of ‘regressive specialization’ via ‘reprimarization’ of the export structure and ‘early deindustrialization’ of the Brazilian economy (see endnote 12). Nevertheless, despite the contrary assertions of conservative discourses in vogue, the agrarian question, with all its ‘sociological’ and ‘political’ problematics, remains key to understanding the contradictory dynamics of Brazilian capitalism and the challenges of its national formation.


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### **Notes**

1. The average annual rate of gross domestic product (GDP) growth was 4.1 per cent in 2003–2010, 2 per cent in 2011–2014, R\$3.4 per cent in 2015–2016, and 1 per cent in 2017–2018 (IBGE, 2019). The nominal fiscal deficit was under control at less than R\$3 per cent of GDP up to 2013, when it started to climb to R\$6 per cent in 2014 and R\$10.2 per cent in 2015, before slightly declining to -9 percent in 2016, R\$7.8 per cent in 2017, and R\$7 per cent in 2018, still a worrying situation (BCB, 2019).
2. On the origins of the coup of 2016, see, for example, Singer (2015) and Loureiro and Saad-Filho (2019). The main reforms passed during Temer

- government were the ‘labor Reform Bill’ and the ‘Public Spending’s Ceiling Constitutional Amendment’. The ‘Pension Reform Constitutional Amendment’ and the privatization of state-owned enterprises are key to Bolsonaro’s agenda.
3. The tolerance with the increased number of hectares affected by deforestation and burning in the Amazon and the records on the release of pesticides, many of them banned in Europe, as well as the ineffectiveness in the case of oil spills on the Brazilian northeast coast, respectively, show the Bolsonaro government’s pro-agribusiness and anti-environmental agenda.
  4. The word *patronal* comes from *patrão* (boss or employer in Portuguese). *Patronal* agriculture denotes the rural entrepreneur or capitalist who owns the land and other means of production and commands the labor of employees, but it also has an implicit connotation of political domination via clientelistic relations (Bruno, 2017).
  5. Law 11.326/2006 officially defines family farming as pertaining to rural establishments, which simultaneously meet four requirements: hold no more than four land tax modules; use predominantly own family labor; receive family income predominantly from activities linked to their own establishment (which was modified in 2011 to allow for two members engaging in non-agricultural activities, or pluriactivity); and are managed by the family.
  6. At the end of the article, the authors come to commit a ‘sincericide’, almost confessing their own ideological bias to the inadvertent reader: ‘[a] possible reading of this text, if done with mistrust or prejudice, may assume that this is an analytical operation proposed to ratify capitalism’ (Navarro & Pedroso, 2011, p. 218).
  7. In December 2006, the monthly minimum wage was R\$350.00, equivalent to US\$164.13.
  8. By the time this article was written, the consolidated version of the new CA 2017 was not launched yet. In the future, it will enable more detailed and updated analyses.
  9. Data from the CA 2006 show that 49.4 per cent of the ‘large establishments’, 0.87 per cent of the total, produce over R\$100,000, and 22 per cent of them produce over R\$500,000. Such establishments are nearly the same highly productive minority as identified by Alves and Rocha (2010).
  10. Data from the CA 2006 show that this segment includes 50.6 per cent of the ‘large establishments’ (more than 15 fiscal modules), with 51.7 per cent of the total land area, but a gross production value (GVP) of less than R\$100,000 per year—slightly above the ceiling of the FF GVP eligible for credit from the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (PRONAF), which is R\$80,000—with 15 per cent producing less than R\$10,000 (equivalent to about two minimum wages per month in 2006).
  11. Nascimento and Aquino (2018) calculate that, in 2014, there were 2.95 million families of rural wage earners (or 10.4% of the total salaried households) and 3.41 million salaried persons in agriculture. Of these, 86.3 per

- cent belong to rural wage-earning families and 13.7 per cent to not exclusively rural wage-earning families. The latter dynamics also relates to FF. The former dynamics, however, relates essentially to PA.
12. Agribusiness trade balances increased from US\$14.8 billion in 2000 to US\$87.6 billion in 2018. If it were not for agricultural exports, the country would have had systematic trade deficits throughout the period, except for 2005 and 2006. Several leading agribusiness export chains, e.g. chicken and pork, or even soybeans to a lesser extent, have a major share of FF in their total GVP. However, several studies have proven that a process of ‘regressive specialization’ is underway in the Brazilian economy, with a set of cause and effect relationships between ‘reprimarization’ of the export basket (agricultural and mining commodities), overvaluation of the real exchange rate (‘Dutch disease’), and atrophy of the productive structure (‘early deindustrialization’) of the country (Faveri, Resende, & Cário, 2016; Mafra & Silva, 2017).
  13. For years, farmers unions’ leadership and even authorities have inadvertently repeated, without attesting to the source, that FF produces 70 per cent of all food consumed in Brazil. Serious research though has shown that the monetary value of FF production corresponds to about 25 per cent of the total expenses of Brazilian families with food. This is not to say that the remaining 75 per cent are provided by PA instead. Much of the food actually consumed comes from food processing industries, and it is almost impossible to identify precisely the source of each raw material. In any case, FF has a fundamental contribution to the main basic products of the Brazilian diet: 83.2 per cent of cassava, 69.6 per cent of beans, 57.6 per cent of milk, 51.2 per cent of chickens, 59 per cent of pigs, 45.6 per cent of corn, 33.1 per cent of rice, 29.7 per cent of beef, and 21.2 per cent of wheat, among others (Hoffmann, 2014).
  14. The Chamber of Deputies later returned FUNAI to the Ministry of Justice.
  15. The PT reiterated in its assessment of the rural social classes the same misinterpretation of the Brazilian changing class structure as a whole, that is, that the process of poverty reduction enacted during its rule would have resulted in the constitution of a ‘new middle class’, when what actually occurred was a recomposition within the working class itself, which incorporated part of a previously marginalized ‘sub-proletarian’ mass (Singer, 2012).

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