

Petrification and (Re)Existence: The peasant defence of biodiversity

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Introduction

Corporate resource capture on a global scale has been nourished by favourable transnational policy and access to international finance and now occurs at an unprecedented rate and scale. This article that focuses on multinational sugar and ethanol production in Goiás state contrasts these dynamics with slow building of community and the consequent clashes with social and cultural values systems of populations in the new frontiers of ‘agrohydroindustry’ production⁴. In Goiás state soil, crop and energy technologies and logistical developments brings the pioneers the green economy once again into contact with groups of indigenous, peasant and traditional, African-descendent communities who have survived in marginal, remote lands since earlier colonial ventures (see Porto-Gonçalves, 2006). Capital’s need to expand across these flat, sunlit lands and its requirement for acquiescent labour necessarily means the restriction and subjugation of these communities whose existence and associated territorial use is in conflict with their monocultures. Here it is contended that the ‘petrification’ of these rural subjects is a necessary condition for continued competitive advantage of corporations and a range of persuasive and coercive levers are employed to reinforce, or indeed deepen these power differentials. However, as is presented below, the resilience and resistance of these communities determined to remain on the land and ‘(Re)exist’ draws attention to new practices of organisation, work and diverse food production that counterpoise the logic of the transnational companies challenging their territories.

Territory in tension

The constant struggle against the loss of land from encroaching corporate interests (de-territorialisation) in favor of continued existence on or repossession of land (re-territorialisation) is perhaps the clearest expression of peasant resistance as it articulates the contradiction between sections of the rural classes and capitalist owners of land. This has

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⁴ This term is coined, following the work of Thomaz Jr (2010) to highlight the intensive use of agricultural land and water resources for the contemporary grain and energy monocultures.

brought the 21st century processes of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization (TDR) as defined by Raffestin (1993) into sharp focus: groups are variably dispossessed, co-opted into new production forms or consciously create, “new territories, either through partial reconstruction in situ of old territories, or through partial re-creation, elsewhere, of a new territory that contains certain characteristics of the old territory ”(Correa, 1996, p. 252). Hence, amidst the homogenising tendencies of modern agroindustry a spectrum of a conscious struggle to avoid subordination to the hegemonic forms of capital is discerned from individual families persistence in producing food traditionally (Mendonça and Mesquita, 2008), to communities maintaining distinct forms of work organisation, social and cultural activity (Souza, 2013), through to the mass organised defence and occupation of land (Fernandes and Molina, 2004).

Conceptualising these subaltern, territorial struggles involves understanding territory as a dynamic product of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991): the boundaries may or may not be strictly demarcated, but these spaces are defined by the character of the social, economic and *cultural* practices that create them and in turn are made possible by their existence (Haesbaert, 1997; Virginio et al., 2017). It is within the context of conflict between commercial interests and the diversity of uses and meanings attached to territories, and from the particular social movements of the Amazon that the concept of (Re)existence emerged to signify, “a particular form of existence, a way of life and production, for different ways of feeling, acting and thinking” (Gonçalves, 2001). Hence (Re)existence is a process, a continuing project of permanence through political, economic and cultural action that reaffirms the reproduction of distinct socio-cultural elements. As Carneiro and Mendonça (2012) assert, (Re)existence signifies a *re*-rooting in particular spaces, the establishment of new roots, or the merging with those existing in order to formulate spatialities with the condition to continue existing. In the context of immense pressures on land and its use from encroaching corporate interests these strategies are increasingly interpreted as a vital form of resistance to the trajectory of the multinational food and energy companies.

Petrification of rural labour

The traditional production of livestock, beef cattle and milk production in south west Goiás was tied to regional livelihoods and their links with territory and place (Souza, 2013, p.30). In

what follows, the testimonies of those affected by and resisting the new ethanol developments contradict institutional aspirations that the green economy will provide new opportunities for small farmers and landholders (e.g. EC, 2009), and instead corroborate concerns voiced elsewhere that small landholding food production is the sacrificial lamb of agrohydroindustry (Edelman, 2013; Garvey et al., 2015). Figure 1 shows that the scale of the transfer of land to sugar cane monoculture since the turn of the century while Figure 2 illustrates how arrival of large scale agroindustry supported by public investment (BNDES, 2007) has coincided with accelerated urban growth since 2000 while the rural population continues to dwindle.

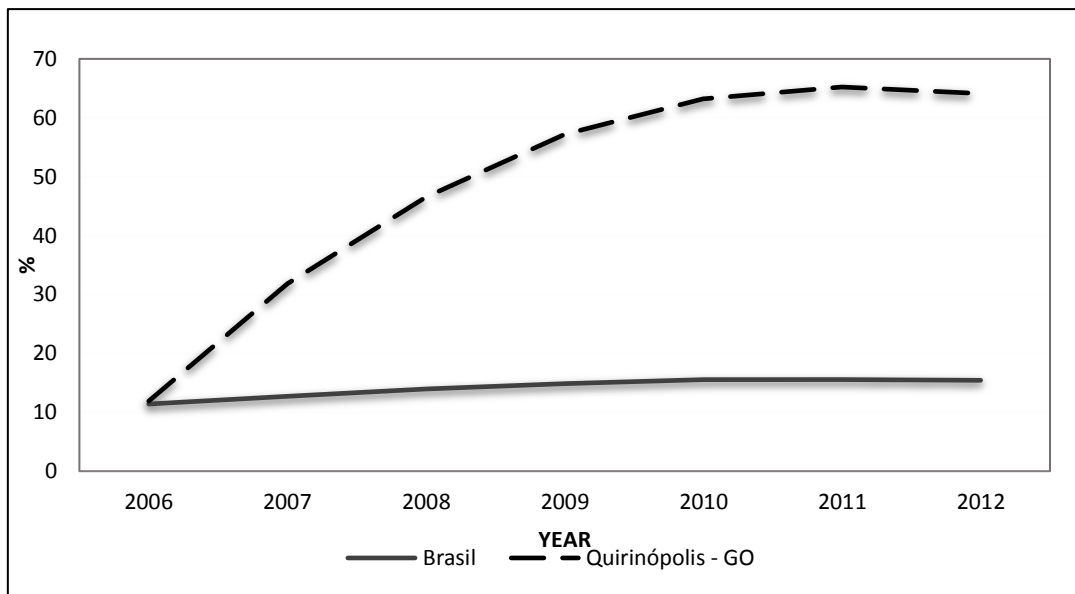


Figure 1 Increase in area planted in sugar cane as a percentage of total temporary crops in the municipality of Quirinópolis compared to Brazil, 2006-2012

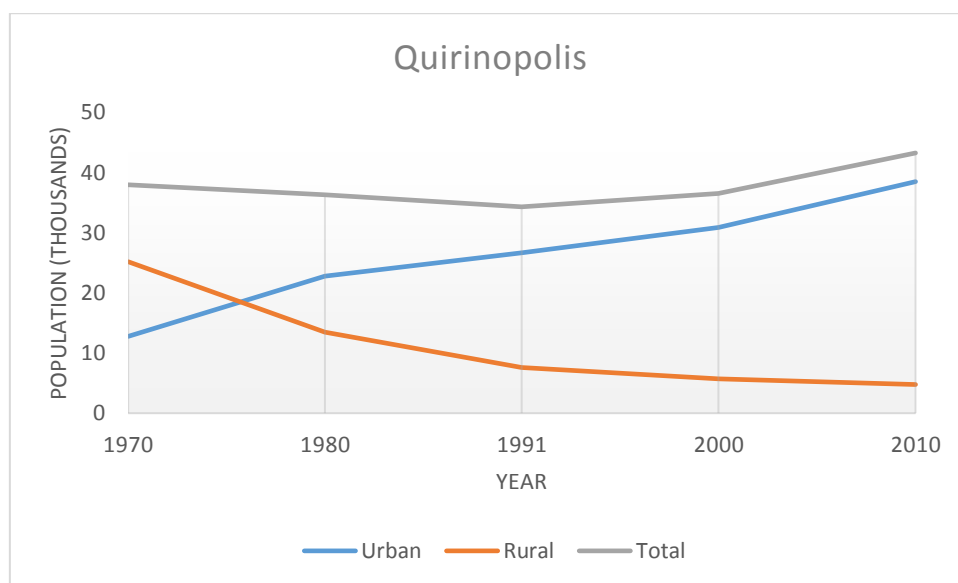


Figure 2. Rural and urban demographics for Quirinópolis, Goias state.

From the accounts of remaining camponês families in Quirinópolis the pressure to sell land to the sugar cane industry was considerable. A tripling in land prices in Goiás state linked to commodity export had encouraged many neighbours to sell their plots but made land acquisition by small farmers and their descendants impossible. The account of Roberto adds currency to concerns over indirect land use change as a result of the monocultural expansion:

Many people we know sold their land and then moved to Mato Grosso where they could buy up ten times as much rough land and turn that into a cattle farm. The small farmers became big farmers.

In addition to this economic pressure there had been a persistent coaxing of families by land agents, paid on commission by the ethanol plants, to sell or rent their land:

They come and say, “Hey Uncle, look you have been working hard all your life, why not sell up, take the money and move for an easy life in the town; send your children to school there; rest a little, look it is more money than you will ever have. Why not do a test. Rent the land for one year. We will even pay you a full years rent for your land in advance, one payment. Lots of people did this. But then after one year they can’t return. The soil is changed. The fences changes. They are surrounded by sugar cane. They don’t have the money to invest to change it back. So the company offers them another deal top take the land off them, but this time for less money because they know he is stuck.

For those that have held on in communities such as Pedra Lisa, where 64 families remained in 2011, the situation has become more difficult and the problems are many (Souza, 2013). The loss of social networks on which small scale and largely subsistence farming depended, and whose fluid, spatial character historically transgressed official boundaries have been further complicated by the rail road construction, by new roads that cross the landscape to transport sugar cane and by the complete encirclement of small farms by monoculture. While each farm had its own particular issues with the companies, the following complaints were common to all interviewees: the dust from the passing trucks on their grasses left it inedible for cattle; the diversion of natural water courses from their plots, the introduction of biocontrols (i.e. flies to target cane eating pests) adversely affecting farm animals, the contamination of produce from the pesticides and the growth chemicals sprayed from passing planes. As Manuel told us,

“When I hear the planes I go out and stand in the corner [of his plot] and wave a white towel to chase them away so they don’t kill the crops”.



The recent closure of the rural school and the municipality’s decision to invest in bussing the children to an urban education was further evidence, in their view, of their invisibility in terms of decision making at a local and national level. Many younger relations of these families had found work in the sugar and ethanol sector, but to do so had moved to the houses of the poorer ‘periphery’ of the town. As they were not permitted to take their own transport to the workplace, but instead take the bus provided which did not pass by their community, relocation was deemed the most practical option especially with changing shift patterns.

(Re)existence

At an institutional level the energy and food majors’ right to rule would appear to be affirmed through successive policy and budget decisions, and invigorated by a particularly pro-business government installed after President Rouseff’s’ controversial impeachment. A closer analysis of the activities of diverse rural subjects, however, suggests that a reconstitution of the social order required is far from complete. The most immediate indication of this is the increase in conflicts over land and water, and the fact that for the most part these are not being organised by the larger social movements, but more sporadic actions by peasant and

indigenous groups. There were 998 land related conflicts in 2015, the highest number in the 20 year record of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), reflecting a general increase in conflict since 2008, when 459 were recorded. In 2015, 50 people were assassinated as a result of this tension. While Amazonia remains a focal point of violent conflict, data shows that land conflicts occur both in new frontiers and are being reproduced in 'older', productive areas dominated by technical, capitalist agriculture. Fourteen per cent of the 120.6 thousand families involved in territorial disputes in Brazil were in Goiás State, the greatest number of any state in the country (Comissão Pastoral Da Terra, 2016).

These figures demonstrate that the destruction and recreation of the camponês is a process within and not without the mechanisations of capitalism and its mode of agriculture (Oliveira, 2007). This persistent conflict and peasant reappropriation of land, even within the established zones of advanced agribusiness, warns against over prescriptive discourses of the homogenising influences of surrounding monoculture and land grabs (see Edelman, 2013; Margulis et al. 2013 for discussion). So too does the fact that small farming (lots under 10 hectares) contribute over 60% of food production in Brazil with less than one fifth of the public resources of agribusiness, and the emergence of a range of creative, co-ordinated and resilient projects and practices suited to local soils and climate in the face of adversity (Mendonça and Mesquita, 2008).

In Goiás state these include projects for current and future food and livelihood security such as the 'Rescue, Production, Selection and Conservation of native seeds' that has developed from eight participating families to around 3,000 families in just three years (2007-2010). Native, 'creole' seeds represent a form of autonomy for these populations, since their reproduction with the local environment has been historically constructed through the peasant and indigenous experiences. They represent a collective creation of the peoples, with the pronounced role of women who were their principal guardians and have guaranteed their permanence throughout history. Creole seeds therefore are the foundation and product of distinct cultures and societies through history and incorporate values, affection, vision, stories, and forms of life that bind communities within the realm of the sacred. In this sense, creole seeds are a means of sovereignty of the camponês communities and peoples, guaranteeing their historical and contemporary cultural construction. The territory where the camponês live and work, therefore, functions to produce food for self-consumption and is also a space where they live, with their beliefs, traditions, constituting lifestyle. The defence

of these territories and the way of life in which they are so inherently entwined then takes the form then of creative celebrations of the cultural inheritance, the increased awareness of the need to safeguard the material bases of the community such as the creole seeds, and collective organised opposition to the powerful interests that threaten their reproduction. These dimensions are captured in the following figures from Catalão, Goias.



Figure 3: Exchange of seeds and sale of artisanal goods at shows the Festival of Creole Seeds in defence of biodiversity Federal University of Goiás / Catalão Campus, Federal University of Goiás. Source: Archive of GETeM. (2011).



Figure 4 Demonstration against the installation of ‘Pioneer Seeds’ in the municipality of Catalao, Goiás, through the initiative of the Popular Peasant Movement (MCP), the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) and the Movement of Dam Affected People (MAB). Source: Archive of GETeM. (2011).

This economic activity that affords space and time for socio-cultural practices, whose survival is testimony to the strength of the social groups that constitute them, is essential to ensuring their (Re)existence (Souza, 2013, p.30). Collective activities in terms of working practices, in honouring of religious, traditional sacred feasts are hosted in fields, churches, schools and market places (Brandão 2004), are thus integrated in newer arrangements for work as typified by the "House of the Bee" co-operative. Operating across the municipality of Quirinópolis and its neighboring municipalities (reflecting the distinct socio-territorial references of the camponês), the co-operative contributes to the maintenance of 109 families organised into 14 co-operative groups, with 8000 dairy cows producing over 35,000 liters of milk daily. Through this activity the groups may not necessarily confront the logic of the agribusiness or present a transformative agenda, the project has become an essential instrument for small producers, some three generations in situ, to continue living in their sites and resist the hegemony of cane –sugar production in the region.

Concluding remarks

With the current administration drastically cutting credit and funding for small farmers and peasant agriculture, competing visions and practices for sustainable food and energy

production merit further analysis. The cultures of resistance, conceptualised here as (Re)existence, are closely tied to agroecology practices that seek minimal dependence on agrochemicals and external energy inputs towards improving soil fertility, productivity and crop protection (Altieri, 2004, p.23). The initiatives have clear social and cultural dimensions alongside ecological concerns: the cultivation and banking of native seeds secures a diversity of seeds and food, but also a means of sovereignty and cultural preservation in rural communities that having been forming new social movements to overcome localised political and economic isolation (Garcindo, 2009, p.8). Through their cultivation and preservation, the social relations of production and field work in rural communities of Southern Goiás are reinforced, and in places reinvented; while awareness and pride and of historic and traditional practices is combined with contemporary cultural development and socio-political practices that recognise the threat to the livelihoods and diversity from more powerful corporate interests. Hence, these form part of strategies to (Re)exist, in socially, economically and culturally distinct forms in the face of these pressures.

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