

Cattle Grazing and Forest Devastation in Brazil: Environmental Resources and Territorial Trajectories

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Abstract: This article examines the history and present-day dynamics of deforestation and cattle grazing in Brazil's Amazon. It discusses the long-standing strategic alliance between agribusiness and the Brazilian state, as well as the role of livestock grazing in Brazil's developmental ideology of the frontier. It shows how the livestock industry is enlaced with soy production in the deterritorialization and deforestation of the Amazon, as well as the legalized theft of Indigenous lands. It places these Brazilian dynamics into larger international context and analyses the class structure and state capture of Brazil's agro-industrial sector.



Livestock seen in a farmed area near the forest in the municipality of Apuí, Brazilian Amazon. Bruno Kelly/Amazônia Real/09/08/2020. Licensed under the Creative Commons 2.0 license.

The environmental agenda in Brazil is today significantly threatened by overt and covert economic interests. Ailton Krenak speaks of the widespread “myth of sustainability” that (not only in Brazil) adopts

a rhetoric allying economic growth and environmental protection, but which only serves to intensify the exploitation of the soil through the legitimation of “sustainable use.” “Natural resources for whom? Sustainable

development to what end? What should be preserved?” These are the provocative questions that Krenak (2019) asks, showing that the paradigm of sustainability is based on a separation of people from the land such that natural resources come to be managed only by those seeking to exploit them economically.

The new Brazilian forestry code, sanctioned in 2012, particularly the law no 12.727 from October 17, 2012, dealing with protection of native flora, makes use of this rhetoric, taking as its guiding principle for sustainable development the “reaffirmation of the importance of the strategic function of cattle grazing and of the role of forests and other forms of native vegetation in sustainability, economic growth, and in the improvement of the quality of life of Brazilians and in Brazil’s presence in national and international food and bioenergy markets.”

In practice, it has been impossible to reconcile these demands. But why does the forestry code and its adjacent laws maintain a perspective that is so problematic for Brazil? And what has the role of the livestock industry been in this unending process of deforestation, predatory land use and displacement of populations that live *in and from* the forests?

During the colonial period, raising cattle met two main requirements: occupation of territory and fulfilling domestic food needs. It is well known that raising cattle was one of the main vectors of colonization in the American territories. Alfred Crosby argued that the “European quadrupeds” were responsible for the success of the colonial enterprise given that “the advantage of the Europeans over the Indigenous peoples of their overseas colonies was not so much the plants cultivated, as the animals domesticated” (Crosby, 2011, p. 182). While the pastoralists moved further inland, subjecting the original populations to progressive displacement (or colonial assimilation), the economic activity that generated income for the metropolis was the monocultural agriculture occurring along coastal regions. This context of near complete separation between farming and grazing was observed by intellectuals such as Caio Prado Junior, who argued that it was

“one of the most important facts and most profound consequences of our economic lives,” amongst other reasons, because it deprived “the cultivated soil of one of its most important fertilizers: animal manure,” but also because it separated products destined for exportation from those destined for the domestic market (Prado, 2011, p. 197). Therefore, since colonial times, animal rearing/breeding was a factor in domestic (and not international) capital accumulation, and therefore, fundamental for the development of capitalism in Brazil.

This situation changed drastically at the start of the 20th Century, during the first years of the Brazilian republic. In this context, cattle breeding progressively left behind the nomenclature and praxis of “pastoralism” to become “grazing.” This was a function of its main product, meat, becoming an exportable agricultural product, and the cattle reared falling under the productive and commercial logic of commodities. At the same time, they continued to be an instrument for the expansion of domestic borders and, therefore, for concentration and accumulation of landholdings. The First World War expanded the sector, considerably increasing the value of Brazilian bovine meat on the international market, (Simonsen, 1932), while also leading to a reduction in traditionally exported products such as coffee and rubber (Linhares, 1979, p. 30).

Ironically, in today’s Brazil, it is impossible to consider the livestock industry without considering the current, main monocultural export: soy. They are interconnected and depend for their success on the possibility of expanding landholding frontiers. Therefore, it is also necessary to look at these two remorseless vectors of agribusiness to understand deforestation. In a recent study carried out by scientists in the United States, Argentina and Brazil, it was found that soy farming was responsible for 10% of deforestation in South America over the last two decades up to 2019. Another study from the *Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais* found that in 2018, around 20% of the soy exported from Brazil came from deforested areas (Garcia, 2011). What is curious is that the producers do not acknowledge this data, arguing that their crops are cultivated in pasture areas and not forests. Soy farming

however, is frequently preceded by pasture for cattle grazing, in a systematic dynamic of deforestation already widely recognized in Brazil.

The socially and environmentally predatory use of natural spaces and environmental resources is not a recent phenomenon. Its origin is found in the colonial past but it also represents an important moment in the processes of independence and the neocolonial assimilation of colonized countries into the internationalized capitalist system. Important historical watersheds were the law of territories from 1850 – which instituted the land market and formalized immense landholdings – and the legal abolition of slavery in 1888. This freed the enslaved population from their old masters but did nothing to guarantee their survival through access to land. Additionally, the implantation of the Republic in 1889 assisted the projects of monocultural agriculture exporters from Brazil. By situating itself in the international capitalist market as a provider of raw materials and agricultural commodities, Brazil, sovereign through its republican pact, reaffirmed the idea of being an “essentially agricultural country,” and of continuing the colonial efforts of advancing frontiers to reinforce the exploitation of the country’s “natural advantages.”

The livestock industry, which established itself during the emergence of the Brazilian Republic, also inaugurated a new relationship between the agricultural elites and the State. This relationship underwent significant

institutionalization and legitimation through the creation of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1909. This became a space of converging interests and a “shopfront for business” for the non-coffee producing agricultural elites who until then only had the National Society of Agriculture (SNA) as the entity representing their interests. According to Sonia Mendonça, this ministry represented the “governmental institutionalization of the interests of non-hegemonic elements in the dominant agricultural class, organized around the SNA and typically identified by historiography as grain oligarchs.” By aggregating these sectors, including grazers, the Ministry of Agriculture spearheaded political-institutional action, endorsing the discourse of the “the country’s agricultural vocation through the diversification of national agriculture” (Mendonça, 1998, p. 17).

With the foundation of this ministry, there was increasing interference in the politics of the State, creating a near total mixing of private and public interests, between the livestock industry and the Brazilian state¹. This was exemplified by agribusiness’ self-proclaimed role as the savior of the Brazilian national economy, sustained throughout the 20th and 21st centuries with the support of media conglomerates. This ultimately led to the preposterous idea of “agro-pop” in modern day Brazil².

Alfredo Wagner Almeida, in one of his clear-headed writings regarding the impact of globalized capitalism on domestic resources, defines the processes of deterritorialization

¹ It is worth noting that social movements’ accusation that the rightwing government has been co-opted by private agribusiness interests, was also always a criticism of progressive labor governments leveled by Brazilian liberal conservatives. Labor governments indeed created other institutional spaces to integrate the interests of the small-scale agricultural sector. This was the case of the Ministry of Agricultural Development, created in 2000 and strengthened in 2003 under Lula’s government, which especially considered the interests of family agriculture. This ministry was extinguished in 2016, still during the term of Dilma Rouseff of the Worker’s Party, but in practice driven by acting president Michel Temer, a central element in the coup/impeachment which took place in 2016.

² “Agro-pop” the an expression adopted by an advertising campaign for agribusiness presented by the Globo Television Network between 2016 and 2018, which identified commodities production with the “industrial wealth of Brazil.”

driven by agribusiness as imbued with what he labels *agristrategies*³. Agribusiness actors, through their class and commercial representative bodies, especially the Confederation for Agriculture and Livestock in Brazil (CAN), promoted “a range of initiatives to remove formal legal obstacles to the expansion of grain cultivation and to integrate new tracts of land to industrial interests” (Almeida, 2010, p. 102). To this end, intellectual institutions that acted as powerful “think tanks” seeking to directly intervene in the development of public policy were mobilized to create justifications and build policy coalitions, be they national or international agents, in this case a type of “green-colonialism” or “agri-imperialism” (p.113). Further, “in the Brazilian case, the dissemination of a triumphalist vision of agribusiness together with a hyperbolic image of Brazil and its agricultural potential were part of these *agristrategies*” (Almeida, 2010, p. 110). This vision was grounded in the previously noted understanding, widespread during the emergence of the Republic, of an “essentially agricultural country” whose wealth supposedly lay in open frontiers, replete with empty territories defined by Alfredo Wagner as a “mythical narrative of unlimited lands” (p. 110).

The fundamental role of cattle grazing in dynamics of deforestation and deterritorialization through interference in agricultural and agrarian policies operated as follows: forcing pasture land further into forests by provoking (or taking advantage of) fires and advancing into Indigenous forest lands, to make more land available for agribusiness. Concomitantly, actors from the livestock industry in Brazil took advantage of the concentration of lands allowed by policies

that legalized land occupations and gave impunity to violence in rural areas, to expand their business⁴. This is central to the livestock breeding complex, which together with mining makes up the main vector for forest devastation and genocide in Brazil today. First comes the fire that destroys the forests and opens up pasture for the livestock, and following that, soy is planted. Within this context, all sorts of arbitrary and violent actions by landholders are carried out and covered up to stitch together these two forms of production.

Another intriguing aspect is that the Brazilian livestock industry, regardless of all the factory farming technologies available, continued to be predominantly extensive (rather than intensive). In other words, the global transformation that occurred with the introduction of meat and derivatives into the international market as commodities, did not end the colonial use of animals for territorial occupation. Nevertheless, to ensure productivity in the extensive livestock system two elements proved crucial: the introduction of exotic foragers and the importation and racial selection of cattle. These elements in turn profoundly altered the environment, due to the homogeneity of the races created, of the grasses adopted, and the paddock fencing used, shaping the dynamics of land occupation more generally speaking.

Although some of the bovine races of European origin were adopted, especially in the colder regions of Brazil, it was the introduction of the zebu of Indian origin into central Brazil, that provided the main characteristics of the livestock for meat production. (Medrado, 2013). These cattle, which today constitute more than 80% of the

³ Almeida considers deterritorialization to be “the set of measures adopted by entrepreneurial interests, connected with agribusiness, to assimilate new land into their economic enterprises, especially in the Amazon region. To this end, these interests seek to liberate these lands, both from formal-judicial and political-administrative constraints and from the limitations associated with the presence of ethnic groups or of certain modalities of use of traditionally occupied land...” (Almeida, 2010, p. 116).

⁴ Recent proof of this violence and of violence as politics, was the photo, published by the government’s Secretary of Communication, marking the ‘Day of the Farmer’, showing an armed man in the middle of a field. An article published in the newspaper “Correio Braziliense” on the 28/07/2021, reports that the “Atlas of Violence in the Countryside, undertaken by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), shows that between 2007 and 2017, homicides in rural areas increased by 75.4%, nearly double that observed in urban areas (40.6%). The largest increase in homicide rates was observed in areas of rural occupation (+10.2%), in Indigenous territories (+15.9%) and in areas belonging to the Legal Amazon (+18.7%).”

Brazilian herd, were imported and disseminated due to their hardiness, compatibility with the national ecotype (climate and epizootics) and adaptation to free range systems. The nationalist ideology of miscegenation, connected to the eugenic discourses widespread in Brazil in the first half of the 20th century, was mobilized to defend the selection and racial purity of the herd and the science of cattle breeding. Beyond simply reflecting advancements in science and zootechnics, the racialization of the bovine herd in Brazil structured and empowered the new rural elites who controlled the genealogical registration (patent) of the bovine breeds and policed the market for breeding – gate-keeping the opportunity for other breeders to enter the international meat market⁵.

The reproduction of extensive grazing as the predominant agribusiness model in Brazil is underpinned by improvements to the bovine herd and management of grasses for foraging. Strategies in both cases seek to guarantee the necessary hardiness for raising cattle on pasture, cutting production costs while counting on the ever-expanding availability of

land. To secure this model, changes to legislation are made, capitalizing on and driving the political instability in Brazil and ceaselessly maintaining the discourse of agribusiness as a national savior. At the same time, the genocide (and/or ethnocide) of the Indigenous population and the seizure of their lands, as well as the exclusion of the black population from legal ownership of their possessions continues.

The foundational pact between the Republican State and agricultural exportation is one of Brazil's strongest national characteristics. This pact includes the elaboration of diverse legal mechanisms that allow for the regulation of areas of the Union invaded by agribusiness interests, keeping in mind that Brazilian commodities always relied on deforestation and deterritorialization of communities traditionally connected to the land, to expand their “natural” territories⁶. In this sense, raising cattle on pasture has been a strategic activity.

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⁵ Today, bovine meat exportation occupies sixth place out of the main Brazilian exports, a position maintained for some time now.

⁶ While I was writing this article, the PL (legislative proposal) 510 from 2021 was being voted on in the senate. Nicknamed the land grab PL, it extended the size of an occupied area that could be legalized, specifically altering certain clauses in the Law 11.952/2009, which codified the legalization of the occupation of lands situated in the so-called “Legal Amazon.” Unfortunately, this project was approved in the Chamber of Deputies and went through for evaluation by the Senate.

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*All photos provided by the author.

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