



Soy expansion into the agricultural frontiers of the Brazilian Amazon: The agribusiness economy and its social and environmental conflicts



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ABSTRACT

The state of Pará in the Brazilian Amazon is recognized both nationally and internationally for its land conflicts throughout history. Agricultural modernization and the expansion of the agricultural frontier, especially with regard to soybean production, did not significantly alter Pará's record of conflict and violence. Instead, new actors involved in agro-strategies and the Amazonian agribusiness economy have experienced new land disputes, new forms of land concentration, and conflicts with indigenous tribes, Maroon communities and peasants' groups in the Santarém region, the most important urban and rural centre of Western Pará, in the heartland of Brazilian Amazon. This article examines relations between the arrival and expansion of soybean plantations, particularly in post-2001, as part of regional agro-strategies that have perpetuated and deepened long-standing conflicts over land in the state of Pará. It also highlights the emergence of new territorial disputes, which have created additional obstacles, increasing the demand for land and raising land prices while impacting processes by which land and territorial rights are secured in the state of Pará.

1. Introduction

A 2018 article published in an international newspaper called public attention to new risks posed to the Brazilian Rainforest as a consequence of the country's current political crisis. It stated that “the Amazon remains vulnerable to political change and powerful agricultural lobbies” (Leahy and Schipani, 2018). While the statement is true – indeed, there has been an increase of deforestation rates in the years after 2014 – the phenomenon is not new, as there has long been a high demand for land and natural resources, and hence pressures to loosen environmental regulations and laws for the region.

Historically, cattle farming and mining were the main economic activities that had an important environmental impact on the Amazon forest (Benatti, 2003; Hecht, 2011). However, environmental destruction and deforestation has several causes, such as those described by Benatti (2003), like extensive cattle-raising, grain production, slash-and-burn agriculture, but also infrastructure works (hydroelectric plants, roads and mining projects), alluvial mining, *grilagem de terra* – illegal appropriation of public land –, disorderly wood extraction and forest fires.

Even though ‘the central issue for deforestation remains the live-stock sector’, according to Hecht (2011, 11), this article examines the compounding impact of soybean expansion in the western region of Pará state in Brazil's eastern Amazon. In the heart of the Amazon,

soybean expansion is a relatively recent phenomenon, particularly in the region of Santarém, where it has been discussed as part of trends in agro-strategies (Almeida, 2010), agribusiness economy (Delgado, 2013) and neo-extractivism (Gudynas, 2012; Baletti, 2014). Alongside the theoretical debate, this article studies the phenomenon through the use of statistical data – mainly collected from Brazil's National Supply Company (CONAB) and the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE) – as well as on-site documents produced by social organisations (surveys, dossiers and information gathered by the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT), among others). This discussion also employs field research undertaken during human rights missions into the Santarém region (Sauer and Silva, 2011; Sauer and Machado, 2010).

This primary aim of this article is to analyse how the combination of governmental investments – mainly infrastructure projects and credit – and flows of national and international private capital have encouraged agricultural expansion in order to meet global demands for agricultural and non-agricultural commodities (Sauer and Mészáros, 2017). As the most important export item for Brazilian agribusiness (Flexor and Leite, 2017, 396), considered a cornerstone of ‘modern commercial agriculture’ (Brandão et al., 2005), the production of soy has been crucial in the process of consolidating the so-called ‘agribusiness economy’ (Delgado, 2013) and agro-strategy narratives in Brazil, but it has also exacerbated long-standing land conflicts (Sauer and Mészáros, 2017) and prompted the emergence of new territorial disputes in the Amazon

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(Costa, 2015).

Long before soybean production expanded into the heartland of the Brazilian Amazon, Martins (1996) identified two distinct processes of occupation and, separately, the opening up of new areas. He defined the first process as one that created *expansion* or *pioneering fronts*, referring to spontaneous movements of peasants looking for land to till and live on. An *agricultural frontier* is the result of a separate process – generally referring to non-spontaneous movements encouraged by public policies and governmental resources – of agricultural expansion and the building of cattle ranches on lands considered ‘unoccupied’ or ‘insufficiently occupied’ (Martins, 1996). In Hecht’s (2005, 383) terms, the notion of a *hollow frontier* is understood as a place or region ‘where a peasant front of *minifundias* with insecure tenure moved ever forward as land holding consolidated in larger holdings behind them’. In the case of the Brazilian Amazon, it is a frontier deeply marked by violence and conflicts, based on a systematic *grilagem de terras* that has hindered ‘the state’s capacity to organize the region’ (Baletti, 2012, 579).

Pará state has been a typical example of an *agricultural frontier* in the Amazon. The occupation of its western region was encouraged through governmental incentives, especially supporting extensive livestock farms and creating colonization projects after the 1960’s. More recently, this same territory has been occupied by soybean plantations, which have expanded into existing pastures and small-scale farms (Garrett and Rausch, 2015). In this process, the agribusiness economy (Delgado, 2013) has renewed agro-strategies across the region (Almeida, 2011), deepening land concentration, producing a ‘distinctive set of experiences of the land’ (Adams, 2008, 32) and consolidating ‘Amazonia as a space of conflicting territorialities’ (Baletti, 2012, 575).

Analyses of the behaviour and dynamics of soybean crops in the Amazon are not relevant given the extension of acreage planted or production in tonnes; a mere 1.5% of the total soy cultivated in Brazil lies in Pará, according to data collected by both CONAB (2018) and IBGE (2017). However, there has been a sharp acceleration in the rate of expansion, as ‘the speed at which the plantations are advancing’ in the state has been impressive (Schlesinger and Noronha, 2006, 77), well above the national average (Ninni, 2004; Benatti, 2003) and only comparable to advances in another agricultural frontier in the states of Maranhão, Piauí, Tocantins and Bahia (CONAB, 2008a; Freitas, 2013), the so-called Matopiba region.

Reaching what could be called the ‘heart of the [Brazilian] rain forest’ (Adams, 2008), particularly the plateau of Santarém where there was land appropriated for mechanization, the expansion of soy here is not much different from that observed in other soy regions or frontiers (Costa, 2015). However, it has been accelerated given that “[...] international demand for commodities like soybeans, palm oil, meat or timber has, in recent years, become a major driving force for forest conversion in the tropics” (Henders et al., 2018, 581). Furthermore, its expansion into the Amazon has been ‘fraught with cases of resistance, conflict, displacement and indirect land-use change’ (Garrett and Rausch, 2015, 8), including the campaign ‘*Não abra mão de sua terra*’ (*Do not give up your land*), which began in 2003 and was run by the Rural Labour Trade Union, the CPT, and other social and non-governmental organizations (Sauer and Silva, 2011).

The expansion of grain crops towards northern Brazil also reveals important shifts in logistical trends, especially in terms of public investments in infrastructure by the federal government, beginning with plans to pave the Santarém-Cuiabá highway, or simply BR-163, in 2000 and continuing with plans put forward by the national Growth Acceleration Program (PAC). The PAC, initiated during the administration of President Lula (2003–2010) and continued under that of President Dilma (2011–2016), combined public and private investments (Sauer and Mészáros, 2017; Baletti, 2014), and notably included the construction of a port by Cargill on the Amazon River in 2001. This prompted a change in grain logistics that tended towards intermodal systems (Costa, 2012) focused on combining highways and waterways,

and ultimately resulting in reduced transportation costs (Wilkinson, 2009). This logic followed that of the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America, the IIRSA agreement, signed by several governments in 2000 (Safrafsky and Wolford, 2011).

This article argues that the expansion of soybean plantations towards the Amazonian rain forest corresponds with a fundamental dimension of so-called ‘agro-strategies’ (Almeida, 2011) and ‘agribusiness economy’ (Delgado, 2013) while complementing ‘neo-extractivism’ (Gudynas, 2012; Baletti, 2014) tendencies in the region. Agro-strategies are strategies built on narratives that emphasize modernization as a fundamental step towards (sustained) development based on public investments in infrastructure. According to a study sponsored by the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), for instance, ‘the key argument to support paving BR 163 [was] that as soybean activity becomes viable in the region, it will enhance the efficacy of environmental policy’ (Brandão et al., 2005, 14).

Based on governmental programs and incentives (Sauer and Mészáros, 2017), in combination with private investments and modernization, ‘neo-extractivism’ (Gudynas, 2012) is “an intensified export-oriented model of extractive development with a progressive social agenda based on the reduction of poverty,” sustaining “an economic model rooted in the intensified exploitation of natural and agricultural resources” (Baletti, 2014, 6). Using Gudynas’ (2012) notion of agricultural activities, the agro-strategy (Almeida, 2011) has been effectively implemented through a combination of elements ranging from public incentives, to media coverage reinforcing these same notions of modern agriculture, as well as entrepreneurial options of regional private investments. Despite narratives of social concern (poverty reduction) and environmental protection, such strategies lead not only to an increased production of agricultural and non-agricultural commodities for export, but also to accelerated environmental degradation and deforestation (Henders et al., 2018) as well as social conflicts (Benatti, 2003).

In order to properly analyse such expansion processes, this article is presented in three main parts. The first section reflects on the historical processes of capitalist expansion towards the north of Brazil and into the Amazon based on a growing agribusiness economy. The second section discusses the arrival, expansion and consolidation of soybean in the region of Santarém, Pará, as well as the mechanisms that facilitated this process, specifically the injection of public resources and infrastructural investments by the federal government. The third section identifies emerging socio-environmental conflicts in the context of new agricultural frontier regions, especially those resulting from land concentration and disputes for land and territory in the Santarém plateau, a region which received an influx of large-scale migrant farmers intending to cultivate soy.

2. Agro-strategies and the agribusiness economy in the Amazon frontier

Beginning in the 1940’s and with renewed emphasis after the *coup d’état* of 1964, an economic expansion policy targeting agriculture and livestock production was consolidated in Brazil. According to the official discourse, such a policy had two key aims: a) to occupy empty spaces within the national territory; and b) to minimize land tenure conflicts in the south, southeast and northeast regions of the country. The so-called ‘March to the West’ encouraged the occupation of the central region of Brazil and guided different migration flows that resulted in the occupation and exploration of areas of the Cerrado biome (Brazilian ‘Savannahs’), especially in the states of Goiás and Mato Grosso (currently the state of Mato Grosso do Sul) in the 1940’s and 1950’s.

The implementation of the technological package that accompanied the Green Revolution in the central-southern part of the country – starting in the 1960’s, as part of the military dictatorship’s modernization of agriculture – did not result in significant shifts in the

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