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Family farming, agribusiness and the state: Building consent around oil palm expansion in post-neoliberal Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the politics of oil palm expansion and state intervention in the Brazilian Amazonian state of Pará. The Workers' Party (PT) envisioned moving away from previous neoliberal policies by using state support to facilitate the coexistence and synergetic nexus between the state, family farmers and agribusiness, through the Sustainable Oil Palm Production Program (PPSOP) launched in 2010. Using a Gramscian approach, we examine PT's ability to impose its hegemonic project and the contradictions that emerged from its efforts to ease capital accumulation and to support marginalized family farmers to legitimize oil palm expansion. We argue that, in light of the articulations and fragmentation generated in the PPSOP intervention, the PT played a key role in providing a common framework that facilitated oil palm expansion in which all the actors involved could find a response to their claims. While agribusiness moved to participate in PPSOP to legitimize the monoculture of palm in international markets and to create the material and infrastructural conditions for monocrop expansion, family farmers and popular movements granted support to this intervention based upon concerns for land access and titling, and with the hopes for alternative agricultural activities and job creation to improve their livelihoods. We show, however, that PPSOP intervention works to reinforce large-scale production and exclude family farmers and popular movements by promoting the concentration of land ownership and failing to improve the terms of incorporation of marginalized actors in the oil palm chain.

1. Introduction

The postwar rural Brazilian political economy has been characterized by intense, ongoing disputes between agribusiness and peasant or family farming¹ as diametrically opposed models of development for the countryside. Agribusiness seeks to insert the country in the path of agricultural modernization—typified by high capital investments, production of monocultures over large acreages, and the use of advanced technology—by reproducing capitalist relations of production (using as few people as necessary) to accumulate and reproduce transnational capital (Mançano, 2014). The family farming model, conversely, rejects landed elites and large-scale agricultural production and promotes alternative economies and forms of development through diversification, agro-ecology, and food sovereignty (Flexor and Grisa, 2012).

The Brazilian Sustainable Oil Palm Production Program (*Programa*

de Produção Sustentável de Óleo de Palma, PPSOP), part of the National Biodiesel Production Program (PNPB) launched in 2010, sought to reconcile the tensions between these two opposing models of development in the Amazon state of Pará. The PPSOP was an effort by the PT government to implement the rationales of what we label here the 'synergistic' state for agrarian development, premised on the idea that by pooling public resources, family farmers, agribusiness and the state can form a critical mass that unleashes synergies from collaborating to jointly develop and implement initiatives that benefit smallholders, agribusiness interests, and state actors. Thus, it was built upon a model of partnerships between the federal government, agribusiness and family farmers to jointly promote both the livelihoods of family farmers and the interests of the biodiesel chain to cushion the potentially detrimental effects associated with oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) monocropping (BRASIL, 2010).

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¹ Federal legislation (BRASIL, 2006) defines family farms on the basis of four main criteria: (i) a maximum farm size of up to four modules (approximately 25 has in the state of Pará), which are set for each municipality according to agroecological conditions and economic activities; the predominance of (ii) family labor and (iii) income from farming activities; and (iv) the local management (by farmers) of farm activities.

Oil palm expansion and PPSOP intervention in Brazil have reproduced, to some extent, two divergent global narratives of oil palm expansion: the promises of economic benefits and agricultural growth as a pathway out of poverty and the concerns over the social and environmental impacts of this expansion (Cramb and McCarthy, 2016). On one hand, official state discourse describes oil palm production as a profitable business with a double benefit: to incorporate family farms into a state-regulated market for poverty reduction and to produce biodiesel to reduce GHG emissions (Abramovay and Magalhães, 2008; IPEA, 2010). On the other hand, studies from critical environmental and social analysts, social movements and NGOs have denounced the increase in deforestation and loss of biodiversity caused by oil palm production, as well as the processes of unequal redistribution of land and depeasantization that result from the incorporation of producers into capitalist relations of production (Glass, 2013; Backhouse, 2015; Nahum and Dos-Santos, 2013, Nahum and Dos-Santos Bastos, 2014). Critics often describe oil palm expansion in Pará in terms of domination, as a classic case of a Marxian process of primitive accumulation in which agribusiness forces its interests over family farmers (Backhouse, 2015) or as accumulation by dispossession, in which family farmers resist the depeasantization process (Nahum and Dos-Santos, 2013).

Beyond these cut-clear dichotomies – market integration as the way out of poverty or depeasantization – little attention has been paid to the powerful Gramscian demonstration of hegemony in the seductive shift of production relations to achieve consensus between family farmers and agribusiness facilitated by the rise to power of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) and its PPSOP intervention. The PT came to power in 2003 via the charismatic union leader Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva (hereafter Lula) (De-Castro et al., 2014), who promised to defend social rights and develop a more just and equitable country. The PT administrations of Lula (2003–2010) and Dilma Rouseff (2010–2016) were part of the “Pink Tide” of progressive, post-neoliberal governments that, with the support of social movements and popular sectors, were elected throughout Latin America at the beginning of the 21st century (Cannon and Kirby, 2012). Given the political path that it had taken to power, the PT promised to carry out profound social transformations, such as through the PPSOP to make oil palm production in places like Pará more fair and inclusive (BRASIL, 2010).

This paper analyzes the aspects of state society relations that have contributed to the construction of consensus around PPSOP to argue that the PT's attempted reconciliation of family farming and agribusiness interests rested fundamentally on a reproduction of elite domination of agricultural production and was supported by a hegemonic reading of the contributions of oil palm production to social well-being. This model suggests that agribusiness and more investment automatically translates to the enhanced welfare of small farmers without acknowledging the uneven power relations between agribusiness and small farmers (Oya, 2009). The fact that the PT promoted this model speaks to the limits of post-neoliberal reforms under the Southern Cone's recent (and receding) ‘Pink Tide’.

To uncover how hegemony unfolded in the PPSOP, we draw on Gramsci (1971), who articulates a difference between domination and hegemony. While domination involves the subjugation of subaltern groups, hegemony occurs in the realm of civil society and considers the intellectual and cultural contributors to the production of a ‘common sense’ that naturalizes the existing social order among the governed. Roseberry (1996) uses the Gramscian concept of hegemony as a corrective to the bimodal explanatory diagrams of power as limited to domination and resistance. He highlights two points that are important for our analysis. The first is that hegemony is a different process than the construction of an ideology shared by the whole population and imposed from above, as some scholars have argued (e.g. Scott, 1998; Corrigan and Sayer, 1985). Rather, Roseberry contends that hegemony constructs a “common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination” (Roseberry, 1996:361). Thus, it

is a process that requires the formation of a historic bloc of alliances among the ruling classes to govern through coercion and consensus (Gramsci, 1971:248). To understand under what circumstances the connection between apparently antagonistic actors is forged and the different elements that helped form a “common framework, we use the notion of articulation advanced by Hall (1996:142), as “the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements”. For Hall (1996), the concepts or projects that have been formulated by a social elite to consolidate its position and exercise power can be used by subaltern groups without necessarily reshaping the power relations that existed at the moment of its conception. A given social group, therefore, is hegemonic when it is able to present its domination as being in the interest of the whole society, such that society believes it will advance with the advancement of the groups in power (Roseberry, 1996; Hall, 1996).

The second and equally important point is that although subaltern classes make use of this ‘common framework’ it does not mean that they accept it as their own; rather, they may recognize that not doing so would mean that their demands or disagreements would not be heard. Thus, while a hegemonic framing sets the terms by which claims are made legible, the common framework is temporary and can never be complete, as Jessop and Sum (2006) argue. It remains a space of “contention,” confrontation and collusion between dominant groups and between these and subordinate and marginalized forces, giving rise to the possibility of fragmentation of the common framework.

Our study contributes to the literature that highlights the relevance of a Gramscian perspective to overcome the dichotomy between domination and contestation in the construction of hegemonic projects. We use this perspective to analyze different ways in which hegemonic discourses around oil palm production in the Brazilian Amazon have generated both consensus and contestation among agrarian elites family farmers and social movements (Asher and Ojeda, 2009; Karriem, 2009; Li, 2014; Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen, 2017). Our case study of PPSOP also contributes to a wider analysis of the new dynamics of agrarian change and state policies across the leftwing countries in Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) and their limitations and failures. Together with Argentina and Uruguay, Brazil was part of the moderate wave of these leftwing post-neoliberal governments. In contrast to Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, that promoted radical social transformation by constitutional means, the PT government did not entirely depart from neoliberalism, despite substantial modifications to the neoliberal project to make it more equitable and inclusive (Morais and Saad-Filho, 2011).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we locate the role of oil palm production for biodiesel in the political economy and the development of the Brazilian Amazon in the state of Pará. By analyzing the particular history of the palm oil industry in the region, we are able to examine how state intervention supported a first cycle of oil palm expansion, helping to shape two contrasting agrarian classes: agribusiness actors and family farmers. We then introduce the PPSOP and show how the PT has mediated state-society relations between family farmers, social movements and agribusiness that have helped construct a hegemonic project around a second cycle of oil palm expansion in the Brazilian Amazon. Following this, we examine the points of fragmentation of the relations between the four actors and analyze the constraints to creating a hegemonic process around the synergistic state and its outcomes on three main processes: a) family farming support, b) mechanisms to control access to land, and c) more equitable agribusiness and family farmers' alliances. Finally, in the conclusion the contradictory consequences of these processes are briefly assessed to argue that the PT's rise to power against the backdrop of struggle against neoliberal hegemony catalyzed a series of state-society relations that facilitated the construction of consensus in the expansion oil palm agribusiness as a means for social inclusion.

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