



Ecological rationality and environmental governance on the agrarian frontier: The role of religion in the Brazilian Amazon



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Agrarian frontier
Ecological rationality
Environmental governance
Religion
Brazil
Amazon

The conventional understanding of environmental governance implicitly assumes a priori presence of citizen rationality that underpins constitution of civil society vis-à-vis state. This assumption tends to overlook the economic and ecological consequences of social interactions through which people with diverse forms of rationality gradually produce distinction between state and society and shape environmental governance as an embedded process. This paper presents a case study of spontaneous settlers called *posseiros* in the south-east of the state of Pará in the Brazilian Amazon and examines ways that their social interactions lead to the so-called emancipation movements for municipal making on the agrarian frontier and open civic places in which environmental governance is negotiated. It pays particular attention to the role of religion, especially the Pentecostal Church of Assembly of God in relation to the traditional Catholic Church, in influencing the *posseiros'* ecological rationality and the articulation of emancipation movements and argues that the focus on religion sheds new light on the linkage between the environment, livelihoods and local governance. The paper concludes by discussing pragmatic implications of the case study for promoting sustainable rural development.

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1. Introduction

While scopes and focuses vary, recent studies on participatory politics and governance have widely used an analytical framework that assumes a priori presence of people's rationality to organize civil society vis-à-vis state. For example, this assumption is clearly seen in the number of studies on social movements in rural Brazil where "state" usually implies multilevel governmental institutions; and "society" is represented by social movements that claim the need for agrarian reform or environmental justice from the state through political participation, such as the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST), extraction workers' and indigenous people's movements (Baud et al., 2011; Chase, 2010; Wittman, 2009; Wolford, 2010). These movements' apparent success in forwarding the political agenda of nationwide agrarian reform and demarcation of protected areas in Brazil has shown that the dualistic state-society framework has been effective in ensuring equitable and sustainable rural development (Hochstetler and Keck, 2007; Ondetti, 2008; see also Li, 2002; Woods, 2008).

However, this state-society framework becomes awkward when we explore participatory forms of environmental governance

where "the interplay between different forms of politics and other social interactions" takes place processually and does not easily fit into the strategized state-society distinction (Baud et al., 2011: 85). This is the case of the Amazon region of Brazil, to which the world's largest remaining rainforest belongs. In the Amazon,¹ 90 percent of more than 230,000 km² of land used for agrarian reform is occupied by spontaneous settlers known as *posseiros* who hold provisional land titles or occupation licenses issued by the state (Brandão Jr. and Souza Jr., 2006; Hammond, 1999; Miranda, 1988). They are known to be individualistic compared to members of the well-organized rural social movements such as the MST, as they tacitly "invade the land, leave the land ... [and] ... enter again, but always in a disorganized fashion" (Branford and Rocha, 2002: 134). While they do claim property rights from the state, they do not readily assume the clear distinction between the state (them) and the society (us) for claiming purposes in the same strategic manner as the social movements. They rather spontaneously colonize the available land and forest without always aiming at redistribution of concentrated land ownership (Hoefle, 2003; Simmons et al., 2010).

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¹ Amazon here indicates Legal Amazon consisting of seven northern states (Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima, Tocantins) and parts of the state of Maranhão (north-east) and Mato Grosso (center-west).

The spontaneous colonization in the Amazon is considered to have a large environmental impact because it takes place as the *posseiros* clear forests, open their plots and start cattle ranching in the interior where they can play by the “politics of the state absence” (Hochstetler and Keck, 2007: 151). On the face of it, the *posseiros* seem to be contributing to weak “frontier governance,” which is one of the major obstacles for the state to effectively enforce environmental laws (such as requiring 80% of a rural property to be a forest reserve) or for environmental activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote intensive and collective land use for sustainable environmental management (such as community-based agroforestry systems) (Nepstad et al., 2002; Pichón and Uquillas, 1999). However, it can be also argued that weak frontier governance is undergirded by precarious physical infrastructure such as roads and means to store and commercialize sustainable agricultural produce, leaving the *posseiros* with cattle ranching or land and forest speculation as their only profitable livelihood options even after they obtained their property rights (Bicalho and Hoefle, 2008; Fearnside, 2005). As a consequence, deforestation frontiers keep on expanding.

In order to control the *posseiros*' agrarian struggles and enhance the state presence on the frontier, experts and policymakers tend to promote militarization of interventions and duly enforce environmental laws and spatial planning while admitting its difficulty (Pacheco, 2009; Tollefson, 2008). One simple problem associated with this militarization approach is that it clarifies little about *posseiros*' rationality behind how they wish their society and environment to be governed. As their society has been evolving in the state absence, they are unlikely to readily claim or carry out citizen obligation to comply with official interventions regarding environmental management. The current framework of governance that inherently assumes a priori presence of the clear state-society distinction is unable to take account of the *posseiros*' rationality that often leads to the gradual making of a civic place where they negotiate locally embedded forms of governance (cf. Taylor and Cheng, 2012).

For instance, even an apparently alternative proposal for a “hybrid” (or adaptive) form of environmental governance in the Amazon recommends that “the state provides public resources to support local governance” while “communities formulate locally appropriate rules based on planning deliberations among stakeholders” such as policymakers, NGOs and scientists (Perz et al., 2008: 1892; see also Boyd, 2008). The question of how the disorganized *posseiros* come to establish their “communities” and formulate rules and then situate themselves in relation to “local governance” and “the state” to claim the public resources is left unanswered.

This paper argues that this question is in fact vital for us to explore the relationship between governance and rationality of particular rural populations such as *posseiros* whose activities organizing livelihoods significantly influence environmental sustainability. Here, rationality indicates subjectivity of individuals who shape social processes, which evolve into “political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced” (Mitchell, 1999: 77). The ecological rationality indicates subjectivity of individuals in a particular place to decide on how to deal with the surrounding natural environment, articulate institutional arrangements of governance, and deliberate on environmental management.

The question at this point is: How does such an ecological rationality begin to be formed and influence the social interactions in the first place? This paper elaborates on a case study of a *posseiros*' spontaneous settlement in the state of Pará in the Brazilian Amazon and proposes looking specifically into the role of religion in formation of the rationality. In recent years, the role of religion in development has been actively debated (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011; Jones and Petersen, 2011; Rakodi, 2012). Once being simply “subsumed under the category of ‘civil society,’” religion as a locus of free association

and group identification regained scholarly attention in the context of global development (Berger, 2001: 453). However, the relationship between civil society, religion and the state has not yet been sufficiently explored in the context of rural development. For example, in Brazil, it is well known that the Catholic Church has ideologically undergirded the organized social movements through its Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*, or CPT), whose offices were widely implemented across Brazil during the military regime (Esterci, 2004; Wolford, 2003). Nevertheless, questions such as how this Catholic influence is related to newer influences of Protestantism (or Pentecostalism), or how the Protestantism affects the ways that the non-organized and non-indigenous settlers, such as the *posseiros*, make their community and manage their environment have been little addressed (except for Hoefle, 1999, 2009; Scott, 1979). In addition, the ongoing debates on environmental citizenship, which largely focus on identity politics and participatory governance (Latta and Wittman, 2010), mention little about the relationship between individual belief, community building and civic placemaking observed on agrarian frontiers.

On the other hand, the recent literature on rural development in the Amazon asserts that individual identification with a community constitutes a core element for the analyst to understand diversifying forms of agrarian frontier expansion and environmental governance (Browder et al., 2008; Simmons et al., 2010). Religious belief (and non-belief) tacitly but clearly links an individual to a group, indicating possibilities of “multi-scalar” collaboration as well as contradictions between various actors who have different world views and ideologies (Bicalho and Hoefle, 2010). As the case study below shows, the Pentecostal Church is increasingly uniting the individualistic *posseiros* and helping them to interact with others and to gradually make a civic place.

In the Amazon, the civic placemaking process has been observed as the so-called “emancipation movement for municipal making” (*movimento de emancipação dos municípios*, hereafter, emancipation movement), through which the settlers justified their ecological rationality and came to form institutions of environmental governance “as [an] embedded process” (Taylor and Cheng, 2012: 110). Methodologically speaking, looking at the evolution of emancipation movements requires an understanding of “large-scale... [political]... processes that do not lose connection with the persons on the ground” (Kapferer, 2006: 145). Anthropologists have studied this multi-scalar connection through a “semi-autonomous social field” that extends “between the body politic and the individual” (Moore, 2000[1973]: 56) and in which “the movement of particular individuals through a variety of contexts” can be observed (Kapferer, 2006: 145). Taking insights from such anthropological studies, the case study in this paper describes social events, which represent the “variety of contexts” that allowed individual *posseiros* with different religious beliefs to interact with each other and negotiate their rationality with reference to the ecological and political economic dynamics.

More specifically, the case study introduces life histories of two political leaders emerging at the social events in a district called Novo Paraíso and the surrounding settlement projects on the border between municipalities of São Geraldo do Araguaia and Eldorado dos Carajás in the south-east of Pará state (see Fig. 1). One leader is a pastor of the Church of Assembly of God²; and the other

² The official English name of this denomination is “Assemblies of God” and initially the Brazilians adopted the direct translation (*Assembléias de Deus*). However, to show the Church's unity, the Brazilian headquarters decided to make the official name *Assmbléia de Deus* or, Assembly of God. Therefore, this paper adopts this contemporary Brazilian translation. See d'Ávila (2006: 39) for details of the “plural or singular” debate in Brazil and also www.assmbleia.org.br for the Brazilian Assembly of God Church's website.

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