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## Cultivating space for contemporary resistance in Brazil's Amazon and Cerrado

Brian Garvey<sup>1</sup> , Maria Luisa Mendonça<sup>2</sup>, Maurício Torres<sup>3</sup>, Daniela Stefano<sup>4</sup> and Fábio Pitta<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK, <sup>2</sup>Network for Social Justice and Human Rights Brazil, City University, New York, USA, <sup>3</sup>Amazonian Institute for Familial Agriculture, Federal University of Pará, Belem, Brazil, <sup>4</sup>Network for Social Justice and Human Rights, Brazil and <sup>5</sup>University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

**Corresponding author:** Brian Garvey; Email: [brian.garvey@strath.ac.uk](mailto:brian.garvey@strath.ac.uk)

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### Abstract

This paper investigates how contemporary labour-capital conflicts in the Cerrado and Amazon biomes of Brazil are centred on the expansion of value from land via dispossession and land titling, and the extraction of value through financial mechanisms that enhance the current and future rent from landholdings. Understanding the consequent territorial struggles between traditional collective ownership on the one hand, and private individual and corporate value capture on the other requires a departure from incumbent capital-(salaried) labour analyses in value chain studies. Resistance to further land capture for speculation reveals inter-and intra-class class tensions, and the facilitative role of the state in validating illicitly grabbed resources. Despite the adverse political conditions in Brazil, there are modest, but significant gains by autonomous land occupations and demarcations in confronting capital expansion. In the face of intensified land grabbing, violent threats, and the laundering of illicit resource extraction, the two cases presented open up new dimensions of, and possibilities for, capital-labour struggles linked to commodity expansion and extraction on resource-rich frontiers.

**Keywords:** Brazil; conflict; commodities; labour; land

**JEL Codes:** F60; F63; F66

### Introduction

The intensification of invasion and grabbing of lands in Brazil's Amazon and Cerrado biomes, the expansion of agribusiness linked to corporate financial strategies, and the re-regulation of land titling and resource licensing continue to generate violent social tensions. The collective resistance of communities in territories affected by contemporary land capitalisation reveals the local and transnational actors involved in speculation and theft. These territorial struggles, which depart from incumbent capital-labour analyses, invite further understanding of the inter-and intra-class tensions, the facilitative role of the state in the value grabbing (Andreucci et al 2017), and the significance of autonomous land occupations and demarcations in confronting capital expansion on resource-rich frontiers.

This paper seeks to build on the work of Kay and Kenney Lazar (2017), Kenney-Lazar (2021), and others (e.g. Huber 2018; Purcel *et al* 2020), and empirically explores the mechanisms by which land becomes a real form of capital through *expanding* production via dispossession and land titling (Andreucci *et al* 2017; Christophers, 2019; Panitch and Gindin 2009) and – often at the same time – becomes a powerful form of rent, or fictitious capital, for current and future value *extraction* (Harvey 2006; Mendonça and Pitta 2018). Distinguishing between the two processes as they proceed in the regions in question is important for four reasons that are central to this paper. In the first place, there is the risk that overreaching analyses of corporate land grabs and grain commodity (read soy) expansion often obfuscate the localised power struggles and the fraudulent and violent incursions that convert public or commonly occupied land into a private asset. Secondly and conversely, the rich empirical bank of myriad forms of (often weakly defined) accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2006) may well sharpen the focus on localised land disputes but can risk absolving the role of established landowners, and regional and international corporations that incentivise and further often illegal resource capture (Torres and Branford 2018).

In the third place, the regulation of land as a means to quell social conflict is one advocated by state, transnational private, and third-sector institutions. Yet, in practice, this welds solutions to new private property relations via market-led mechanisms and policies that validate rather than impede land grabs. Fourthly, the rather stubborn transfixion of incumbent capital-labour analyses to salaried labour, at least in the English-speaking literature, restricts a more thorough exploration of the capital-labour tensions inherent in territorial, and socio-ecological disputes, despite the considerable research conducted in the southern hemisphere to this end (Porto-Gonçalves and Leff 2015).

The paper is based on fieldwork in two territories within the Brazilian state that are found in the Amazon and Cerrado biomes, respectively. These are chosen as they are differentially affected by violent incursions, land grabs, corporate resource appropriation, and public policies. In both cases, however, the intra and inter-class conflicts, legal contestation, and collective strategies have resulted in measured gains for rural workers in the face of acute power asymmetries and opened up new dimensions of possibilities for capital-labour struggles. Taking their experiences as a starting point, the paper asks the following questions: (i) What are the contemporary mechanisms by which land is being capitalised in the Amazon and Cerrado regions? (ii) How do state policy and financial mechanisms facilitate the validation of land grabbing at the expense of rural labour? In shifting our focus to labour and beyond the confines of the capital-labour wage relation, the paper explores, (iii) how certain articulations and organisations of collective resistance wrought some important concessions from the state and capital on the frontiers of resource extraction and cultivation?

The paper begins by visiting the literature pertinent to this study of land capitalisation and resistance. The methods by which these themes were investigated in Brazil's Amazon and Cerrado biomes are then described. By focusing findings on two specific land struggles in these respective regions, the paper analyses the dynamics of value expansions and extraction on these resource frontiers and the materialisation of these with respect to collective resistance by rural and riverine communities.

### **Value expansion and extraction through land**

The starting point for our discussion on land picks up from Kenney-Lazar's (2021) considerations of land as a real form of capital on one hand, (Christophers 2016, 2019; Marx 1975) and as a fictitious form on the other (Harvey 2006). Land as capital, following Marx (1975), affords both a process of continuous value expansion *and* accumulation of value towards further production via rent (Christophers 2016). In the former, the value of land

can be increased (via labour and technology) by dispossession (Harvey 2006; Marx 1975). The clearing of forests, ploughing, chemical treatments, and insertion of infrastructures, for example, make land 'investible' (Li 2014). Alternately, or indeed at the same time, land is sought after as an asset against which investments, loans, sales, and increasingly complex financial mechanisms can be set in order to increase (future) returns (Fairbairn 2020). Here, land *rent* is considered as the extraction of value from anticipated future revenues (i.e. fictitious capital).

The tendency for financial investors to benefit from annual agricultural commodity revenues, as well as the increasing value of land-as-asset<sup>1</sup> (Fairbairn 2020; Mendonca and Pitta 2018), challenges Harvey's (2006) treatment of land as solely fictitious capital and underscores Kenney-Lazar's conclusions that land as capital (value in motion) and land as rent (accumulated value) are not mutually exclusive. Land can be considered as a 'real' form of capital (Christopher 2016; Li 2014), where social relations are transformed to facilitate value *expansion* (Andreucci et al 2017; De Angelis 2007), and as a rent-generating asset that can be mobilised through capital circuits for further value *extraction and realisation* (Harvey 2014; Marx 1975; Purcell et al 2020; Swyngedouw 2012).

The above attention to social relations is important as the form that values expansion and/or extraction will take in particular spaces, and the contestation of accumulation is dependent on political-economic contexts (Kenney-Lazar 2021) and class and interclass struggles (Andreucci et al 2017), with implications for land control, access, and value distribution (Borras et al 2011; Le Billon and Sommerville 2017). The acute power asymmetries and violence inherent to contemporary land appropriations are captured by Andreucci et al's (2017) conceptualisation of value 'grabbing'. These authors highlight the often coercive dispossession that creates property rights in the first place (after Marx 1975), the continuous process of enclosure (Fairbairn 2020; Harvey 2006; Li 2014), monopolistic control of land (Christophers 2019), and call for closer scrutiny of how value is extracted, produced, flows, and accumulated in relation to land.

These dimensions of the capitalisation of land, and their inherent social relations, are indelibly linked to the state that is central to creating, transforming, or transferring property entitlements (Glasmann 2006; Jessop 1990). Andreucci et al (2017, 35) underscore how it is the property title that is a necessary precondition for further and future reproduction of capital: 'without prior institutionalization, regulation and enforcement of property rights, capitalist production cannot take place'. The state is thus central to affixing exchange value to land. Its role in issuing new licences for extractive industries, compulsory land purchases, and new infrastructures, for example, is paralleled by its delimiting of new agricultural, hydrographic, or mining zones and regulation thereafter. Furthermore, the function of the state as a landowner and rentier, or a key partner in public-private partnerships, can contribute to a complex set of arrangements, responsibilities, losers, and beneficiaries from contemporary land valorisation. The vista in relation to capital investors often is no less opaque, with asset owners involved in either or both productive and speculative activities (Fairbairn 2020; Mendonça and Pitta 2018) and, as we will see later, employing deliberate strategies to bypass legislation and inspection.

The acceleration and expansion of private property relations have inevitably generated new social conflicts. This is discernible in the scrambles for new private expropriations and appropriations at a range of scales (Torres 2018), within capitalist class tensions between land owners, rentiers, financiers and owners of capital (Andreucci et al 2017; Garvey et al 2015, 2019), and the popular struggles that are not best captured by conventional capital (salaried) labour analyses of working-class struggle, founded as they are on territorial, cultural, and ecological bases rather than the labour process (Bieler and Nowak 2021; Porto-Goncalves and Leff 2015). These socio-ecological modes of collective resistance too, are imbued with inter-class tensions, and merit closer analysis and more widespread coverage than is currently the case. The paper seeks to draw further attention

to these and the violent, fraudulent processes that are central, and not peripheral, to contemporary capital-labour struggles. For example, where Amazonian deforestation is part and parcel of new land grabs, the labour involved *must be* illegal, unregistered, and therefore often slave-like to avoid detection; where value is being appropriated from illegal mining ventures, the insertion into regulated value chains *must be* laundered; where pension companies are extracting value from territories in which they are prohibited from speculating, existing regulation *must be* sidestepped; and where traditionally held territorial and human rights are routinely trampled over, the state *must be* complicit in the ongoing dispossession and coercion that typified actual land capitalisation. In the following section, we place the ongoing contestations of land and labour in Brazil's Amazon and Cerrado region in a brief historical and political context of contemporary land capitalisation processes in Brazil.

### **Looting and lucrative land deals in Brazil**

The sociologist José de Souza Martins (1986, 51) argues that with the ending of slavery, land became the most profitable commodity for the elites in Brazil:

The capital that was previously paid to slave traders was now paid to real estate companies and land grabbers who, based on false documents, after 1854, took possession of extensive areas vacant or occupied by squatters, reselling them to new and potential farmers.

As farmers moved to new regions in search of fertile land, the colonial land law of 1850 consolidated private property via negotiable titles. The acquisition of land no longer took place through the granting of 'sesmarias' and (free) occupation by possession, but through purchase and sale. The expenses incurred by bribes, ambushes on original occupants and payments to surveyors constituted the basis of the price that the land acquired at the beginning of Brazil's agrarian capitalism (Martins 2010, 61). The subsequent individual claims to property were less related to human labour than to looting. These new pillars of a post-slavery land market contrasted and conflicted with land occupations, collective forms of cultivation, and multiple forms of territorial organisation by a diversity of peasant and indigenous communities. These were treated as an obstacle to be overcome by the venturers of the time. As Júlio Vito Pentagna Guimarães said of his 1977 eviction of 260 families of rubber tappers in western Pará state, 'It's no man's land. It is the land of the discoverer. It is the right of the discoverer' (Torres 2008).

From the second half of the 19th century onwards, the capitalisation of land had two original scouts: the 'bugreiro' ('killer of Indians', whose work was the 'civilising' conquest of the land, and the 'grileiro' (the 'land grabber'). Holston (2013) recounts how 'wills, permissions, withdrawals, titles, pages of record and so on' were crafted, often fabricated in the attempt to give land grabs a veneer of legality from the second half of the 19th century. The dynamics of looting public lands only intensified with the onset of the republican administration, which tasked federal authorities with the regularisation of 'vacant' lands. In this period, amnesties for improperly gained lands and more flexible means for titling took place, and indeed the land grabber who appropriated vast portions and sold them in small lots became synonymous with the entrepreneur (Torres 2018).

These dynamics of land capitalisation in Brazil have remarkable resonance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Based on the real need for land tenure regularisation in the Amazon, the federal and state governments built a legal-political apparatus for the purpose of legitimising land grabbing and granting amnesty to land grabbers. The Terra Legal programme was introduced in 2009, ostensibly to regularise 67 million hectares (ha) of land in the legal

Amazon for the benefit of small landholders (less than 400 ha) and resolve the social issues surrounding irregular land claims in the region. According to data from the National Rural Registry System (SNCR), however, 85% of the land covered by the new programme was in the hands of medium to large landowners.

In Brazil, Provisional Measures (MP) are rules with the force of law issued by the President of the Republic in situations of relevance and urgency. These have been used to facilitate the amnesty of illegal occupations, increase the land size of plots that can be claimed for private ownership within the Amazon (from 1,500 hectares to 2,500 ha), and lower the standards for proof of occupation.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Provisional Measure No 759 allows for public lands to pass to private speculators even in situations where private companies have appropriated them through land-grabbing mechanisms since the understanding of *direct use of land* is expanded to also include activities of third-party labour. Provisional Measure No 910, edited in 2019, expands the criteria of ‘land tenure regularization’ for the entire country, no longer restricted to the Legal Amazon, and to the lands registered in the name of the National Agrarian Reform agency, INCRA.<sup>3</sup> This measure also opens the door to regularising land tenure for individuals or legal entities that have more than one occupied area. The measure reduces the necessary period of proved occupation from 2008 to 2014 and extends the area for a self-declaration of occupancy to areas of up to 1,500 hectares (Torres 2018). This is ‘regularisation’ by nothing more than the presentation of documents by the alleged occupant.

What this means is that, even though existing legislation (Law No 11.952/2009 and its amendments) forbids the ‘regularisation’ of land traditionally occupied by indigenous people, African descendant ‘quilombolas’ (Article 4, II), and agrarian reform lands (Article 4, I), there is, in practice, a real race in Brazil’s Amazon for the grabbing of public lands under very advantageous political conditions to the detriment of these peoples.

### **Land, agribusiness, and speculation**

The above section shows the state-garnered means by which land is capitalised and assigned exchange value under the banner of regulation, and the ways in which land grabbing is validated as larger estates are favoured by inherited and actual policy. The relative fixity of land, its relative scarcity, and the tendency for monopolistic control, engender particular strategies by which further and future value is appropriated or expropriated. In Brazil, state policies favouring the industrialisation, expansion, and export orientation of agricultural produce (particularly from 1964 onwards) furnished new processes by which traditionally occupied lands were dispossessed and offered new possibilities for local and international land speculation and commodification. Between 1969 and 1976, rural credit increased on average by 23.8% (Delgado 2012, 46). Extensive and mechanised agriculture was targeted as a priority for state support by arguing that it was necessary to pay off the country’s foreign debt and ensure a positive balance of trade. The deregulation of the international financial system facilitated capital flows towards Brazil; but the dependency on imports of industrial inputs for agriculture, however, only increased deficits in the trade balance (Garvey and Barreto 2016; Mendonça 2018). The global economic crisis of the 1970s increased interest repayments on foreign loans that had propped up heavily subsidised sectors, and by 1986, debt service payments reached nearly 96 % of Brazil’s export revenue and led to the debt crisis of the 1980s (Garvey and Barreto 2016; Mendonça et al 2014).

During the period marked by neoliberal policies (1990–2002), regulations on foreign investors’ profit remittances were further relaxed. This process began with the deregulation of financial markets and also facilitated financial investments in government bonds and the transfer of revenues out of Brazil. Brazilian agribusiness followed the

strategies of those further north in the Americas and sought the ‘securitisation of its debt’. Under the neodevelopmentalist policies of the incoming Workers Party government, the Brazilian state expanded its own debt by selling national treasury bonds in the financial market, and this revenue allowed an increase in credit to agribusiness from BRL 27 billion in 2003–2004 to some BRL 136 billion for the 2013–2014 harvest year (CONAB 2015).

It was the strongest companies, those with access to international liquidity, that survived the economic downturn of the early nineties and that were positioned to use both their landholdings and the related access to credit for territorial expansion, factory, and technological developments (Garvey *et al* 2019; Mendonça *et al* 2014). During the commodity boom of the early 2000s, companies took out publicly funded loans and used them to speculate on the appreciation of the Brazilian currency in relation to the US dollar. When the value of the dollar rose again, however, agribusiness experienced drastic losses in foreign exchange transactions leading to bankruptcies and further consolidation of the sector (Mendonça *et al* 2014; Pitta 2016).

The global crisis ushered in a period of agribusiness mergers and joint ventures as national companies’ need to roll over existing debt coincided with international finance seeking safe places for investment amidst a banking crisis (Garvey *et al* 2019; Pitta 2016). The value of assets and share prices of these ‘new’ companies served as qualification for obtaining further credit to increase investments in land and machinery. The fall in returns on investment arising from capital-intensive operations, however, encouraged the already present tendency to attract foreign investment in their productive spaces and speculate on financial markets in search of further value capture. The new lines of global credit afforded by the privatisation of pension and retirement funds, together with the establishment of foreign debt payments at floating interest rates, have become increasingly central to strategies for financial accumulation. These dynamics come to ground in the most profound manner in the Matopiba region of the Cerrado. It is there, and in the adjacent Amazon basin that research was conducted using the methods set out below.

## Methods

This paper is primarily based on fieldwork undertaken in two territories over a five-year period between May 2017 and March 2022. In each of these places, however, relationships between residents, civil society organisations, and academics stretch back to 2005, and the article thus reflects the knowledge shared between residents and the research team of community-based, academic and legal practitioners over this period. A synthesis of the legal proceedings in each case was formally brought together in the online event *Land Law and Legal Strategies to Defend Rural Communities’ Land Rights: Matopiba, Cerrado and the Amazon*, 17 July 2020.

In Montanha-Mangabal, Pará state, annual visits were maintained between 2008 and 2017. In 2018, 2019, and 2020, remote communication was maintained by the authors in preparation for a later phase of self-demarcation. In July 2021, members of the research team visited the community in the aftermath of another land invasion to gather testimony and highlight the territorial rights of the residents, and in February 2022, a further visit conducted additional interviews and presented documentation on the outcome of the community’s legal challenge.

In Salto, Piauí, the civil society organisation Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos (Network for Social Justice and Human Rights) first conducted fieldwork observations and interviews with the agrarian community following the increased land speculation in 2008. The ten interviews with residents of the Salto communities that inform this paper were conducted in May 2018 and September 2019, and the community was engaged through a series of interviews for written and podcast dissemination in May 2020 and June 2021.<sup>4</sup>

### **Montanha-Mangabal: land grabbing and resistance**

The territory of the communities of Montanha-Mangabal lies along the 70 kilometres of the west bank of the Alto Rio Tapajós, south of the Amazon National Park, and, until a recent victory by the traditional residents, was subject to what the Federal Public Ministry identified as the second largest illegally grabbed area in the state of Pará. The territory borders the lands along the Transamazônia highway in the municipality of Itaituba, west of the state of Pará and between the Montanha and José Rodrigues rivers. It covers 54,443 hectares, comprising 101 families known as *beiradeiros*, whose existence dates back to their migration from northeastern Brazil to work as rubber tappers during the mid-19th century rubber boom. Through the (commonly very violent) incorporation of indigenous women into life on the rubber plantations, a matrix of knowledge was also incorporated that allowed the community to adapt to the conditions imposed by the forest when the latex trade ceased.

Many families were expelled from a part of their territory due to the creation of the Amazon National Park and construction of the BR163 highway in the 1970s. These major works resulted in land value appreciation, eased access for incomers, and intensified land grabbing that resulted in the eviction of many people whose sustainable, extractive practices had helped preserve the forest for nine generations, long before the 'official' records of companies and prospectors. It was in the 1990s that the community then learned that amidst the military-led infrastructure developments, a judicial decision issued via the Torrens Register<sup>5</sup> in 1974 had guaranteed the possession of over 1,138,000 hectares in the Tapajós region, including the territory of Montanha-Mangabal by a company from the distant state of Paraná, namely Indústria e Comércio de Madeiras LB Marochi, Ltda. (Indussolo). In 1999, the Indussolo sent its employees to inform the community that the land now belonged to the company and required their eviction. They resisted but endured a prolonged period of insecurity as they sought legal redress. By 2005, they availed of the new legal instruments (via Law No 9.985) to ensure the right to land linked to the sustainable use of natural resources and also accompanied a formal request to identify and find the original process that had registered the areas in the name of Indussolo. Despite searches of notary offices and archives, these original documents were never found. In response to the Public Civil Action (n. 2006.39.02.000512-0), the Deputy Federal Judge granted an injunction in March 2006 that recognised the occupation of Montanha-Mangabal by its residents and made the registration of Indussolo lands untenable. This ought to have led to formal recognition of their territory as a sustainable, extractive settlement. Successive budgetary cuts<sup>6</sup> and the politically motivated changes to staffing at the National Agrarian Reform Agency, INCRA, however, stalled the process. The situation for the residents was further complicated by state appetite for a hydroenergy plant construction within their territory. In the face of further attacks, the community again took matters into their own hands.

On 26 September 2013, the *beiradeiros* released a consultation protocol endorsed by the Public Ministry, which was to be followed by the federal government for all decisions related to its territory in accordance with ILO Convention 169 demanding free and prior informed consent. Although INCRA, in 2013, officially designated the territory as a sustainable, extractive settlement in the hands of its dwellers, this was not followed by the required physical designation. As a result, the territory was subject to a fresh wave of illegal attacks that involved the grabbing of lands, illegal mining within the forest, on riverbanks and in the waters, and intensified logging. As leader, Ageu Lobo explained:<sup>7</sup>

That's why we [...] defend the territory because we depend on it to survive. These intense attacks of mining and logging, these illegal acts not only impact the environment, they impact people's lives. For us traditional and dependent residents

of this forest, it is part of our life, from there we take our food. The mining activities directly harm people, animals, nature and our way of life, our livelihood.

The community denounced the owners of illegal gold mines and the mercury poisoning and violent actions that accompanied their lucrative, mechanised activity, including exploitation of the Igarapé do Rato river inside the Itaituba National Forest, despite a legal injunction (dating back 15 years) prohibiting this activity. In the absence of statutory support, the inhabitants again set out the self-demarcation of the territory. Significantly, a groundbreaking alliance between the beiradeiros and the Munduruku peoples of Sawré Muybu, who were once their sworn enemies, led to a second joint expedition of demarcation between these groups (Vega *et al.* 2022). The five-day and six-day expeditions that were carried out in September and November, 2017, carried acute risks. Over the course of the expedition, there were physical confrontations with land grabbers and loggers, as the leader recounted,

[...]Life has completely changed. Just for defending the preservation of our area, which is our livelihood; defend the natural resources, the forest, our Tapajós River. It should not be, but defending it is life-threatening, life-threatening again and again.

Two leaders, Francisco Firmino Silva and Ageu Lobo Pereira, received death threats and after being tracked by assassins, left the region temporarily in 2018. They returned and committed to completing the struggle against land grabs and invasion. In January of this year (2022), after years of struggle, the beiradeiros finally received news that their territorial claim made by the MPF on their behalf had been upheld. The resistance of the riverside people had provided space and time for extensive genealogical research to be conducted, which proved that the community heritage traced eight generations who were born and buried in that place. The result was the legal annulment of all fraudulent land claims on their lands and the interdiction of 60 thousand hectares of its territory to anyone who was not from the families of Montanha-Mangabal (see Figure 1). An interdiction of this type in an area that was not occupied by indigenous people or quilombolas was unprecedented in the history of the Brazilian Judiciary.

### **Matopiba and land financialisation**

The region that today is known as Matopiba possesses relatively flat and fertile land. These characteristics explain the early expansion of cattle rearing into Brazil's backcountry, or 'sertão', since the 17th century (see Furtado 2000). Slavery and compulsory labour were synonymous with cattle rearing and mining activities in the interior, and remnants and current dwellings of quilombos and mocambos,<sup>8</sup> are commonly found, as fleeing and rebelling slaves sought refuge along the fertile banks of the Araguaia and Tocantins rivers. Under the New Land Act of 1850, expansion of cattle ranches and expropriation of traditional communities intensified. Even after the end of slavery, freed Blacks had the obligation to possess a work permit, or risk being arrested and condemned to work compulsorily on the large farms for coffee, cotton, and sugar cane or for the gold mines. These and other traditional occupants shifted further inland during this initial phase of colonial encroachments and enabled familial existence by planting and rotating crops, using the flat top hills, or 'chapadas' for raising cattle, and reproducing the wild grass, typical of the Cerrado.

From the second half of the 20th century, state support for monocultural expansion and high commodity prices saw the area in Matopiba planted with soy and sugarcane increase by 253% and 379%, respectively, between 2000 and 2014. Such is the draw that leading companies involved in orange juice and sugar cane, for example, have entered the soy





**Figure 1.** A member of Montanha-Mangabal signs her acceptance of the land offer following decades-long struggle for recognition. Photo by Brian Garvey.

market alongside trading companies, commercial agents, seed producers, processors, importers and exporters of soy. Despite the availability of national and international credit, new infrastructure developments, and state support, the monocropping of soybeans has faced difficulties in maintaining profitability due to increased input costs, fluctuating exchange rates, and the decade-long decline in soy prices following the 2008 financial crisis. The amount spent on capital inputs jumped from BRL 397 thousand per hectare in the 2012/2013 harvest to just over BRL 990 thousand in 2016/2017, an increase of 151%. In the following season, 2015/2016, Brazil's harvest experienced a drop of 0.8% in overall production and 4.3% in productivity levels (per hectare). Yet, throughout this period, the expansion of the planted area continued.

The anomaly is explained by the tendency of producers and trading companies to expand the planted area of agricultural frontier into regions where land is cheaper. By doing this they can avail of further credit (there was a 37% growth in credit for agriculture in the 2009/2010 harvest) while bringing land into circulation for the futures market. These lands are thus monetarised and held as financialised assets by companies that inflate their portfolios until they are sold, realising capitalised income, and compensating for commodity market volatility. The physical expansion of commodity production is, therefore, a 'bet', shared by shareholders, on the continuation of the rise in future prices.

Between 2003 and 2019, prices of agricultural lands rose sharply in Matopiba, with a staggering 900% increase in Cerrado and Caatinga areas in the Floriano region of Piauí in just 15 years. One hectare in this region cost BRL 44 in 2003. In 2019, a hectare in Cerrado was traded at BRL 800 (FNP 2021). The inflation of the price of land as a financial asset, and the gathering of land titles, generated an increase in the prices of the shares of the companies producing these commodities on the Stock Exchanges. The case of SLC Agricola, the world's largest soy producer that has Cargill, Amaggi, and Bunge amongst its key buyers, and the UK-based asset management, pension, and investment fund company, Variance, is instructive.

In 2012, the CEO of Valiance, Jan Pensaert, announced a GBP 300 million partnership with Brazil's SLC Agricola, with a further GBP 180 million until 2013. The joint venture, named

Landco, gave a 49.4% share to Variance, whose CEO announced farmland as the ‘best’ asset class over the previous decade and was clearly enthused by land prices in Brazil valued at 20% less than the UK with twice the productivity (Economia 2012). For its part, SLC outlined the new company’s role in purchasing plots, clearing, and developing them before leasing them for farming back to SLC Agricola, and in real estate for further acquisition and sale.

LandCo, then, was created to ‘monetize part of the real estate gain obtained over 30 years of land acquisition’ in the Cerrado and immediately took over 86,574 ha of land in Brazil, 73,225 of which was in Matopiba (Economia 2012). SLC Agricola encountered challenges in 2015 and 2016 (SLC 2017) as income from agricultural production fell, following the decline in commodity prices (Delgado 2012; Pitta 2016). There was a drop in average productivity (from 3.3 kg/ha in the 2010/2011 harvest to 2.6 kg/ha in the 2015/2016 harvest), as production costs increased with the devaluation of the real against the dollar. SLC, however, with Landco in its portfolio, was able to boast continuing growth in its stock market value, and access further credit to increase the area planted with soybeans (from approximately 118 thousand hectares in the 2010/2011 harvest to 212.5 thousand hectares in the 2015/2016 harvest).

In an interview, the Agricultural Manager of SLC Agrícola at Fazenda Parnaíba, in Tasso Fragoso-MA,<sup>9</sup> explained that expansion into previously marginal areas served new land speculation as a compensation for the drop in commodity prices, which at times income was lower than production costs. These areas could in turn be expanded and later sold, with the realisation of capitalised income from the land. According to his calculations, the cost to set up a farm in the region would be BRL 5 thousand per hectare over five years, with the deforestation of the Cerrado, soil correction, and implementation of basic infrastructure, elevating the price per hectare to at least BRL 15 thousand. By 2021, the properties of SLC Agrícola were valued at BRL 6.9 billion, a 75% jump from BRL 3.9 billion in 2020 (Network for Social Justice And Human Rights 2022).

Closer inspection reveals the ecological cost of this value capture involves a reliance on coercive practices. A survey conducted by the NGO Chain Reaction in 2019 found that 66,234 ha of the land under the control of SLC Agricola was deforested land of the Cerrado. In May 2019, SLC deforested a further 1,355 hectares of Cerrado forest and, in the first quarter of 2020, the company deforested a total of 5,200 hectares. With expansion in the Cerrado, corporations such as SLC Agricola have targeted the flat top mountains, or ‘chapadas’ due to their favourable topography, hydrography, and humidity. With limits to further cultivation on these plateaus, companies have started to expropriate lands in the lowlands where traditional communities survive. A key motivation of this is a corporate effort to maintain the most productive lands in cultivation, command the available watercourses for irrigation, but also comply with legislation that requires that landowners maintain up to 35% of their property as a legal reserve of Cerrado vegetation. In order to comply, land grabs have occurred in the lowlands, where traditional occupiers have adapted cultivation to local ecology, hence, the preservation of natural grassland, forest, and springs is now coveted by speculators. This process has been enabled by public policy.

In 2019, agrarian reform in Brazil stalled. In an unprecedented political retraction, no new settlements were created and there was no land made available for this purpose. In place of designating public land for agrarian reform, the government has favoured a raft of ‘concession of use’ contracts. Some 14,868 concession of use contracts were issued from January to September 2019 in Brazil (Mançano Fernandes *et al* 2020) and alongside these, bills of law are pending in the National Congress to ‘regularise’ land in a way that makes land grabbing more viable via self-declarations<sup>10</sup> and the presentation of Rural Property Registration Certificates. Between 2000 and 2019, there were 2,338 conflicts over land and 130 conflicts over water (including impediment of access to water sources to communities, pollution, and private appropriation) in Matopiba (CPT 2020). In Piauí, the highest number of records were concentrated in the municipalities of Bom Jesus (18 separate conflicts) and

Baixa Grande do Ribeiro (15 conflicts) during this period. All of the interviewees encountered in these two areas in 2019 and revisited in 2020 pointed to an escalation in conflict. The traditional riverside community of Salto is situated in the municipality of Bom Jesus and borders the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí, and Bahia. Hundreds of traditional peasant, indigenous and Quilombola families have lived in the region for hundreds of years.

Regina, a resident of the community, Salto, in Piauí, illustrated the situation,

It's [name of land grabber] that beat us people, destroyed our houses, already sold our lands to five people. One of these sent a message saying he had a document [of ownership] in his hands and he was coming to show us.

According to testimony by a Salto resident before the Public Ministry on 22 August 2017, the community was invaded in June of that year by four armed men who claimed to represent SLC and a second company, JB. They fixed signs and concrete markings that fenced off important water, vegetation, and travel routes for the Salto community, and erected warnings: 'Accredited and protected by law', signalling ownership of the invaded lands.

As Regina recounted, these lowlands have already been compromised by industrialised agriculture in the higher topography:

Throughout our rainy season [...] all the water from the mountains goes down to the lowlands [...] and it is the water that we consume because here we don't have a well [...] so we drink all the pesticides that fall from planes, from farms [...] you already sense that smell but you drink unfortunately because there's no other.

The attempted enclosure of the lowlands would, she was sure, spell an end to traditional lives. There were already some three kilometres of marsh that she had watched become dry as a result of monocultures, 'If you deforest all our lowland here, our rivers will end. They are already quite impacted [...] today each farm has a well. This causes our waters to dry up'.

As residents such as Regina resist agribusiness, the complexity of local tensions is vividly depicted. Regina was able to casually provide anecdote after anecdote about local large farmers, as her brother-in-law works for one of these presently. As a young mother, she had also worked on the adjacent farms but left after a matter of weeks due to the conditions. Local patrimony and the monetarisation of land led to what she described as an almost constant conflict, sometimes with the 'big' landowners, sometimes with the 'small' neighbouring farms, and sometimes internally:

When it's not with the big, it's with the small, when it's not small and with someone from the community itself... because [...] there are several who go out to sell the lowland to the farmers and, therefore, bring the big [landowners] to the community.

Resistance, therefore, is dangerous, as a resident who did not want to be named outlined:

I arrived at this gentleman's house, he has a little ranch on the street. [...] he called me and said: 'my daughter, be careful, there are people following you. Be careful, life is very good'. Another time a car drove by as I was leaving the hospital, stopped and smiled. I won't say the name so it doesn't escalate increase. I'm not going to speak into the microphone, I'll say who it is for you later. A person I know, who is from here and who we played together when we were kids. This happened in July (2019).

Regina no longer walked alone at night. 'Not now. There are a lot of people watching us. But we defend the territories and that's why they want to follow us.' The lines are drawn.

We want this area to live in, to raise our children, grandchildren, our great-grandchildren and live for the rest of their lives. And they want it to sell. There's a group here that sells everything. They say they are from here and they put people from outside here. And every sale they make comes with new cars. Then they go to another area, do the same thing, change cars to make money and drink cachaça . . .

Regina joined others in forming an association in Salto to demand collective land rights in response to violent attacks in 2017. These traditional riverside communities joined a broader Collective of Communities Impacted by Agribusiness, created by rural communities in the Cerrado region of Piauí to resist land grabbing. The Pastoral Land Commission, the Network for Social Justice and Human Rights, and the Association of Rural Workers' Lawyers provided accompaniment and legal support through this process. This popular pressure was instrumental in the law State Legislator Assembly in Piauí approving a new law (No 7.294/2019) determining that Indigenous, Quilombola, and other traditional communities have the right to collective land regularisation. Following initial investigations into complaints by residents, the Land Institute of Piauí began anthropological studies in 2019 towards proof of occupancy and regularisation. The communities undertook their own socio-territorial mapping of their lands at the same time. In June 2021, the regularisation process was completed and the announcement was met with relief and cautious optimism by Regina:

I hope that from now on the community will have peace, we can live in peace and be happy in our territory. Let the land grabbing end, let no one show up to burn our houses, let no one show up to evict us.

### Concluding remarks

The collective titles in Montanha-Mangabal and Salto are a significant step in the recognition and protection of agrarian, riverine, and forest communities and thus an important counterweight to the otherwise rapacious capitalisation of land in the Amazon and Cerrado. Whereas previously territorial rights were largely reserved, albeit very imperfectly, for indigenous and quilombo communities, these recent conquests afford certain territorial, land use, and cultural rights that recognise the particular working lives of the residents. These are the result of decades of struggle and, importantly, a very conscious opposition to exploitative resource extraction and agribusiness. Thompson (2009) observed that any project of emancipation requires that differentiated actors can consciously situate themselves and their relationships within the logical, social, and spatial relations of the dominant system. In the respective communities, those that have been effective in articulating and organising resistance have done so in the face of external encroachments and invasions but also acute internal tensions. By refuting the capitalisation of land in each case in favour of collective titling, the residents face violent reactions from those who seek to sell their lots, expand their property, or whose salaried work is linked to larger farming interests.

In these regions, capital encounters a space whereby nature-labour relations are bounded in territories where land sales and speculation are not possible. Furthermore, the struggles result in new possibilities for the reproduction of familial and community life, variably assisted by public policies, as it has been the struggles of the traditional occupants that bring their lives into the public domain. Although the hegemonic policies

and practices of recent and current administrations are not in the favour of these subjects, the examples provided are gaining increasing currency among other traditional communities in the face of ongoing invasion, grabbing, and land speculation.

It is the resistance of these communities that has drawn attention to the processes, actors, and social relations inherent in strategies of capital expansion and extraction in relation to land. Recent joint ventures between landowners, agribusiness, and finance companies seek to resolve the contradictions between ‘asset owners’ and ‘productive capital’ (Andreucci et al 2017). A further concentration of the land market is typified by increasing monopoly control over commodity production and further monetarisation of high-quality and marginal adjacent lands. Surplus value through rent is an important and compensatory measure for commodity price volatility. The relentless pursuit of cheaper land to expand both commodity production and asset portfolios generates socio-ecological disputes that can no longer be considered peripheral to contemporary capital-labour relations, conflict and analyses.

**Data availability statement.** The datasets informing this publication are available in the public depository: <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/855480/>; So Who Is Building Sustainable Development? Transforming Exploitative Labour along Southern Corridors of Migration Dataset, 2017–2021. [Data Collection]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Service. 10.5255/UKDA-SN-855480.

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## Notes

1 Similarly to land in urban peripheries, appreciation of agricultural land can occur when no labour time is applied due to expected increases in prices.

2 The date of proof of occupation for land regularisation purposes changed from December 1, 2004 (as established by Law No 11,196/2005) to July 22, 2008.

3 This was amended by Law No 11,952/2009.

4 See <https://social.org.br/livros-2/37-podcasts/246-podcast-aqui-e-o-meu-lugar-resistencia-das-comunidades-rurais-aos-impactos-do-agronegocio>

5 Torrens register refers to the land transfer system, whereby the state transfers ownership of land by the binding registration of a transfer of title.

6 The resources available to INCRA for land acquisition, which were BRL 930 million in 2011, dropped to just BRL 2.4 million in the 2022 budget. When compared to previous years, the drop is also vertiginous. In 2015, the budget for obtaining land was BRL 800 million, a number that plummeted in the following years: 2016 (BRL 333 million), 2017 (BRL 193.9 million), 2018 (BRL 52.3 million), and 2019 (BRL 29 million).

7 Interview conducted in June 2021.

8 Mocambos were small villages of runaway and rebelling slaves; quilombos are larger settlements that may originally have hosted various mocambos.

9 Conducted in April 2017.

10 Law 13.465/2017. <https://legis.senado.leg.br/norma/17723904>. Regarding MP 910; see also <https://www12.senado.leg.br/publicacoes/estudos-legislativos/tipos-de-estudos/textos-para-discussao/td-114-aquisicao-de-terras-por-estrangeiros-no-brasil-uma-avaliacao-juridica-e-economica>

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**Brian Garvey** has a PhD from University of Sheffield and is a Reader at Department of Work, Employment and Organisation, University of Strathclyde. He is co-founder of the Centre for the Political Economy of Labour.

**Maria Luisa Mendonça**, PhD in Human Geography from University of São Paulo (USP) and research scholar at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics, CUNY Graduate Center. She is co-director of Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos (Network for Social Justice and Human Rights - [www.social.org.br](http://www.social.org.br)) in Brazil. Her research includes history and political economy of agriculture, food, land and water systems, and geopolitical processes of resistance by rural social movements in Brazil and internationally. She is the author of *Economia Política do Agronegócio* (Annablume, São Paulo, 2018) / *Political Economy of Agribusiness* (Fernwood Publishing, Halifax, 2023).

**Maurício Torres** is a Professor at UFPA, with a master's and doctorate in Human Geography, focusing on territorial conflicts in the Amazon. He develops research from the angle of defending the rights of indigenous peoples and traditional communities in the Amazon.

**Daniela Stefano** is a journalist and researcher at Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos. She has been investigating the impacts of speculation with farmland by Harvard University and agribusiness corporations in the Brazilian Cerrado, which is the most biodiverse savanna in the world. She produces grassroots educational materials, such as a podcast series, together with rural communities in the Cerrado.

**Fábio Pitta** is a Visiting Scholar at the Department of History at Harvard University and a Visiting Researcher at the Department of Geography at the University of São Paulo. He is a Visiting Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Territorial Geography-UNESP / SP. He has a Master's, Doctorate and Post-doctorate in Geography from the University of São Paulo, when he studied the financialization of capital and its crisis, the sugarcane agroindustry and its labour relations.

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