

Brazilian Legal Amazon and the Theory of Agrarian Conflicts

Amazônia Legal Brasileira e a Teoria dos Conflitos Agrários

Amazonía Jurídica Brasileña y la Teoría de Los Conflictos Agrarios

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Abstract

The analysis of agrarian conflicts in the Brazilian Legal Amazon involves a theoretical and methodological endeavor to comprehend the essence of these conflicts in terms of class struggle and the ongoing territorial disputes in the Amazon region, and by extension, throughout Brazil. In this context, this paper employs the framework of Agrarian Geography in conjunction with data from the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) to map conflicts and murders in Brazilian rural areas and the Amazon during two time frames, i.e., from 1964 to 1985 and from 1985 to 2020. By doing so, this paper highlights the recurrence of barbarism in Amazon rural areas and its implication for Brazilian society.

Keywords: Amazon. Agrarian Conflicts. Territory. Agrarian Geography.

Resumo

A leitura sobre a teoria dos conflitos agrários a partir da Amazônia Legal Brasileira, consiste num esforço teórico-metodológico para compreensão da natureza dos conflitos agrários à luz da luta de classes e das constantes disputas territoriais travadas na Amazônia e, conseqüentemente no Brasil. Nesse contexto, utiliza-se do arcabouço da Geografia Agrária em consonância com os dados da Comissão Pastoral da Terra para mapear parte dos conflitos e assassinatos no campo brasileiro e na Amazônia a partir de dois recortes temporais, quais sejam: 1964-1985 e 1985-2020, revelando, portanto, a continuidade da barbárie no campo amazônico, e, portanto, na sociedade brasileira.

Palavras-chave: Amazônia. Conflitos Agrários. Território. Geografia Agrária.

Resumen

La lectura de la teoría de los conflictos agrarios desde la Amazonia legal brasileña representa un esfuerzo teórico-metodológico para comprender la naturaleza de los conflictos agrarios a la luz de la lucha de clases y las constantes disputas territoriales que se libran en la Amazonía y, en consecuencia, en Brasil. En este contexto, el marco estructural de Geografía Agraria se utiliza en conformidad con los datos de la Comisión Pastoral de Tierras para mapear parte de los conflictos y asesinatos en el campo brasileño y en la



Amazonía a partir de dos marcos de tiempo, entre: 1964-1985 y 1985-2020 revelando, por tanto, la continuidad de la barbarie en el campo amazónico y, por tanto, en la sociedad brasileña.

Palabras-clave: Amazonía. Conflictos agrarios. Territorio. Geografía agraria.

Introduction

“Legal,
The Legal Amazon. The capital,
national, foreign.

Illegal, the first one,
the wild, cunning Indian,
who never cared for Cabral nor offered him treats...;
the one who occupies, tills the land,
living in hardship, in the zone
Legal Amazon, Illegal...”

“Illegal Legal Amazon” by Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (1979, p. 16)

The history of the Amazon can be understood only through the lens of the logic of pillage and violence. Galeano (1996, p. 62) emphatically states that: “The gold rush, which continues to impose death and slavery on indigenous people in the Amazon, is not a new phenomenon in Brazil – let alone its consequences”.

Galeano’s (1940 – 2015) remarks remain exceptionally accurate and relevant. They also indicate that Brazilian gold supports endeavors taking place in England. The same goes for riverine dwellers, quilombola communities, rural workers, extractivists, among others, who are systematically vulnerable to the impacts of modern-day mining and the advancement of agribusiness, which, historically speaking, employs land grabbing, deforestation, and above all violent methods for the territorialization of *latifundia*.

These conflicts can also be referred to as territorial tensions, as proposed by Mazzetto Silva (2006, p. 38), who argues that “[...] deterritorialization leads to the impoverishment not only of rural workers, but also of mankind as a whole, which loses diversity in knowledge, lifestyles, and ways of approaching nature”.

For this reason, these conflicts or tensions between territorialities are and will continue to be ever more frequent in the contemporary world, due to its access to natural

resources in an unequal scale worldwide. Therefore, the privatization of the environment, based on capitalist mercantilization and the aggravation of territorial disputes calls for a struggle in favor of the democratization of natural resources. As Calabi and Indovina (1973, p. 1) argue, “[...] the (whole) territory is not alien to capitalist processes. On the contrary, these processes use the territory and transform it”.

One should read this brief discussion on territory, regarded as an instrument of power in the context of geographical reality as an analytical element, since there are alternative perspectives on the concept of territory. Each one of these perspectives, in turn, requires some rigor in dealing with different kinds of knowledge and, above all, interpreting the embodied phenomena in a given territory. Thus, this paper presents a brief theoretical revision in light of the agrarian formulations of Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira and José de Souza Martins. To support this review, it draws on data provided by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) until mid 2017, and on Cowell’s cinematographic work (FERREIRA, 2018; 2022; COWELL, 1990). This revision serves as a methodological framework to analyze agrarian conflicts and their numerous impacts on the Brazilian Amazon.

The Amazon is not limited to Brazil’s Northern region, since it

[...] has its origins in a political-administrative division for the purposes of censuses. The concept of the Amazon is strongly linked to the immense extension of the latifoliate equatorial forest, the Amazon rainforest, which, as it is known, surpasses the Northern region of Brazil, comprising also part of the states of Mato Grosso, Goiás [now Tocantins], and Maranhão. This, if we take only Brazil as a reference, covers 3.5 million km² of the continental Amazon, which extends through Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana (OLIVEIRA, 1990, p. 10).

Such a definition concerns the International Amazon, the extension of which reaches 6.5 million km² of South America and, due to this continental vastness, draws the attention of agents with multiple and linked interests, especially in the economic and strategic integration of the region. Regarding the Brazilian Amazon or Legal Brazilian Amazon, one should point out that it encompasses nine states – Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima, Tocantins, Mato Grosso, and Maranhão. It spans through more than 5.2 million km² (OLIVEIRA, 1990).

According to Portela and Oliveira (1991), Brazilian Legal Amazon would be equivalent to the seventh largest country in the world, surpassed only by Russia, Canada, China, USA, Brazil, and Australia. Thus, it is important to note that government's plans for the region date back to 1953, with the creation of the Superintendence of Economic Recovery Plan of the Amazon (SPVEA) -, which reflects the nationalistic precepts of the Vargas administration. Later, during the military rule of Castelo Branco in 1966, it was replaced by SUDAM, the Superintendence of Development for the Amazon (OLIVEIRA, 1990). In the following map, one can verify the Legal Brazilian Amazon, which comprises portions of nine Brazilian states, the Brazilian Amazon biome, as well as the Pan-Amazon – the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), with nine countries.

Map 1: Legal Brazilian Amazon and International Amazon



Source: Available at: <<http://www.greenpeace.org/brasil/pt/O-que-fazemos/Amazonia/>>. Accessed December 15 2017.

Based on this brief contextualization, it is worth pointing out that:

The history of the Amazon in the 20th century is a history of social predation, violence, conflicts, and struggle. It is a history in which agreements were made to legalize the looting of mineral wealth. It is a history that merges with that of the country itself. In fact, it is part of Brazilian history (OLIVEIRA, 2002, p. 117).

This statement remains valid and highly productive, particularly given Adrian Cowell's diverse filmography. Cowell's work has explored topics such as the "Westward March" and the encroachment on indigenous lands in Xingu. More recently, he has examined the colonization and agro-mining initiatives in Rondônia, Acre, and Pará, which are aimed at exploiting forested areas as well as rubber tapping territories, in addition to the construction of highways and hydroelectric power plants. The impacts and impacts of these activities maintain and strengthen the process of social predation throughout the 21st century, contributing to the cyclical nature of the history of the Amazon as a whole and the Brazilian Amazon in particular.

Thus, "large company property tends to destruct or abuse other kinds of property. This gives rise to clash and violence, which are pronounced and essential features to understand the current occupation of the Amazon" (OLIVEIRA, VESENTINI, 1991, p. 32).

In this sense, SUDAM is at bottom a large contradiction, perhaps even an open scam with government funds¹. These funds are used as public incentives under the motto "integrate so as not to hand over" and the consequences go beyond deforestation, especially if one reflects on the territorial violence related to the high concentration of land ownership, which allows us to infer that it is rather an "integration for the means of handing over":

¹ This statement is mainly based on Martins (1990, p. 118-9), who states that: "by July 1997, SUDAM - the Superintendence of Development for the Amazon - had approved 366 projects related to agriculture and livestock, in which more than 7 billion cruzeiros, the Brazilian currency at the time, were to be invested, 2 billions of which corresponded to resources provided by companies. The remaining 5 billion, more than 70% of the total value, would come from tax incentives - exempt from income tax, provided that the corresponding value was invested in projects directed at the Amazon. Considering that most of the equity refers to the price of the land, usually overestimated in the companies' accounting, and that this land was grabbed or purchased at a negligible price, the tax incentive is proportionally much greater".

All this was done under the direction of military administrations that prepared the region to internationalize its natural resources *de facto*, while officially keeping them under the tutelage of the state. In the Amazon and in Brazil the motto is: “exporting is what is important” (OLIVEIRA, 1990, p. 14).

This process of internationalization of the Amazon within the framework of military dictatorship has made many victims: workers, land squatters, gold prospectors, Brazil-nut gatherers, riverine people, rubber tappers, settlers, and especially indigenous people. For this reason, the Brazilian westward march is a continuous and ongoing process. Also, one should point out that, in this process, “[...] the history of the occupation and colonization of Brazilian lands has been marked by discrimination, violence, enslavement, and annihilation of indigenous people. Slaughter is not an unusual event among them” (OLIVEIRA, 2002, p. 125).

Based on this setting, the theory of agrarian conflicts is a crucial part of understanding the Amazon, due to the intense and contradictory contexts that impose territorial rearrangements under the pretense of an alleged integration. Thus, conflict over land has been systematically reported, as Martins (1990) states, and it is not restricted to land squatters: it also includes indigenous people and extractivist/traditional communities facing harassment by hitmen at the service of land grabbers, landowners, national large companies, and multinationals.

Having said that, we have the basic background of the conflicts in the Brazilian countryside and its perverse logic, which simultaneously refers to

conflicts over land concentration, land demarcation, environmental preservation, the devastating exploration of natural resources, the construction of huge infrastructures, the expansion of agrohydrobusiness, food production, preservation of lifestyles, expropriation, expulsion, and exclusion of rural workers, traditional people and communities, but also conflicts over the implementation of developmental strategies (MONTENEGRO, 2010, p. 13).

These conflicts are distributed throughout the Brazilian territories, as well as the whole Latin American Amazon, and they reveal, among other perspectives, the advance of capitalism and a genuine conflictual movement of class struggles. In this regard, Porto-Gonçalves argues:

I consider the degree of conflictuality and people’s involvement in agrarian conflicts as a concrete expression of the relevance of agrarian reform in the

context of the current development of Brazilian society. After all, if we approach the agrarian issue from the concrete fact that the agricultural model of production and life is being questioned, the number of conflicts and people involved in them are the best indicator of the existence of this problem. Thus, the agrarian issue reveals itself to be more than a scholarly problem. As long as there are social segments questioning this Brazilian agrarian-agricultural model, there will be an agrarian issue (PORTO-GONÇALVES, 2004, p. 10)

These conflicts – in the light of their agrarian context, which concentrates land, opposes agrarian reform and is, therefore, allied with agribusiness and mining commodities – systematically grow in the country, thus forming a bloody trinity: deforestation, monoculture, and murder.

On this basis, the pioneer front allows for the recognition of new areas of population displacement, which geographers refer to as pioneering zones or fronts². On the other hand, the front of expansion approaches these very same areas, especially in the case of the Amazon. As such, this process involves the integration of new territories into the market economy. This entails converting land into commodities and thereby generating capitalized income, a key aspect of capitalist capital reproduction (MARTINS, 2014).

In this process, the Amazon pioneer front continues to exist due to public lands³. This tension intensified during the military regime, especially from 1970 onward (MELLO, 2009), and continues to be serious in the face of the cyclical democratic disruptions experienced in the country.

In this context, the perspective of the frontiers, according to Martins (1990; 2014), dialogues with the pioneer front. It allows one to reaffirm the frontier as a place of alterity, of discovery of the other, and mismatch of different historical temporalities. This is so because each one of these social groups is located in their own distinct way in historical time and, therefore, has a rationality and, above all, a specific appropriation of that place. Thus,

2 According to Mello (2009, p. 159), these are called the “pioneering fringes”: “that was the term [Pierre] Monbeig used to define the systems of social and economical modifications in the organization of the geographical space that occurred gradually in areas of low population and economical density”.

3 “Public lands belong to the government, that is, they are either determined or determinable public goods that integrate the public patrimony. They are the UCs (Conservation Unities), land destined to agrarian reform, training areas of the Armed Forces, or those destined to some public use” (MELLO, 2009, p. 166). In addition, there are indigenous and quilombola lands, borderland strips, coastal zones, etc.

the border only ceases to exist when the conflict disappears, when different times merge together, when original and moral alterity gives place to political alterity, when the *other* becomes opposite to *us*. When history becomes *our history*, the history of our diversity and plurality, and we are not ourselves anymore, for we are anthropophagically both ourselves and the other who we devour and who devoured us (MARTINS, (2014, p. 134).

Reading these conflicts through this lens, the pioneer front and the border comprise the same analytical reality in dealing with rural workers during the expansion of the capitalist world. Hence, “the main recent conflicts in rural Brazil have occurred in spots where the ‘pioneer front’ (organized on capitalist bases within the economic border) overlaps with the ‘expansion front’” (MARTINS, 1975, p. 52).

For instance, it is possible to encounter tense regions in the Western portion of Paraná, Northern portion of Mato Grosso, and alongside the Araguaia river, Goiás – now Tocantis – among other areas where conflicts are older, such as Contestado, Porecatu, Trombas e Formoso, as well as in the Mucuri Valley.

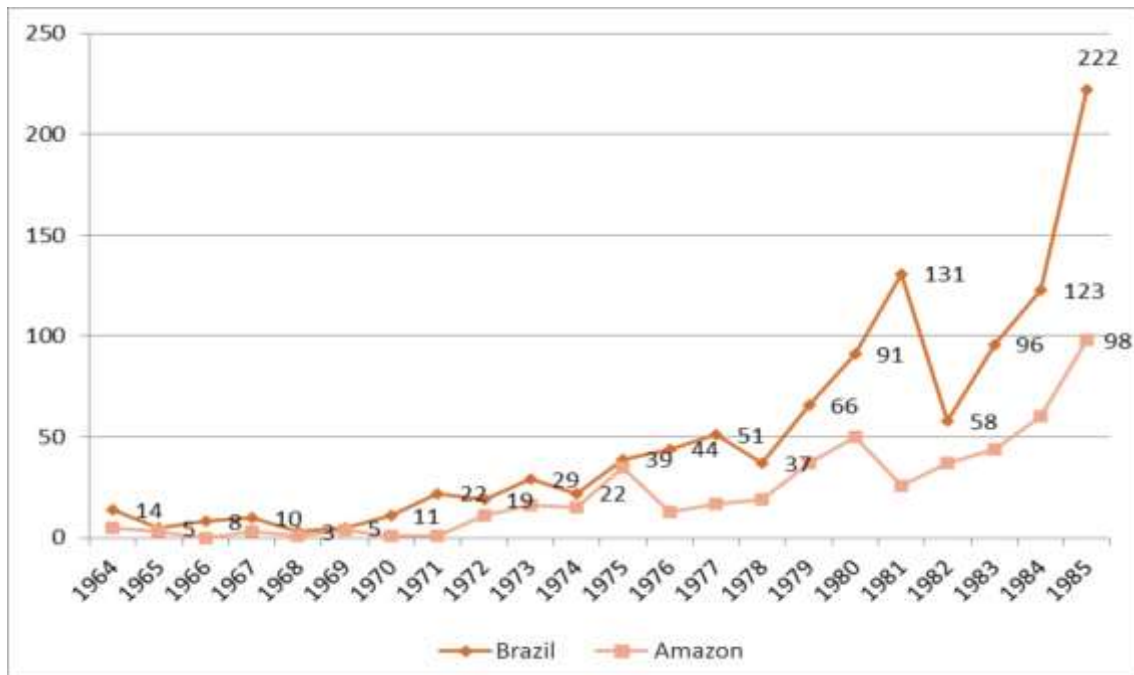
In examining these contexts, it is possible to confirm that “the history of the recent border displacement is a history of resistance, rebellion, protest, dream, and hope” (MARTINS, 2014, p. 132). Therefore, amidst these conflicts utopias continue to emerge from the daily struggles and practices of rural workers, indigenous people, and other extractivist and traditional communities involved.

It is worth noting that conflicts in Brazil, especially in the Amazon, are not restricted to land. They can also be classified as labor conflicts, conflicts over water⁴, out of violence, and protest (CPT, 2015). Regarding conflict over land, it can be defined as “acts of resistance and confrontation for tenure, use, and property of land, and for access to natural resources [...]” (CPT, 2015, p. 14).

Based on this premise, Chart 1 shows the murders in Brazil’s countryside and Legal Amazon from 1964 to 1985, that is, during the military rule in the country. It provides a comparative reading that allows one to assert that, in this region, there were 496 murders, 44.8% of the total of 1106 murders, recorded in Brazil’s countryside. In the following period, from 1985 to 2017, the numbers are even higher, indicating 2029 murders, 1,271 or 62.6% of which took place in the Brazilian Legal Amazon.

⁴ Regarding the conflicts during drought in worker’s union and gold prospecting areas, CPT keeps track of them and publishes reports “only when their occurrence is expressive or when the context on which they unfolded indicates the pertinence of the analysis thereof” (CPT, 2015, p. 14).

Chart 1: Brazil: murders in countryside conflict (1964-1985)⁵



Source: OLIVEIRA, 1996, p. 31. Organized by the author.

Table Charts 1 and 2 show how conflicts and murders continued during the respective administrations from 1985 to 2017. It is a perverse reality produced within our history. Thus,

there is no place where violence is not present. Military and civil governments alike have aligned themselves with capitalist groups in their uncompromising defense of what gradually turns the Amazon into a territory for business and not for the Brazilian people (OLIVEIRA, 1997, p.153).

Therefore, it is evident that the big national and international business is continually opening the Amazon to its worldwide reproduction, the marks of which confirm the theory of agrarian conflicts, as well as a “Geography of countryside struggles” as proposed by Oliveira (1996)⁶. Therefore, the struggle over land is inseparable from violence and, in the Amazon, it has significant proportions, to the point of being

⁵ Primary data from: CPT, MIRAD, CONTAGO.

⁶ It is worth noting that the first edition of the work is from 1988. The one dating from November 1996 is the 7th edition.

[...] internationalized without the need for it to become an international territory. The military, which ruled Brazil during the 20th century, left to the Brazilians an Amazon whose natural wealth is slipping through the fingers of the workers of the country on a daily basis (OLIVEIRA, 2002, p. 127).

This reading implies that agrarian reform remains relevant in the country, as expropriation is not limited to the outbacks and ranches on the border. Therefore, it is a conflict whose solution remains unchanged, given the mercantilization of agrarian reform through projects of public and private colonization in the Amazon⁷. Having said that, it should be noted that the conflicts “[...] involve privileges, interests and rights, demands and struggle. The state is the competent institution to solve this conflict” (FERNANDES, 2004, p. 46).

Rural workers have made countless appeals to the state, through various actions, to tackle the issue of agrarian reform. However, some of these strategies aggravate conflicts even further, by inducing a “land counter-reform”, whereby the regularization of land in the Amazon is used to prevent agrarian reform in the country. The following data support this interpretation on the contradictory and violent territorial disputes, revealing that “justice remains the only thing absent in the countryside nowadays” (OLIVEIRA, 1991a, p. 07).

Table Chart 1: Conflicts and murders in the Brazilian countryside (1985 - 2017)

ADMINISTRATION	Sarney	Collor/Itamar	FHC 1°	FHC 2°	Lula 1°	Lula 2°	Dilma	Temer	TOTAL
Period	1985-89	1990-94	1995-98	1999-02	2003-06	2007-10	2011-15	2016-17*	-
Conflicts	3,489	2,175	3,140	3,448	7,029	5,078	7,279	1,536	31,174
%	11.2	7	10	11	22.5	16.3	17	5	100
Murders	848	273	172	120	189	116	185	126	2029
%	41.8	13.5	8.5	6	9.3	5.7	9	6.2	100

Source: CPT (1985, 1988, 1992, 2010, 2015)⁸. **Org.** The author.

Note: * Data from 2017 are partial, especially those concerning conflicts, as they will probably undergo substantial change with the “Conflicts in the Countryside - Brazil” documents, which should be published over the course of 2018.

⁷ In addition to the case of land counter-reform linked to historical policies within INCRA (National Agrarian Reform and Colonization Agency), I also highlight the Brazilian market-assisted agrarian reform – launched during the FHC administration (1996), as well as land regularization strategies in the Amazon and other Brazilian regions.

⁸ Every document from “Conflicts in the Countryside – Brazil” is available at: <<http://cptnacional.org.br/index.php/publicacoes/conflitos-no-campo-brasil>>, accessed April 16 2016.

Table Chart 2: Murders in Brazil's countryside (1985 - 2017)

Period	1985 ¹	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	
Amazon	98	183	100	66	33	49	30	22	34	33	33	47	15	24	14	8	14	
Brazil	222	302	154	104	66	79	49	46	52	47	41	54	30	47	27	21	29	
Murders	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 ²	TOTAL	%
Amazon	26	57	20	24	32	14	20	17	25	23	21	20	24	47	48	55	1276	62.7
Brazil	43	73	39	38	39	28	28	26	34	29	36	34	36	50	61	70	2034	100

Source: CPT (1988, 1992, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2018); OLIVEIRA (1996, 1997). Organized by the author.

Note: * Red highlights are a visual aid to differentiate the administrations analyzed.

** Data reported by CPT on April 16 2018. Available at:

<<https://www.cptnacional.org.br/publicacoes-2/destaque/4319-assassinatos-no-campo-batem-novo-recorde-e-atingem-maior-numero-desde-2003>>, accessed on April 16 2018.

To make some remarks on these data, it is necessary to agree with Alberto Moreira when he states that the table chart hides the face, conceals the eyes, and does not show the history (BALDUINO, 2010). In this sense, statistical data must be opened through a critical and sometimes propositional analysis, by acknowledging the need for a wide agrarian reform, which unfortunately has not occurred in the country (FERREIRA, 2022).

Oliveira (2007) is emphatic in analyzing such murders and indicates that, in the period from 1964 and 1971, most of the murders took place in the Northeast and, since 1972, most of the murders in the Legal Amazon have occurred in the countryside. It is worth noting that there is also conflict and murder in other regions. In fact, disputes over land and territory are present in all Brazilian states.

Moreover, a total of 496 murders took place in the Legal Amazon, i.e., 44.8% of the total during the military dictatorship, and 23 murders per year were recorded in the region.

Regarding the data from Table Chart 1, it is worth highlighting that they all come from the following editions of the documents entitled “Conflicts in the Countryside – Brazil”: 1985, 1988, 1992, 2010, 2015, and 2016. The **Sarney administration (1985-1989)** was the period with the highest murder count in the countryside, being responsible for 41.8% of the total in the last 32 years. Porto-Gonçalves and Alentejano (2010) had already indicated that this was the highest average and that it would not be equaled. Next, in the **Collor/Itamar administration (1990-1994)**, we have a percentage of 13.5% and, if we consider both its terms, the **Lula administration (2003-2010)** gets a total of 15%. On the other hand, in the **Fernando**

Henrique Cardoso (FHC) administration (1995-2002), also combining both terms, we have 14.5% and a sum total of 9% in the **Dilma administration (2011-2015)**. Finally, the interim/coup **Temer administration (2016-2017)** has the sum total of 6.2%. If this tendency continues we will reach the highest rates since the beginning of the 1990s⁹.

Porto-Gonçalves and Altentejano (2010, p. 110) divide and describe the aforementioned periods in the following way:

- **1st Period 1985-1990** – Predominance of violence by the private sector. The murder count is the highlight. The annual average rate has not been matched ever since.
- **2nd Period 1991-1995** – Gradual resumption of social movements with the 38% growth in the annual average rate of land occupation over the previous period.
- **3rd Period 1996-2000** – Intensified mobilization for the struggle for land. This is the period with the highest annual average rate of occupations and families involved in these actions. There is a significant growth in the annual average rate of conflicts over land (90%) and families involved in these conflicts (142%).
- **4th Period 2001-2002** – A decline in all the conflict indicators and different forms of violence compared to the previous period, following the measures taken by the FHC administration to criminalize social movements. However, this period ranks third in the annual average rates of conflicts and of families involved in occupations and conflicts. It is worth noting the 46% decrease in the annual average of families evicted by the private sector. The count of persons arrested also dropped 43.8% and the number of families evicted by the public sector decreased 38.7%.
- **5th Period 2003-2009** – This is the period with the highest rate of conflicts within this 25-year time span. It holds the record for highest annual average rate of conflicts and the second highest in the annual average rate of families involved in these conflicts. These average rates are almost the same as those from the first period. It is the second highest in terms of annual average rate of occupations and of families involved in them, while the period from 1996 to 2000 holds the highest annual average rate. Regarding the private sector, the number of evicted families reached the highest annual average, while there was a resurgence in murders. In 2003, the number of murders matched those of the most violent period (1985-1990), although it would drop again to an annual average rate of 39 murders in the following years. Also in this period there was the highest annual average rate of evicted families – 22,000 families per year – and 380 people arrested per year.
- **6th Period 2010-2014** – This period can be viewed as the one of the minimal agrarian reform, i.e., there was a slight increase of 0.7% in rural conflicts, from 17.1% to 17.8% and from 6% to 8% in the count of murders in the countryside. In this period, landholding regularization was used as a form of agrarian reform, thus reaching lower levels than all previous administrations, including the military regime.

⁹ I chose to add the first term of the Dilma Rousseff administration and the year of 2015, i.e., the first year of her second term. I also included 2016 and assigned it to the interim/coup Temer administration that, through a political/parliamentary/statutory/media coup that took place in 2016, violated Brazilian democracy and aggravates on a daily basis conflicts and barbarism in the country. Between 2017 and 2020, there is an expressive growth in conflicts, which total 5009, with 151 murders recorded (CPT, up to 2020). Roughly, 79% of the latter took place in the Brazilian Legal Amazon.

One should also add the “end of agrarian reform” and the legitimization of institutional land grabbing, whose barbarism still prevails in the Amazon. According to CPT, it accounted for 150 murders, between 2015 and 2017, representing 83% of all the murders that took place in rural areas. Thus, one can infer that the 7th period (2015-2017) and possibly 2018 will maintain this increase in conflicts and the “handing-over agenda” that aims at invalidating and above all abolishing agrarian reform in the country¹⁰

When it comes to conflicts in rural areas, the Lula administration leads the ranking by reaching the mark of 38.8% in his two consecutive terms (2003-2010) and, combined with the 17% from the Dilma administration (2011-2015), the Workers’ Party (PT) administrations reach 55.8% of rural conflicts in Brazil in the last 32 years. Part of the answers to this scenario lies in the fact that they abandoned agrarian reform or carried it out in areas of interest to agribusiness, followed by regularization of land grabbing of public land in the Legal Amazon, especially with the 455/2005¹¹, 422/2008, and 458/2009 Executive Orders. According to Oliveira (2010, 2010a, 2015):

For the current administration [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva] and to the “joy” of land grabbers, it is believed, along with some environmentalists, that regularizing private land ownership, banditry agribusiness will no longer take place in the biome [Amazon rainforest]. (OLIVEIRA, 2010, p. 18).

As Oliveira suggests, this perspective is an error, as crimes and violence continued in Brazil’s rural areas and favored the land grabbing of unoccupied lands in all states of the country. Thus, agrarian reform is being neglected in favor of agribusiness, which is based on violent colonial *latifundia*, disguised by modernity, constituting actual *agribusiness banditry*. I use the phrase “*agribusiness banditry*” to mean the employment of mechanisms used by some agents linked to rural areas to reaffirm their power in the country. The period after the political/parliamentary/judicial/media coup partially strengthens agribusiness banditry and barbarism in the countryside,

10 The CPT’s up-to-date documents reveal that, during the 2016-2021 period, there was an increase of 76.34% in conflicts in Brazil’s rural areas. These numbers show only the tip of Brazil’s huge structural problem.

11 The so-called “Righteous Executive Order”, as referred to by the land grabbers of public lands in the Amazon.

especially in the Amazon, where over a million people are involved in conflicts in approximately 77,442,957 hectares in 2020 alone, as systematically reported by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) (MITIDIERO JUNIOR; FELICIANO, 2018).

Final Considerations

Based on the continuous conflicts in the Amazon and, therefore, in Brazil, the period following the 2016 political/parliamentary/judicial/media coup, consists in a historical moment in which ecocide and genocide have been institutionalized. Successive dismantling of government agencies and political rights, carried out by the Bolsonaro¹² administration has marked this period. For this reason, numerous fronts have emerged to resist these destructive forces and build a new future that safeguards human, social, and territorial rights, among others.

Therefore, I reiterate that theories stemming from the territorial occupation and land framework refer to public policies in the Legal Amazon and to the inseparability of environmental and agrarian issues. In this sense, it is reasonable to assert that the theory of agrarian conflicts remains valid. Take, for instance, INCRA transferring thousands of hectares of public land to land grabbers associated to logging, livestock, soy monoculture, mining, etc. This is a policy that wastes public patrimony in line with deforestation, life threats, murder of rural workers, land squatters, indigenous people, leaders of social movements, etc., especially in the Amazon. Therefore,

The problem of the Amazon is not strictly an economic issue. The military developed a “doctrine of occupying empty spaces”, what I personally call the doctrine of emptying occupied spaces, since it is a doctrine of expelling people to make room for livestock. In other words, it is necessary to occupy the land in this way, and not in any other way, to defend it. I would say that this huge herd could feed immense enemy armies (MARTINS, 1990, p. 136).

The concept of “occupying empty spaces” in the Amazon, which led to the institutionalization of conflicts in rural areas during the military dictatorship, has remained unchanged in the country. This is particularly evident with the expansion of commodity in the Amazon through continuous land grabbing, supported by tax

12 Here I refer to Mitidiero Junior’s (2021) discussions, when analyzing the weakening of public institutions, among other strategies.

exemptions, legislation, and legislators associated with the political party Democratic Association of Ruralists (UDR). In this context, there is a clear expansion of the agribusiness to the detriment of rural workers, who continuously resist and reinvent themselves:

Therefore, the debate on agrarian reform is still an open question in Brazilian society. **The increase in conflicts in rural areas and the growth of social movements show that sooner or later the country will have to undertake a wide and profound agrarian reform or else it will have to live with one of the most concentrated land structures in the world and with the largest *latifundia* that human history has ever known.** Agrarian reform, in addition to solve most of the structural problems that exist in Brazil's rural areas, will allow for the increase in food supply and resolution of the chronic problems of hunger, unemployment, and, ultimately, poverty, which affect millions of Brazilians (OLIVEIRA, 1999, p. 103, emphasis added).

Consequently, a broad agrarian reform is present in the current space of possible ideas. It is also necessary for the country and bears with it the conflict thesis. In this process, the democratization of the country in 1985 sounds like mere rhetoric, for conflicts and, especially, murders continue with alarming numbers, as shown in the tables and graphs above.

Therefore, the analysis, or rather the cry of denunciation of Casaldáliga (1971) show the violence and the construction of social and territorial justice vis-à-vis *latifundia* and its fences that deprive life and lead to social exclusion. For this reason, they make the theory of agrarian conflict become permanent in Brazil. Furthermore, comprehending lands and territorialities is crucial for grasping and potentially addressing the historical pillage enforced in the Amazon region. In other words, it is imperative to have a prior understanding of both the Amazon dimension and the past and present territorial conflicts in the region (PORTO-GONÇALVES, 2012; 2017).

Therefore, this is a declared war that aims to protect the illegal acquisition of land and establish a form of capitalism that seeks to modernize itself at the expense of the rural population and their traditional way of living. However, rural workers are still resisting, since “[...] the life of agricultural laborers is not organized based market demands, as it is the case with capitalism overall, but rather a way of social existence enabled by a mode of production” (PAULO; ALMEIDA, 2010, p. 19). Hence, some of these rural workers recognize themselves as a class, i.e., there is an awareness based on

the processes of their own reality, which encompasses both themselves and their families.

In conclusion, I reiterate that the theory of agrarian conflicts is one of the key theoretical approaches for the understanding of the agrarian issue in the Amazon and Brazil, as it is rooted in land grabbing, violence, genocide, and ecocide. This theory reveals the contradictions of the agrarian society and its alliances to sustain it in power on a daily basis.

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