



The advancement of the sole agriculture discourse and the urgency of re-signification of family farming in Brazil

Eliziário Noé Boeira Toledo

Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul – Erechim – RS – Brazil

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7919-9371>

Valdecir José Zonin

Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul – Erechim – RS – Brazil

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3021-4275>

Darlan Christiano Kroth

Universidade Federal da Fronteira Sul – Chapecó – SC – Brazil

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2664-857X>

Abstract

The article reflects on the discursive advance of “sole agriculture” in Brazil, represented, roughly speaking, by agribusiness and the retreat of the socio-productive projection of “family farming”. It is understood that this prevalent narrative has, as possible causes, the fragility of theoretical, political and social investments in the family farming segment, closely linked to the definition and restrictive criteria present in the rural credit regulations and by Law n. 11,326/2006. It was possible to sustain the idea of a sole agriculture that has been fueled in large part by the economic gradient that concentrates the Gross Value of Production (GVP), by the agribusiness advertising campaigns broadcast by the media and by the influential political power bloc in the National Congress, represented by the Agricultural Parliamentary Front (FPA) vis-à-vis the peripheral bench of family agriculture. These factors, aligned with the political scenario of the 2016-2022 period, and involuntarily, due to the loss of social and political mobilization by social organizations and family farming unionism, contributed to the weakening of policies to support family farming and the option of strengthening the agribusiness.

Keywords: Family farming. Rural development. Political power. Policy agricultural.

O avanço do discurso da agricultura única e a urgência de ressignificação da agricultura familiar no Brasil

Resumo

Este artigo discorre sobre o avanço discursivo da “agricultura única” no Brasil, representada, grosso modo, pelo agronegócio e pelo recuo da projeção socioprodutiva da “agricultura familiar”. Compreende-se que essa narrativa prevalente tem como possíveis causas a fragilidade de investimentos teóricos, políticos e sociais do segmento da agricultura familiar, muito vinculada à definição e aos critérios restritivos presentes nos normativos do crédito rural e na Lei n. 11.326/2006. Durante esta pesquisa, foi possível sustentar a ideia de

agricultura única, que vem sendo alimentada, em grande parte, pelo gradiente econômico que concentra o Valor Bruto da Produção (GVP), pelas campanhas publicitárias do agronegócio veiculadas pela mídia e pelo influente bloco de poder político no Congresso Nacional, representado pela Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (FPA) *vis-à-vis* à periférica bancada da agricultura familiar. Esses fatores, alinhados ao cenário político do período 2016-2022, e involuntariamente, pela perda de mobilização social e política das organizações sociais e do sindicalismo da agricultura familiar, contribuíram para a fragilização das políticas de apoio à agricultura familiar e para a opção de fortalecimento do agronegócio.

Palavras-Chave: Agricultura familiar. Desenvolvimento rural. Poder político. Política agrícola.

El avance del discurso de la agricultura única y la urgencia de resignificación de la agricultura familiar en Brasil

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el avance discursivo de la “agricultura única” en Brasil, representada, en términos generales, por el agronegocio y por el retroceso de la proyección socioproductiva de la “agricultura familiar”. Se entiende que esa narrativa predominante tiene, como posibles causas, la fragilidad de las inversiones teóricas, políticas y sociales en el segmento de la agricultura familiar, estrechamente ligadas a la definición y a los criterios restrictivos presentes en las normas de crédito rural y en la Ley n. 11.326/2006. A lo largo de esta investigación, se logró sostener la idea del concepto de agricultura única que ha sido fomentado en gran parte por el gradiente económico que concentra el Valor Bruto de la Producción (PVB), por las campañas publicitarias del agronegocio difundidas por los medios de comunicación y por el influyente bloque de poder político en el Congreso Nacional, representado por el Frente Parlamentario Agropecuario (FPA) *vis-à-vis* al grupo marginal de la agricultura familiar. Esos factores, alineados con el escenario político del periodo 2016-2022, e involuntariamente, por la pérdida de movilización social y política de las organizaciones sociales y del sindicalismo de la agricultura familiar, contribuyeron para el debilitamiento de las políticas de apoyo a la agricultura familiar y para la opción de fortalecimiento de la agroindustria.

Palabras-clave: Agricultura familiar. Desarrollo Rural. Poder político. Política agrícola.

1 Introduction

The rural world's evolution has been elucidated by various theoretical approaches in economics and sociology. Different social and political agents have utilized its empirical and analytical interpretations in the debate and creation of narratives surrounding the current and future state of the Brazilian countryside. In the case of agriculture, the central argument recalls the countless socio-technical influences introduced by uneven and discriminatory modernization. The game-changing factor in agricultural and agrarian history, which prompted shifts in societal and cultural norms and highlighted the significance of technological advancements for sustaining income, remains highly influential.

Hence, the expression of a competitive landscape and intense struggle, influenced by inherent traits of economic activity, has become an integral part of the way capitalist agriculture operates. Consequently, they emerged as the dominant features of farmers' sociability and social conduct (Navarro, 2019).

On the other hand, there are significant differences in structure, social dynamics, and productivity between farmers and their establishments. Their operations do not exclusively align with the overarching labels of family farming (FF) or agribusiness (non-family) that are commonly used. The Brazilian agricultural landscape saw the emergence of a heated discussion surrounding the conflicting methods of production in the early 1990s.

Ever since, it has been at the center of academic, political, and union debates. These are ideas about the world that strengthen the attitudes and desires of people and, in turn, of companies. They are imperative to comprehend and depict society's intricacies in the political battle for acknowledgment. However, The political aspirations of a particular social class, viewing itself as the protector and advocate of a specific set of principles, customs and behaviors, has a tendency to exclude or invalidate other forms of sociopolitical presence (Foucault, 2011).

Thus, this article delves into the latest discursive developments in agribusiness and how it has become a unifying force for "sole agriculture" in Brazil. The main objective of this discourse is to bridge the gap between FF and agribusiness in rural studies literature. The latter is evolving into a guiding principle for agricultural policy and a target of government assistance. It is important to mention that Brazilian agriculture is characterized by productive heterogeneity and inequality, including in FF. The details are extensively backed up in literature that focuses on this topic.

In the past three decades, attempts have been made to incorporate FF (previously known by different names) into rural credit accessibility. During this period, the State briefly shifted its approach and focus for political intervention. However, the growing discourse of "sole agriculture", added to the changing political situation, contradicts the socioeconomic makeup of Brazilian agriculture (Aquino et al., 2018; Nascimento et al. 2022). Those excluded from the field are left to debate the insufficiencies and mistakes of the short-termism of government programs.

Considering the Gross Value of Production (GVP) of Brazilian agricultural strata, the Parliamentary Agricultural Front (FPA), both numerical and political powers in Congress and the advertising campaigns broadcast in the media, the main point of this text is that the rise of the "sole agriculture" discourse is a reflection of the diminishing relevance and broader socio-economic impact of FF. The lack of theoretical and political investments, along with the failure to develop a suitable concept for the segment and overcome legal and credit limits, are among the potential causes.

The misinterpretation of rural life and increasing political manipulation of family farming groups and unions has led to complacency and a decline in social activism. The availability of this option even contributed to the decline of demands and the importance of FF in Brazilian society. According to Sabourin et al. (2020), there is a noticeable decline in the capacity to discuss, formulate, and put forward substantial innovations in agricultural policy.

This article employs a socioeconomic approach to context reading, drawing on the works of Navarro (2010; 2016; 2019) and Buainain (2014) as the primary theoretical foundations. They witness the rise of a novel pattern of agricultural and agrarian growth in the Brazilian landscape. The descriptive,

exploratory and analytical aspects were prepared based on a literature review on the subject, documentary analysis of political-union organizations and government representation, analysis of data from the Agricultural Census and resources made available by the general budget of the Union. This proposal aims to introduce innovation by conducting a sociopolitical examination of the rising narrative that has taken root in the public consciousness, in the political sphere, and in the government agenda. It plays a crucial role in guiding and financing agricultural policy.

This text is organized into an introduction, two sections, and final considerations. The initial dialogue discusses the areas of contention between the FF and agribusiness, examining the level of productivity and GVP disparity among various strata of rural establishments. In the second part, the focus is on fortifying agribusiness while also examining the potential impact of fragmentation and voluntary unionization.

2 Agribusiness and family farming: the ever-present debate

The familiar term “agribusiness” is a classical concept that was first introduced by Davis and Goldberg (1957) referring to the agricultural practices in North America. It refers to the interconnectedness of the input, production, industrialization, and food distribution sectors, both upstream and downstream. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the concept has become heavily ideological in various political and governmental sectors in Brazil. Despite numerous clarifications on the compatibility between the two, it was perceived as antagonistic and detrimental to the objectives of the FF (Delgado, 2013).

The term is not limited to large agricultural establishments, as the increasing interaction between economic agents in markets applies to both practical and theoretical aspects. Yet throughout history, the marginalized individuals living in rural areas of Brazil were often referred to by various regional labels within the rural culture (partners, tenants, small producers, small landowners, farmers, settlers, peasants, etc.). In recent times, these nominations have been classified within the all-encompassing concept of FF, the socio-productive category highlighted in the writings of Lamarche (1993), Veiga (2012 [1991]), Abramovay (2012 [1992]), and FAO/INCRA (1994). The concept was also incorporated in Brazil's agricultural legislation (Law no. 8,171/1991), intended to guide targeted policies for rural credit, technical assistance, adapted technologies and commercialization support. Nevertheless, it continues to strive for public acknowledgement.

The characteristics used to distinguish and define Brazilian agriculture, outlined in Box 1, have become a necessary tool for identifying specific traits (management, work, use of resources, decision making, origin of inputs, wage labor, diversification and productive specialization).

Box 1: Criteria for family and non-family farming

Non-family farming (agribusiness)	Family farming
Complete separation between management and work factors	Closely related management and work
Centralized organization	Production process directly organized by the farmer
Emphasis on specialization	Emphasis on diversification
Emphasis on standardizable agricultural practices	Emphasis on the durability of natural resources and quality of life
Predominance of wage labor	Wage labor is complementary
Technologies aimed at eliminating ‘on-the-ground’ and ‘in-the-moment’ decisions	Immediate decisions, appropriate to the high degree of unpredictability of the production process
Technologies mainly seek to reduce labor needs	Decisions made ‘on the spot’, conditioned by the specificities of the production process
Emphasis on the use of purchased inputs	Emphasis on the use of internal inputs

Source: FAO/INCRA (1994).

The terms FF and agribusiness do not capture the multifaceted and varied landscape of Brazilian agriculture. They focus the academic and political debate on the typological framework. Interestingly, the adoption of economic parameters (according to Navarro and Pedroso, 2011) is absent. Additionally, certain authors argue that the economic goals of the FF are antagonistic to the agribusiness framework (Sauer, 2008; Sousa; Cabral, 2009). However, these arguments hide the everyday reality of agriculture – in its current form, clearly capitalist – as the process of intensifying and commodifying the production system becomes increasingly apparent.

It can be expected that the primary goal of political-union activism and voluntarism was not to create a concept. The formulation of a normative instrument aimed to provide a basis for the discussion on the use of public funds for rural credit initiatives. The need to support “small producers” was hastened by competitive fragility, especially that of Brazilian southern states, negatively exposed in the economic integration negotiated under the Treaty of Asunción with the member countries of Mercosur in 1991 (Schneider, 1999) .

During that period, Brazil became exporter of manufactured goods and importer of specific agricultural items. This provoked social and trade union movements to stand up against it. In 1995, the National Confederation of Rural Workers (Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores Rurais - Contag) created a union alliance, which was showcased in the initial launch of “Grito da Terra Brasil” and backed by academic studies. The concept of “family farming” was redefined and evolved into a modern and socially productive category, uniting various sectors of small-scale farming (Navarro, 2010). The collaboration among different organizations formed a unique alliance of political influence led by the emerging FF sector. It also allowed the creation of the Program for the Valorization of Small Rural Production (Programa de Valorização da Pequena Produção Rural - Provap), carried out during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso Government.

Provap laid the foundation for the establishment of the Family Farming Strengthening Program (Programa de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar -

Pronaf) in 1996. Trade unionists made it a priority to include the main program in the scope of "agricultural policy" to facilitate the segment's growth. In this context, the traditional criteria for rural credit were being considered a prerequisite for FF, and were even included in official laws. The criteria required: a) that farmers should not hold an area of the establishment exceeding four fiscal modules (between 5 and 110 hectares); b) predominant use of family labor in activities; c) predominant family income from activities linked to the establishment; and d) organized by the family itself (Law no. 11,236/2006).

Consequently, it was disregarded that "[...] no matter how this particular group is examined, a defining attribute is its significant level of differentiation. The differences between them lie in their production methods, output, and location of production" (Sousa; Cabral, 2009, p. 27).

The task of differentiating between family and agribusiness establishments still remains vague, even with the guidance of the FAO/Incra report (2000) and other rural studies. This was a result of the Agricultural Census data not specifically designed for this purpose. Alongside discussions of political unity, the FF segment also highlighted other important issues such as the environment, hunger eradication, food security, democracy, and the rule of law. Their purpose was to serve as both tools for action and ideological justification, with the aim of gaining public support and justifying the allocation of public resources for rural credit.

According to Navarro and Pedroso (2011), there is no social theory that includes FF as a concept in its analytical perspective, nor does it address the economic aspect of agriculture as seen in Brazil. The authors suggest that some literature exhibits a clear bias towards portraying family establishments solely as units for agricultural production and social life. The legally required objective measures and societal, economic, and technological environments are commonly acknowledged to be converging and comparable. The criticism was used as a starting point to challenge government actions in multiple domains, and were perceived by the authors as mistaken.

According to Picolotto (2012), representatives of agribusiness political unions took an offensive approach towards agricultural and agrarian matters by challenging the validity of official data from the Agricultural Census. The Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil - CNA) aimed to "rectify distorted information" from FF (CNA/FGV, 2010). Pronaf's emergence at the union level enabled the CNA to claim a political presence in a neglected area, leading to the authorization to issue Declarations of Aptitude to Pronaf (Declarações de Aptidão ao Pronaf - DAP). The Agriculture Federation of Rio Grande do Sul (Federação da Agricultura do Rio Grande do Sul - FARSUL) justified this initiative by highlighting:

The Farsul System is based on family farming. We understand that, for Farmsul, the rural producer has no specific size. [...] and regardless of its size, to be a rural producer, one must be competent, have a vocation and courage (FARSUL, 2010, emphasis added).

The goal was to challenge, particularly with Contag, the competition of "new" political actor and their slogan of "rural producers have no specific size". This

underlying substrate and key point of contention led to the rise of single farming, despite variations in size and location, indicating the integration of Farsul's staff into a political coalition. Nevertheless, the message was specifically directed towards the entrepreneurial and capitalized minority segment of the FF.

The concept of a rural middle class was introduced in this narrative (Lopes et al. 2012; Alves; Rocha, 2010). The impact of the FPA's interests was felt even within Dilma Rousseff's administration, as evidenced by the inclusion of their goals in the program "The countryside in the middle class" ("O campo na classe média"). The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA) spearheaded the National Support Program for Medium Producers (Pronamp) (Brasil, 2015), designed to support medium-sized farmers in order to differentiate them from large ones, currently holders of gross income between R\$500 thousand and R\$3 million/year (BCB, 2024).

According to Severo (2023), the introduction of middle-class rhetoric by agribusiness aimed to validate their dominance and strengthen the power of family farmers through the composition and support of their union. Despite this, the discursive and political landscape of sole agriculture, operating under the belief that "rural producers have no specific size", serves a particular socio-political sector. They serve as carriers and disseminators of a specific ideological perspective on the world, deemed relevant and true (Foucault, 2011).

This narrative tends to exclude, neglect, silence – or even ban – other forms of political expression and existence. Since 2016, this discourse has been circulating in society and has continued to be echoed in the media through statements such as: agro is tech, agro is pop, agro is everything (o agro é tech, agro é pop, agro é tudo), stressed by the ideological groups within agribusiness, government bodies, agricultural investigation, and academic institutions.

The focus of this perspective is primarily on achieving economic and technological success, as well as promoting the export agenda of the sector. The main point is that agriculture is a competitive field and should be regarded as an economic pursuit, regardless of its scale. In this viewpoint the socio-productive nature is hidden, as it is evident through the exclusion, selectivity, and concentration of production that are inherent in capitalist agriculture. According to Buainain et al. (2014), this modality necessitates a constant flow of capital throughout all production stages for all farmers. This is observed in the FF and requires the continuous increase and dependence on financial resources provided by rural credit from the FF Harvest Plans (Planos Safra). This increases Pronaf resources, a consecutive target of demands from political-union actors (Toledo; Zonin, 2020).

According to Bruno (2016), the dominant discourses of agribusiness representatives fail to accurately capture the complexity of rural social structures. They assume the possibility of the permanence of two distinct groups of farmers: agribusiness (corporate agriculture on commercial farms) and family entrepreneurs (capitalized), a trend that, unequivocally, has been confirmed.

The Farsul union leader's vision includes the concept of carriers possessing competence, vocation, and courage. In terms of politics, the concept of sole agriculture has been revitalized and fortified, influenced by the return of neoliberal ideologies during the Temer (2016-2017) and Bolsonaro (2018-2022) presidencies. Both implemented a consistent deconstruction of the limited rural and

environmental policies (which were only approved on a yearly basis) designed to aid small-scale production (Bauer et al., 2013).

In the family segment, in a single stroke, Temer government abolished the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) placing the Secretariat of Family Agriculture (SAF) under the interests and structure of MAPA. During the Bolsonaro government, the weakening of public control and inspection bodies, cuts in resources for agrarian reform, reduction in the environmental legislation, and the extinction of spaces for control and social participation (Sabourin *et al.*, 2020) were recurrent, as forms of social delegitimization.

This dismantling is not just the responsibility of the aforementioned governments. The deep crisis and inaction of rural workers' social and union movements in this context cannot be ignored (Fachin, 2010). Many have embraced a guarded anti-intellectual attitude and intentionally ignored the intricate shifts in agriculture, farmers, and rural areas of Brazil. Martins, 2014, p. 180), when capturing these trends, warns that “[...] the Brazil we don't know has become bigger than the Brazil we know”. The failure of social and union groups to act demonstrated a lack of political leadership in mobilizing society and stopping the dismantling, along with the brief and sorrowful expressions of disapproval.

Recent years have seen the consequences of political parties taking over the leadership of social and trade union movements. The systematic assistance given to favored governments further alienated the grassroots population, solidifying the lack of criticism and pacifying protests. The agreements aimed to decrease the resistance towards reformist programs that could negatively impact workers, such as pension reform (Campos, 2019).

Despite the political errors that benefited the FPA power bloc and fraction, this selection continued to support them, including the implementation of public policies aimed at increasing exports. The impeachment of Dilma Rouseff in 2016 and the subsequent defeat in the 2018 elections resulted in a significant decrease in mobilization capacity for social movements and unions among both rural and urban workers, according to Sabourin *et al.* (2020).

Unrestricted defense of the government led to the suppression of responsible criticism, as democratic governments embraced the neo-corporatist ideology to secure unconditional support. It was a mistake to believe that electing a government connected to trade unions/movements and holding positions in the State would effortlessly lead to the realization of historical demands, without the necessity of political strife and organized pressure. Specifically, the changes in the economic structure. The short-term nature of emergency programs contributed to the FF's political compromise, which became more prominent from 2002 to 2015. The third term of the so-called "popular" governments appears to be reproducing these actions, as they contribute to the rise of the GVP of Brazilian agriculture, yet without any novel developments. Despite efforts, there are no substantive strategies to address the increasing disparity and concentration of productivity.

According to Table 1, the agribusiness sector accounted for 22.3% of establishments and a significant 77.0% of GVP. FF represented 77.56 and 22.91%, respectively. The strata of establishments “between 0 and 5 ha” and “from 5 to 50 ha” are significant (68.8% of family establishments, but only 17.3% of GVP). The

majority of these farmers reside in the semi-arid area and rely heavily on assistance from the State. However, with the current circumstances, it is doubtful that they will receive the necessary support, leading to a path of selective exclusion.

The productive and socioeconomic difficulties and vulnerabilities experienced by these farmers are deeply rooted in both the past and present. They don't even remotely fit into the "sole agriculture" discourse. Agribusiness representatives do not include these farmers in their plans, while at times, they align with the views of FF representatives, depending on their organization. Nevertheless, the attention typically shifts, though not explicitly stated, towards the best economically-placed. These are the ones who are actually represented.

Table 1 – Area strata, establishments, GVP non-family and family agriculture

Area strata	Total	Non-familiar (agribusiness)			Familiar		
		Stab.	%	% GVP	Stab.	%	% GVP
More than 0 to less than 5 ha	1.789.143	358.883	7,7	1,6	1.430.260	30,6	3,0
From 5 to less than 50 ha	2.088.374	299.978	6,4	4,8	1.788.396	38,2	14,3
From 50 to less than 200 ha	567.981	176.522	3,8	9,5	391.459	9,0	5,1
From 200 to less than 1,000 há	186.923	159.67	3,4	20,0	27.432	0,6	0,5
From 1,000 ha and more	46.517	46.338	1,0	41,0	-	-	-
Total	4.678.938	1.041.391	22,3	77,0	3.637.547	77,7	23,0

Source: SIDRA/IBGE (2017).

The presence of rural establishments within the "up to 200 ha" category is significant, accounting for 17.9% of all establishments and contributing with 15.9% of the total GVP. These establishments are primarily non-family owned, but still produce more than half of the entire GVP of the FF. The classificatory framework in use, by not considering economic aspects – when it extends to the other strata up to the limit of 440 ha in the maximum area size for FF – becomes clearly inadequate.

The idea of new groups, as described in Table 2, was formulated and labeled based on data from the 2017 Agricultural Census in a study conducted by the Public Policy Group of Esalq/USP (Grupo de Políticas Públicas da Esalq/USP - 2020). The GVP and segmentation by establishment area were their primary points of reference.

In the productive elite of Brazilian agriculture, 42.8 thousand rural establishments were inferred, 0.9% of the total, 33% of the occupied area and 48% of the GVP (greater than R\$ 500 thousand). These establishments specialize in temporary crops and primarily produce export commodities such as soy, corn, and cotton, most of them located in the Center-South, Center-West regions and in the recent territory of agricultural expansion, called MATOPIBA (Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia).

Table 2 – Groups of establishments, percentage of participation, total area and Gross Production Value (annual GVP)

Groups	Stab. (mil)	% Part.	% area	% GVP	Segmentation criteria
I - Large-scale farming					
Productive elite	42.817	0,9	33,0	48,0	GVP > R\$ 500 thousand
Extensive	53.672	1,2	24,0	2,0	R\$ 100 thousand GVP < R\$ 500 thousand; and properties with more than 500 ha
II - Farming – Other groups					
Entrepreneurs	348.093	7,5	6,0	33,0	R\$ 50 thousand GVP < R\$ 100 thousand
Resilient	993.345	21,4	25,0	13,0	R\$ 10 thousand GVP < R\$ 50 thousand; and properties between 100 and 500 ha
Vulnerable	3.201.011	69,0	12,0	4,0	GVP < R\$ 10 thousand; and Properties with < 100 há
Total	4.638.938	100	100	100	

Source: Sidra/IBGE (2017). Grupo de Políticas Públicas da Esalq/USP (2020).

The extensive establishments totaled 53.7 thousand, around 1.2% of the total, covering 24% of the area, and represented 2.0% of the GVP (R\$ 100 thousand and less than R\$ 500 thousand, whose properties have more than 500 ha). The majority of this group consists of traditional livestock farmers, with a small portion being rentier farmers. However, their productivity levels are low. Nonetheless, the implementation of certain methods for enhancing productivity and modernizing these businesses was noted. They are located in the Brazilian semi-arid regions, part of the North region, the periphery of the Southeast region, the Central-West region, and even a smaller portion found in the South region.

The group called entrepreneurs comprised almost 348.1 thousand rural establishments, 7.5% of the total. It summed up 6% of the occupied area and generated 33% of the GVP of agriculture (R\$50 thousand and less than R\$100 thousand). The majority of this concentration can be found in the Southern and Southeastern regions, as well as in certain regions with a history of occupation in Goiás state. A significant portion of this portion is incorporated within the supply chains of beef, pork, and poultry agro-industrial production complexes. Despite the significant GVP produced, the projects may still have low net profitability due to high production costs.

The combined data of the three strata – the productive elite, extensive farmers, and entrepreneurs – summed up 444,6 thousand rural establishments. They made up 9.6% of the total, covered 63% of the area, and produced 83.0% of the GVP (between R\$50 thousand and greater than R\$500 thousand). This is unequivocal evidence of the productive concentration expressed by GVP. This is one of the reasons often cited to support the concept of centralized agriculture, embodied by a set of rural businesses with a strong emphasis on trade and export.

The dominant agribusiness model in this scenario is reflected in both the accomplishments and pitfalls of Brazilian agriculture, while also shedding light on the privileged few farmers amidst the millions facing socioeconomic challenges.

However, this perspective ultimately renders establishments outside its scope insignificant (the 3.2 million establishments noted as vulnerable from a production point of view as they represent only 4% of the GVP).

Additionally, there were 993.3 thousand rural establishments that were resilient, making up 21.4% of the total. These establishments covered 25% of the area and contributed with 13% of the GVP (between R\$ 10 thousand and less than R\$ 50 thousand and properties with an area between 100 ha and 500 ha). Their primary activities revolve around dairy and fruit production, classified as both medium and small. Certain areas of these establishments can be found in the historic regions of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and southern Goiás. The provision of economic and technological incentives could effectively harness the productivity of these groups of farmers. By providing economic and technological incentives, it is believed that these groups of farmers can be effectively utilized to boost the GVP.

Out of the total, the most significant group comprises of vulnerable Brazilian farming establishments, which amounts to 3.2 million units. They make up 69% of the overall figure, while only occupying 12% of the total area, and accounted for just 4% of the GVP in 2017. These are small-scale rural businesses covering less than 100 hectares and generating an annual GVP of under R\$10,000. They manage to survive through precarious means of subsistence, deemed insignificant and dispensable in the dominant discourse surrounding sole agriculture. Moreover, based on the presented strata and the nominated GVP value, the items utilized in the Intermediate Consumption (CI) of the establishments must be deducted as well, that is, the value of all goods must be included in the agricultural production.

This element suggests that rural businesses have even lower net economic profits. Wanderley (2017) refers to a subset of farmers as the "peripheral fringe" of Pronaf, those deemed "unnecessary" for agricultural production. These do not fulfill the structural requirements necessary for economic sustainability in the competitive market environment and cannot be improved solely through isolated inclusion in rural credit.

The data reveal a concerning yet familiar pattern of increasing inequality in Brazilian agriculture, driven by socioeconomic, technological, and productivity factors. This evidence was suggested by Guanziroli et al. (2012) through their analysis of data from the 1996 and 2006 Agricultural Censuses. On the other hand, an emerging part of rural studies emphasizes the recent set of structural changes in agriculture, the "new period". Those were clearly identified, from the 1990s onward, as the significant changes in the Brazilian agricultural economy (Buainain et al., 2014; Navarro, 2020; Klein; Luna, 2020).

Navarro (2019) suggests that this is a new phase and not a simple and momentary chronological fact. The evolution of agrarian development does not signify a turning point or structural disruption, as the epicenter of this phase emphasizes the distinctive nature of capital accumulation's continuous progression. This serves as a reflection of the delayed effects of the conservative modernization of agriculture, with State investments focused on introducing socio-technical and agronomic transformations. It was revealed that their selectivity extended to the socioeconomic gap between farmers and different rural areas in Brazil.

As expected, the discussion of political-union representatives in Brazilian agriculture brings attention to two opposing forces: agribusiness and the FF.

According to Klein and Luna (2020), the primary focus is on excelling in the production and export of commodities, which plays a crucial role in maintaining a healthy trade balance. The second concept embodies a picturesque lifestyle and emerging rural communities, centered around the importance of producing nourishing, safe, and eco-friendly food for local consumption (Delgado et al., 2013). Political-union and academic leaders often use this assumed value as the foundation for their exaggerated arguments. According to the data from the "2006 Family Agriculture Notebook" (Caderno da Agricultura Familiar de 2006) (IBGE, 2009), approximately 70% of the food consumed in Brazil (Noronha; Falcón, 2018) was produced by the FF. We often hear about the advantages of family farming, but it's a misleading narrative.

Hoffmann (2014) discovered that the supposed origin of this information, the 2006 Agricultural Census, did not provide any official evidence for the obtained figure. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the value of the family demographic for the country, but dismisses the need for fabricated and fanciful justifications based on ideology.

3 The dimension and political role of agribusiness and family farming

The strength of the segments, agribusiness and FF, make up two of the 344 parliamentary fronts in the Chamber of Deputies: the Frente Parlamentar Mista da Agricultura Familiar e Desenvolvimento Rural Sustentável (Mixed Parliamentary Front for Family Agriculture and Sustainable Rural Development - FPAF) and the Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (Parliamentary Front for Agriculture - FPA), known as Bancada Ruralista (the Ruralist Bench). In 2023, 341 congressmen (300 deputies and 41 senators) joined it (Câmara dos Deputados, 2023). Established in the 1980s, it held significant influence in the discussions surrounding agricultural matters during the National Constituent Assembly of 1988. Bruno (2009) observed that the FPA is a reference of resulting political power:

[...] the consequences of the employer mobilization of large landowners and rural entrepreneurs during the New Republic government – Bancada Ruralista has been an important space for the construction of identity and representation of the interests of the dominant classes and groups in the countryside, both in the National Congress and to the Brazilian society (Bruno, 2009, p. 15).

Apart from its numerical significance, the FPA is a united and powerful bloc that holds sway over both political and economic landscapes. Poulantzas (1977) described it as a stable hierarchy and a leading fraction of power. Regardless of their political ideology, any government seeking parliamentary support can use this as a bargaining tool.

The objective of the FPA is clear: aggressive defense in removing obstacles to the development of agribusiness (rural credit and insurance, debt renegotiation, expansion of the agricultural frontier, relaxation of environmental legislation and incentives for exports). Additionally, it forges strategic partnerships with other influential groups (such as industrialists and bankers) to bolster its political influence and protect its interests. The effective utilization of public funds in

government policies aimed at expanding commodity exports during the rule of "popular" administrations serves as a testament to the global presence of Brazilian agribusiness companies (Boito Junior, 2018).

On the other hand, the Frente Parlamentar Mista da Agricultura Familiar (FPMAF) has 234 congressmen (205 deputies and 9 senators) (Chamber of Deputies, 2023). Despite its appearance, this arrangement is ultimately deceptive as it lacks the ability to truly alter the balance of power. The FF's demands do not receive complete support. A large number of parliament members are affiliated with other groups, such as the FPA, whose goals are antagonistic.

Hence, it is no surprise that 113 FPMAF members backed the 2022 Union Budget proposal and cut in several areas. Pronaf's contributions were among the areas affected by their budget cuts. The FF holds little and peripheral political sway in the National Congress, with not even ten representatives (Toledo, 2018). Only a small number of congressmen tackle minor requests, often resolving them through amendments made specifically for each situation. As a whole, they are unable to effectively advocate for political tactics that would bring about essential structural transformations (for being and doing) in the FF.

The idea of using the FF as a counter to the agribusiness model may seem promising, but it ultimately proves to be a false hope, especially in terms of gaining support from farmers. The use of "alternative" models by farmers, regardless of their family status, has the potential to make a small impact in the agricultural industry. There are multiple obstacles to this choice, such as the requests for credit to the State, technical support, provision of input, and market accessibility. The 2017 Agricultural Census showed that 64.7 thousand (1.28%) rural establishments practiced some form of organic farming, compared to 90.5 thousand (1.75%) found in the 2006 Census (IBGE, 2017). Organic establishments were those with the lowest gross income (between zero and two minimum wages), precisely those that have the greatest organizational difficulties, namely: membership in cooperatives, low level of education of the family group, and access to credit and commercialization (Sousa et al., 2021).

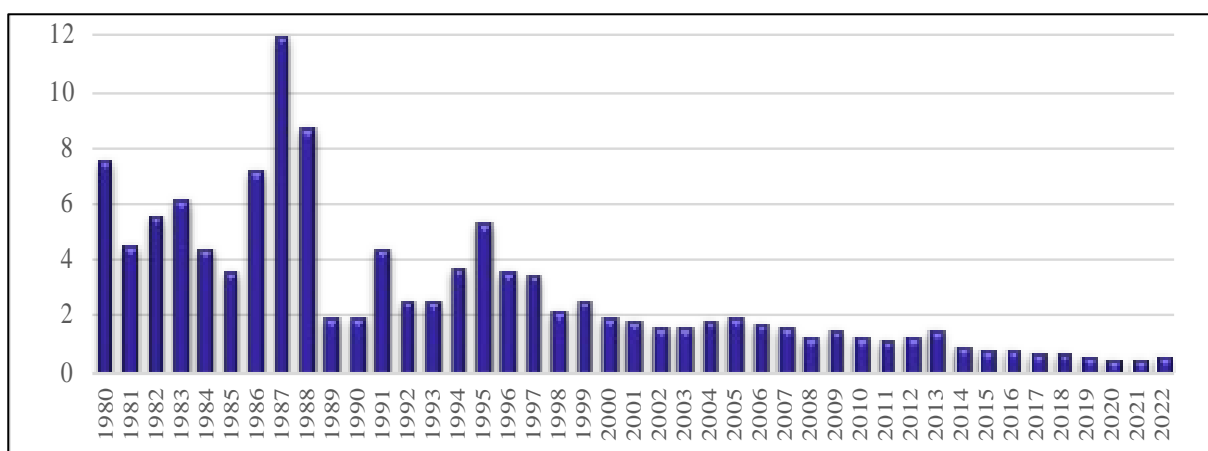
From a critical perspective, alternative farming was accompanied by a powerful ideological and political bias, brought together by various non-governmental organizations, particularly in the southern region of Brazil (Almeida, 2009). The proposal strongly opposes capitalism and aims to challenge the dominant discourse of hegemonic agriculture. It suggests an inevitable and questionable shift towards revitalizing farming practices in response to the escalating environmental crisis. According to Monerat (2021), the latest development is the emergence of eco-friendly capitalism. The production-related environmental conflict hinders this possibility. Crisis management aims to minimize harm and address emissions, without taking into account its underlying structural causes.

Therefore, any effort to introduce changes to the agricultural production model requires a new look from the State and farmers, the majority of which resist to it. The detrimental effects of production on the environment must be taken into account in this conversation, and the economic profits should be considered as well (Romeiro, 2014). Solving this equation proves to be difficult as FF now considers the environmental issue and production of safe food as valuable assets.

Despite this, the prevailing production method, with some variations, continues to be agribusiness, and given the present state of affairs, only certain producers have the capacity to endure the risks involved in such endeavors. The challenges facing agriculture, such as pests, climate conditions, soil quality, and imperfect markets, illustrate the limitations of applying the economic theory *ipsis litteris* to this industry. Structural intervention by the State is necessary to mitigate the risks. Despite this, Brazil's public spending on agriculture and agrarian policy has reached its lowest point in the past forty years.

It is an indisputable fact the State has favored a dominant model that decreases public investment in rural sectors (agriculture and agrarian), and directly affects the agrarian reform, which has a direct impact on the viability of family farming. The market plays a key role in regulating the agricultural sector. The State chose to implement targeted and individualized regulatory measures, supported by the FPA and the majority of legislators, and the silence/omission of FF trade unions/movements regarding budget reallocation. According to Gasques' (2021) tabulation (Figure 2), there is a noticeable decrease in public funding within the budget. The 1980/90 decade obtained, on average, 7.5% of resources; from 1990/2000 it was 1.9%; from 2000/10, 1.9%; in 2010/20, 1.2% and in 2020/22 the average expenditure foreseen in the budget reached only 0.4%.

Figure 2 – Percentage of the Federal Government Budget (OGU) with rural functions agriculture and agrarian) from 1980 to 2022



Source: Prepared by the authors based on Gasques (2021) and Brasil (2024).

The transformation of agriculture through capitalism is evident in the historical, social, and economic evidence seen. A period marked by an overwhelming number of influences that go beyond the boundaries of both human society and the natural environment, and equally, a time when the State, through its adoption of the *laissez-faire* approach, gave up on trying to manage these influences.

The unending pursuit of private capital accumulation, fostered by the free competition of the capitalist society, is a vital ingredient that sustains the present social order and way of life (Streeck, 2014). The trend of capital accumulation is reinforcing exclusion and inequality, particularly through the competitive nature of credit. According to Navarro (2020), agriculture is currently being produced and:

[...] influenced by the economic principle of unrestricted liberalism, [...] in the law of the strongest [...], the most active, innovative and dynamic productive sector [...] has been cementing, in parallel, a rural society with few winners, alongside an army of losers” (Navarro, 2020, p. 25-26).

The competitive approach requires generating economic excesses at all costs, regardless of the farmer's profile or the establishment's scale. The key to survival lies in mastering technical, credit, managerial, and marketing resources, and becoming the leading representation of successful agriculture. This is often highlighted in various advertising campaigns, as well as acknowledged by academia, governments, parliaments, and the media. This setup presents a paradox that requires further clarification. It encompasses a significant portion of the dialogue surrounding sole agriculture, a discourse that is aggressive and unrealistic. Unfortunately, this connotation is dominant in the agricultural sector and in society: agribusiness is good for Brazil, which can be translated as a more evident discursive connotation.

Despite facing criticism, it cannot be denied that agribusiness representatives have been highly effective in communicating with society. Despite the widespread use of slogans and catchphrases like "agro is tech, agro is pop, agro is everything" in media campaigns, there has been a lack of consistent political and economic opposition. While acknowledging its structural limitations, it is possible for FF representatives to make use of the space.

Nevertheless, it is important to educate society and consumers, particularly those in urban areas, about the presence of other social actors and the use of alternative arguments to comprehend the events in rural world. Global corporations are currently dominating the food debate, concealing important details about the origins and production methods of their products. In the meantime, FF representatives face difficulties in justifying the political structures and handling the withdrawal by resorting to obvious complaints, which ultimately only serve to demonize their slogans.

Moreover, there is a mistaken belief that the "sector is flourishing" (falsely portraying equal opportunities for all). This generalization oversimplifies reality and fails to acknowledge the positive progress made in agro-industrial production (milk, pigs, poultry, meat for export and domestic consumption), crops of soybeans, corn, and wheat with the potential to sustain and promote social, environmental, and economic growth within the FF. It is worth asking: who is the field going well for? Where would be the place for FF in this context? (Zonin; Martins, 2016).

The rural world is a contradictory place. Interpreting the extended progression of creating and accumulating wealth, and pinpointing those who reap its rewards, poses a persistent difficulty. This is because it depends on the choices of those in power, the interests at stake, as well as how actors organize themselves in the political arena to defend their interests. Agribusiness tends to consolidate among the most well-positioned businesses in Brazil. Despite significant disparities in wealth and profitability among farmers, this diverse group has emerged as a powerful political and economic force (Boito Junior, 2018).

Despite conflicting ideologies, the existence of a hegemonic bloc necessitates ongoing political negotiations. Even in left-wing governments, they were successful. The choice further solidified the legitimacy of the export strategy by

increasing specialization in commodities, and promoted the overall growth of Brazilian agribusiness firms. However, no social compensation was required, causing losses to the most vulnerable sectors through abusive contracts and systematic exclusion of those unable to adhere to production and health standards (Schlesinger, 2017).

Furthermore, the policy of national champions impacted the expansion of deindustrialization of sophisticated sectors and enhanced Brazil's main vocation, agribusiness. It supported promoting the sole agriculture discourse. The Safra Plan provided compensatory resources to underprivileged individuals in rural areas, including less capitalized FF, agrarian reform settlers, and traditional populations, as a means of fortifying the "small agribusiness" model and implementing income transfer initiatives. In addition, financial aid was provided to back initiatives led by social organizations in line with the government's policies.

Thus, the unconditional support of rural workers was obtained, specifically that advocated by Contag and MST (Boito Junior, 2018). In the case of the Landless Movement (Movimento sem Terra - MST), it is paradoxical, as agrarian reform actions, during the period, were reduced or put on hold in order to avoid conflicts that could displease and generate conflicts with the influential FPA bench.

In reality, the implementation of compensatory measures for marginalized populations in rural areas and other sectors of society has been lacking in designated public funding, even during times of political opportunity. The resolution of conflicts involved negotiations with leaders relying on the political compromise of marginalized groups and their representatives. The surplus of resources resulting from the boom in exporting agricultural and mineral commodities played a crucial role in decreasing economic inequality. According to Martins (2016), the rise of ten reais in per capita income resulted in the shift of the impoverished to the middle income class. Neri (2017) highlights the role of accessible credit in facilitating entry into the world of consumption, as well as supporting income transfer and financing programs.

Sampaio (2019) makes a valid criticism of "popular" governments in this context, pointing out that existing programs only brought about occasional "improvements". Although the electoral, economic, and social outcomes were initially beneficial, they ultimately led to the co-optation and disengagement of marginalized communities, as noted by Perlatto (2015). Nevertheless, this alternative failed to significantly impact political practices or the nation's strategies for industrial, agricultural, and agrarian development.

Final considerations

The information presented in this article supports the idea that structural and socio-economic inequalities between family farming and "agribusiness" are becoming more pronounced and enduring. The discourse surrounding agribusiness unions and the FPA's strong presence in Congress has long been a divisive topic, with conflicting perspectives arising. The dominant economic aspect of agribusiness is highlighted through the use of arguments and further reinforced by advertising campaigns in the mainstream media. The cyclical debate has been won by successive governments, who have consistently favored large producers and owners with

substantial political influence. Simultaneously, there are arguments in favor of the rise and progress of the sole agricultural narrative.

The success of the sole agriculture narrative is not just a result of government ideology, but also the decline of family farming. This can be credited to the peripheral parliamentary representation in congress and the inertia and inaction of movements and unionism representing family farming, compared to capturing and recognizing the dynamic process of socioeconomic transformations in Brazilian agriculture, farmers and rural regions.

As a result of political loyalty to the government, family farmers' associations were weakened and socially disengaged. The public policies for agriculture that have been put in place since the Temer government were dismantled despite their efforts. The neglect of initiatives to develop a new political, economic, and research strategy for this sector, which has been linked to short-term rural credit plans for decades, is evident. Furthermore, the need to institutionalize and consolidate long-term policies was not perceived, not even when there were political conditions for doing so. This has the potential to lay the foundation for a new approach to the political and socio-economic aspects of family farming.

Even with the challenge of redefining family farming, there are countless justifications for investing in rural studies and addressing the anti-intellectualism prevalent in rural organizations. It is essential to accurately depict the world of agriculture, including farmers and their local communities, aligned with the course of progress.

Additionally, it is necessary to strive to allocate sufficient public funding for the implementation of (more or less) structural initiatives. In essence, the aim is to address a crucial aspect of Brazil's past and present, presenting a call to action for agricultural institutions and academic fields, particularly those related to social and agricultural studies.

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