

Government and Popular Participation in the Brazilian Eastern Amazon Regionⁱ

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Abstract— This article intends to reflect on the popular participation in the collective struggles for land access in the Brazilian Western Amazon region, specifically the South and Southwest regions of the state of Pará, Brazil. This research also aims to contribute on the analysis of the different roles the Brazilian Government takes in these struggles, both as controlling entity towards the social movements (using physical violence as well as symbolic violence), and as part of the struggle when it takes over the distribution of expropriated land for landless settlers. Our analysis is based on specific literature, documents and interviews of leaderships from different social movements, as well as agents representing the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) of the region. The term “popular participation” is used here through a critical purview that understands that collective actions are more than the restricted and traditional meaning of popular participation within institutionalized spaces designed to allow different levels of public oversight towards state policies and policy making. We propose an understanding of popular participation that encompasses collective actions not necessarily accepted by the Brazilian Government, but that generate results towards the territorialization of peasants, the increase of transitory and final rural settlements, rural workers resistance and the improvement of the ability of settlers to remain in land autonomously and with dignity.

Keywords— Popular Participation; Land Struggles; Government; Brazilian Western Amazon Region.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This article intends to reflect on the popular participation in the collective endeavor for land access in the Brazilian Western Amazon region, specifically the South and Southwest regions of the state of Pará, Brazil. This research also aims to contribute to the analysis of the different roles the Brazilian Government has partaken in these struggles, both as controlling entity towards the social movements (using physical as well as symbolic violence), and as a part of the changing forces when it takes over the distribution for landless settlers of expropriated rural property.

The term “popular participation” will be used here through a critical purview that expands the concept to all collective actions seeking to change public interests, as well as social structures, and, therefore, proposes social transformation. (MARX; ENGELS, 1998; SANTOS, 2002; BORDENAVE, 1983). The critical usage of said term contemplates a less restricted and traditional perception about the meaning of popular participation, not only as the

collective actions within institutionalized spaces designed to allow different levels of public oversight towards state policies and policy making. We propose an understanding of popular participation that encompassed collective actions - not necessarily accepted by the Brazilian government - that generates different types of results toward the settlement of rural workers/peasants, the increase of the numbers of transitory and final rural settlements, the ability of rural workers to resist and, also, the improvement of the effectiveness of settlers able to remain in their land in a productive, autonomous and dignified way.

The time frame for this analysis comprises the experiences of fighting for land in Brazil between the re-democratization period - after the end of the Military Dictatorship (1964-1985) - until fairly recent years. Our goal is to demonstrate the lasting effects of the fighting for land long-established in this specific part of the Brazilian Amazon Region. It is worth mentioning, that rural workers have come a long way in securing their legal rights towards land access, as they endured extreme violence from the

Brazilian government, as well as from powerful landowners and large agribusiness companies. Surprisingly, they have been able to maintain their traditional and autonomous ways of life.

A picture of extreme violence, physical and symbolic, has marked the lives and territories of peasants who aim to conquer and remain in the land, in the forest and in the rivers, is currently evident in the eastern Amazon (HÉBETTE; MAGALHÃES; MANESCHY, 2002). According to the data provided the Brazilian Catholic Church Agency to mediate land distribution disputes - *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (CPT) – the number of violence acts committed against rural workers and/or environmentalists in 2017 has increased since 2016, being so far, the most violent year since 1996, when 19 landless workers were slaughtered by police authorities in the city of Eldorado dos Carajás, in the state of Pará (PA). Out of the 71 murders in rural areas in 2017, 80% (56 deaths) happened in Brazilian states within the Amazon region. The state of Pará holds the first place in this ranking of violence, with 30.98% (22 deaths) of the total number of killings in the country (CPT, 2017). As a matter of fact, the increase of this type violence appears as tendency. The CPT's most recent report shows that 29 rural workers were killed in land disputes in Brazil in 2019. 86% of those (25 killings) happened in the Amazon region. 41% of the killings happened in the State of Pará (12 deaths), 5 killings happened in the State of Amazonas, 3 killings in the State of Mato Grosso and the same number of deaths happened in the State of Maranhão (CPT, 2020).

The data supporting this article has been taken from the specific literature concerning land disputes in the region, different press and CPT documents, as well as the official numbers from the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (*Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária*, INCRA).

It is also important to point out that this research would not be possible without the valuable contribution in the form of oral accounts from *posseiros* (rural workers occupying and cultivating land, without any property titles and as a form of collective action and resistance), members of multiple unions and CPT's agents.

These oral accounts enable a better understanding of the political interests and agendas of the individuals that were actually involved in the fighting for land. These accounts are also revealing of the “indescribable”, that we understand as all those things that rarely appear on written documents: “oral accounts tell us not only what the people did, but what they wanted to do; what they believed they were doing and what they believe they accomplished”

(PORTELLI, 1997, p.31). This article, thus, aspires to understand the popular participation in the Brazilian Western Amazon Region recent history of the fighting for land, as it takes into account the rural workers personal experiences and struggles, but also their deep solidarity towards each other, their collective labor traditions and their mutual exchanges habits.

This article is divided into four parts: The Introduction, where some of objects of this study are presented, as well as the description of the methodology of the research (and the chosen theoretical basis). The second part is dedicated to presenting the Brazilian Western Amazon region, specifically the South and Southwest regions of the state of Pará. We will focus on the volatile consequences of the increasing of land concentration and public policies towards the creation of 513 settlement projects (INCRA, 2019). The third part will reflect on popular participation in the fighting for land access, forms of social resistance and the violence endured by rural workers in this region. In the conclusion, the importance of popular participation in the improvement of historically disenfranchised populations seeking recognition of their basic rights, autonomy and dignity is going to be stressed.

II. THE AMAZON: AN EVER CHANGING AND DISPUTED TERRITORY.

In 1970s, federal plans were created towards the integration and development of the Northeast and the Amazon regions in Brazil. Those projects were the National Integration Program (*Programa de Integração Nacional*, PIN) and the National Plan for Development (*Plano Nacional de Desenvolvimento*, PND) (HEBETTE, 1991; GUIMARÃES NETO, 2011). The political agenda behind both plans were to guarantee the presence of the Brazilian government throughout its territory in a more modern, authoritarian, rational and universal manner. The Amazon region was, then, divided into two parts – Western and Eastern Regions – and new federal and state highways were built to better connect them. Various agribusiness activities also began to grow in many native forest and natural fields. Around this time, there was a surge on mining activities and they began the construction of large hydroelectric power plants. These factors had a profound environmental impact as they changed the direction of the flow of many rivers (as well as affected the quality of their waters).

In the South and Southwest regions of the state of Pará, the construction of the Transamazon Highway (*Rodovia Transamazônica*, BR-230), combined with the PA-70 (nowadays BR-222), BR-158 and PA-

150(nowadays BR-155) highways, among others, provoked a rapid rise of the flow of people and other economic activities all throughout the area. Municipalities like Marabá and Conceição do Araguaia stopped being perceived as cities “in the river shore” (“*beira de rio*”), to become cities surrounded by large highways (“*de beira de estrada*”)(PEREIRA, 2015, p. 72). The Brazilian federal government policies towards the economic development of the country brought attention to regions that were previously considered “empty”, as it was the case of the Amazon region. Various types of business ventures, as well as impoverished workers, started arriving in the area seeking profits, work opportunities and land (MARTINS, 1993; GUIMARÃES NETO, 2005). Thousands of acres of forest began to be taken down by both small and large undertakings in order to become pasture. Particularly important to the conversion of forest areas into cattle land were the abundant government aids regulated by the Superintendence for Development of the Amazon (*Superintendência de Desenvolvimento da Amazônia*, SUDAM), founded 1966. Logging and fishing companies were too attracted to the region, frequently involved in the displacement of various recent migrant and local populations.

The forest areas became a commodity to be potentially explored for profits encouraged by a banking system specifically designed to benefit large landowners and big companies. The building of various bank branches throughout the region can be perceived as a palpable reality of the new financial rationale rooted in the destruction of nature (VELHO, 2009).

Alongside the newly built highways, the military regime intended to develop colonization plans for the expanding of crops and the raising of cattle. This was the model designed to the colonization of the surroundings of the Transamazon Highway (*Rodovia Transamazônica*). They meant to settle 100.000 families - in tracts of land of 100 hectares per family - in said highway from the city of Marabá, through Altamira, to Itaituba. These schemes were named Integrated Colonization Programs (Programas Integrados de Colonização, PIC) and were devised to be carried out until 1974. The bureaucrats behind the PICs, however, apparently knew very little about the Amazon geography. As they drafted rectangular properties equally distant from planned “agro-villages, *agrópolis* and *rurópolis*, to be built alongside the newly erected highways, they did not take into account the characteristics of the terrain, water supply or climate conditions” (PEREIRA, 2015, p. 105). As these plans reach the phase of actual construction, INCRA personnel realized that many of the local roads in the designs were to take place in

hills, swamps and rivers. But these characteristics mattered very little. The colonizing spirit did not consider man in his human condition and still denied nature, considering important only the technical, scientifically calculated and effective aspects of planning.

Thus, intense conflicts started to spread across the Amazon involving, on the one hand, excluded social segments struggling for land and, on the other, agents responsible for the implementation of a model of predatory capitalist development that, by denying the knowledge of social groups (indigenous people, quilombolas communities, fishermen, shellfish gatherers, extraction workers), is deeply violent. It was also in this moment that we can observe an acute increase of large private groups investing in the purchasing of forest in order to transform them into pasture (facilitated by tax policies). According to Costa (2000a), 21 large companies, such as Bradesco S/A, Volkswagen do Brasil S/A¹ e Mendes Jr Construction Company, among others, secured about 47.2% of all the investments in a sample of 106 projects officially approved by the SUDAM, until December of 1985. Each project received an average of 4.9 millions of dollars. The segment to obtain the second largest amount of financing were constituted by family owned business from the Center and South regions of Brazil, such as the Lanari do Val, Rodrigues da Cunha and Lunardelli², among others. Out of 28 projects analyzed by Costa (2000a), these families secured about 22.4% of the financing, adding up to US\$50.5 million.

Brazilian governmental policies, therefore, effectively warranted a process of rapid concentration of rural properties, as well as preserving and augmenting an agrarian structure based on political and financial privileges. The colonization leg of this plan meant to secure progress and national integration.

The described rapid – and violent - concentration of rural property process is, up to this day, a determinant factor in quotidian lives of rural workers, as this union

¹Bradesco S/A Group owned Fazenda Tainá-Rekan e, with 64.000 hectares, in Conceição do Araguaia; Volkswagen do Brasil S/A owned Fazenda Vale do Rio Cristalino with 139.000 hectares, in Santana do Araguaia.

²The Lunardelli Family owned, for example, the Cia. de Terras da Mata Geral (Fazenda Santa Tereza), with 201.528 hectares, in the city of Redenção; they also owned the estate of the Development for the South of Pará Company (Companhia de Desenvolvimento do Sul do Pará S/A, CODESPAR), with 52.358,4 hectares, in the city of Santana do Araguaia and owned Agricultural Administration Company (Administração Agrícola Ltda, NICOBRAN), with 143.847 hectares, in the city of Santana do Araguaia. For more detailed information see: Silva (2009); Moreno (2012); Codespar (1975, p. 9).

leader offer us his description of his migration experience from the State of Maranhão to the State of Goiás and, then, to the State of:

[...] We arrived in Brejo do Meio where we encountered one of uncle John's son. Uncle John, then, said – look, sons, there is no police after Bastião's land. You will need to borrow shotguns because it is too dangerous. First because you will be deep in the forest. Secondly because there will be private militia (jagunços) watching over miles of farmland. You will have to go through the farmland and when they understand who you are, they will think you will be looking forward to occupying their land [...]. (SINDICALISTA, 2019).³

During the 1970s, many rural properties belonging to these large economical groups began to be occupied by disenfranchised rural workers willing to resist collectively. Since the Military regime was still operating in Brazil, there was little room for social protests or institutions to appeal to. In this context, the solidarity and collective strength among these rural workers were the only real assurances that their struggle would stand a chance in achieving their goals. These different coping mechanisms based on solidarity were formed initially as ways to better deal with practical adversities that came with the unknown territory to which they migrated. They had to deal with a virtually impenetrable forest, as well as wide and deep rivers, in order to tame the territory into farmland capable of harboring these migrants' futures. An example of these types of aspirations is in this fragment by a future union leader in the State of Pará: “[...] I said, boy, for me it is good, I won't go... for you I am not sure it is good, but for me it is good. I am going to move there, build a life for myself and raise my children once they are born” (SINDICALISTA, 2019)⁴.

Learning the meaning of fulfilling this mission, achieving the dream of setting roots in a land of their own, is an important step to understanding the role of resistance in the history of the rural working class in the Amazon region. These aspirations animates projects, inspires

³ Translated by the author. Original text: [...] Chegamos no Brejo do Meio. Tinha um filho do tio João. O tio João disse - olha meus filhos, quando vocês for pra lá, passa no Bastião, que de lá pra frente não tem mais polícia. Vocês pega uma espingarda emprestada pra levar porque é muito perigoso. Primeiro que é só mata. Segundo que tem muito jagunço vigiando terras, glebas e glebas de terra. Vocês vão passar no meio dessas glebas. A hora que o povo ver vocês com os machim nas costas vão pensar que vocês vão ocupar as terras deles [...]. (SINDICALISTA, 2019).

⁴ Translated by the author. Original text: “[...] Eu disse: rapaz, pra mim é bom, não vou... pra vocês não sei não, mas pra mim é bom. Eu vou morar e fazer minha vida lá, vou criar meus filhos lá quando nascer” (SINDICALISTA, 2019).

desires to build a territory – and territorialities (*territorialidades*) – based closeness and purposeful connections communally bonded by the committed labor of the land, as well as the responsible use of the forest resources. The products of one's labor, in the perspective of these rural workers, are only as valuable as they can be shared with the community:

Firstly, on the day the farm burned down, soon six comrades arrived to help. When harvest season came, there were so many people helping that a person could only manage to pick two baskets (*cofos*⁵) to make seeds. There were a lot of folks! By then, there were more than 70 families just to help that harvest season. We all contributed and harvest all that had been planted, everybody did their part cultivating the land, infiltrating the forest as we could not find any owner to those lands up to the water and the rivers [...](SINDICALISTA, 2019).⁶

According to many rural workers, their way of resisting and upholding these communal standards led to an open opposition to relocating to cities, as well as engendered the collective wish not only to protect their values, but also to propose an alternative to the development and progress models that did not take into account their contribution to the social-economic advancement of the region (MOREIRA, 2004; ALMEIDA 2009; ALMEIDA, 1993). The Amazon rural working class, as a result, had to resist and fight for their survival once the economic model being implemented in the region left them little or no room to earn a minimally dignified living, especially as the Brazilian government was consonant with the illegal concession of public land to *grileiros*⁷ and powerful landowners. (HÉBETTE, 2004).

From the rural working class of the Amazon region countless associative schemes emerged to represent their interests, to strengthen their collective political response as they aimed to remain in their rural settings true

⁵A kind of oval basket, with a narrow opening, used to carry or store cereals, fruits, root vegetables, fish, etc.

⁶Translated by the author. Original text: “Aí primeiro, no dia que a roça queimou, chegou logo seis companheiros pra ajudar. Aí plantamos a roça. Quando foi pra colher era gente que só dava pra cada um tirar dois cofo pra fazer semente. Era gente demais menino! Nesse tempo, já tinha 70 famílias só pra colher essa roça. Todo mundo ia lá e tirava um pedacinho porque o pico era nesse sentido aqui: eu tirava um, tirava um taião, aí chegava outro e tirava outro e ia sumindo na mata, aí sem achar dono, sem achar nada, só água e rio [...]” (SINDICALISTA, 2019).

⁷In Brazil, land grabbing (*grilagem*) is the forgery of documents to illegally take possession of unoccupied land or land belonging to third parties, as well as undivided buildings or buildings. The term also designates the sale of land owned by the government or privately owned by falsifying land ownership documents. The agent of such an activity is called a land grabber (*grileiro*).

to their ways of life and their own collective bonds. These specific cultural traits were crucial to the establishment of their associations (MANESCHY; MAIA; CONCEIÇÃO, 2008; DOIMO; DOXSEY; BELING NETO, 1986). Their collective action, in many ways, redefined the meaning of participation, democracy, citizenship, participatory development, among other things. They also associated themselves with entities such as the CPT, as the CPT aimed to provide support to rural workers fighting for land without any protection from the Brazilian government.

In the course of events, we are able to observe and to contribute in different ways in order for the social movements to shape their own protagonism in the fight for their rights and citizenship (AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2019).⁸

There is no doubt that these rural workers groups provoked deep changes in the socio-political dynamics of the rural reality in Brazil. Through popular participation, they contributed to the formulation of a new political culture, one that demands from the Brazilian government the recognition of their propositions. The political context in Brazil hints to a unique possibility of social mobilization and the exercising of rights as results of the re-establishment of democracy in Latin America (ALVAREZ, DAGNINO, ESCOBAR, 2000; HÉBETTE, 2004, MARTINS, 1995).

In the Southwest of the State of Pará, a large number of diverse zones for the organized fighting for rights are originated in this context. With the end of the Military Regime, unions resume their actions and secure a leading role in the fight of both rural and urban workers. In the cities of São João do Araguaia, Itupiranga and Marabá, for example, the workers raised to leadership of the rural workers unions, weakening the long influence of powerful landowners. They, then, joined forces with other local unions, as well as the Federal University of the State of Pará (*Universidade Federal do Pará, UFPA*), to create the Agri-Environmental Center of the Tocantins (*Centro Agro-Ambiental do Tocantins*) in order to broaden the scope of economic alternatives to oppose the model that the Brazilian government had promoted for the rural reality of the Amazon region for years (HEBETTE, 2004). Popular participation followed the flourishing of these social partnerships, as the Brazilian government tended still to defend the Capitalist class (The Bourgeoisie).

The end of the Military Regime proved to be fruitful to the implementation of social and political changes, such as the creation of city councils in which rural workers unions were initially part of. In the Southwest of Pará, however, the city councils were generally averse to the land dispute matters and were promptly co-opted by local elite groups, linked to a long history of practices of social control through violence.

The re-establishment of democracy on one hand allowed the growth of different forms of social organization, defined by Almeida (1993) as mobilization units (*unidades de mobilizações*) constituted by rural workers. These organizations not only became very prominent, but also began forging their own discourses, their *raison d'être* for the problems they faced. They also aligned themselves with other social groups and associations, as they collectively negotiated their interests. They began a long journey to master different legal terminologies in order to navigate new bureaucratic realities, as they shaped new strategies to further their fight for the right to remain in the lands they had been cultivating, as Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (2000) describe in their works.

In the case of the Amazon region, the rural working class fight for their rights, through popular participation, originated the understanding of the land as the locus of the reproduction of life. In this context, 513 projects for Agrarian Reform were conceived, leading to 72.077 families settled in more than 4 million of hectares of land in the South and Southwest regions of Pará (INCRA, 2019). On the other hand, an alarming increase of violent land conflicts emanated from these new circumstances. Evictions, slaughters and the killing of rural workers became more frequent and acute in the region. Many city councils, committees and organizations, as they participated in various forums and regional conferences, did not acknowledge that the land disputes resulted from structural problems in the formation of Brazilian society. There was very little interest from the Brazilian government to instigate structural changes that would risk its long political alignment with large landowners.

Since 2017, the Southwest region of Pará has become again the home to mass evictions, repossession and the dislodgement of multiple families occupying federal lands against the interests of large landowners. That was the case of the temporary settlements of Hugo Chaves, Helenira Resende, and the case of the Landi estate. Concerning the Landi estate, this was the eighth evictions. All this processes were interloped by countless acts of physical and symbolic violence, as they disrupted groups

⁸Translated by the author. Original text: Nos processos aí, a gente vai constatando e observando e também participando de formas diversas dos movimentos irem desenvolvendo seu protagonismo para poder então buscar a conquista dos seus direitos, da cidadania (AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2019).

of families and fragmented solidarity bonds. There was also the destruction of crops, housing and schools. With little options of places to go, some of the dislodged families sought harbor in nearby temporary and permanent settlements. As for the large landowners, the lifeless land perceived just as commodity serves to expand the value of their financial assets (MOREIRA et al, 2017).

These repossession lawsuits, however, cannot be fully comprehended without the careful consideration of the prominent role of certain capitalist forces shaping Brazilian economy currently:

Nowadays, indigenous and *quilombola* communities lands, the Agrarian Reform settlement programs and environmentally protected areas are not only under the constant and direct attack coming from various large landowners groups, but these traditional communities have also lost ground in the state and federal legislatures, as well as, the support of the executive branches. On one hand the attacks result in deaths and physical violence against different types of rural communities. On the other hand, in a political level, the attacks restrict the rights and the ability of negotiation of these same communities. (DATALUTA, 2017, p. 2).⁹

It is crucial to remind ourselves that in this region - the Southwest of Pará – in 1996, the State of Pará partook in the slaughter of 19 landless workers in the S curve (*curva do S*), in the city of Eldorado dos Carajás. The military police of Pará, in 2016, compelled by powerful landowner, again slaughtered 10 landless workers in the city of Pau D'arco. These crimes shed light to a reality of social resistance in order for communities to be able to remain in the land they had been cultivating, as well as present a counter-hegemonic economic alternative through popular participation.

III. POPULAR PARTICIPATION AS A WAY OF RESISTANCE IN THE FIGHTING FOR LAND ACCESS

The development model envisioned by different Brazilian governments for the Amazon region has been based on the establishment of vast properties substantiated

by massive transfer of public funds to large landowners and private companies – both from Brazil and from abroad – based in the Center-South region of the country. Most of these ventures have allocated their investments in the raising of cattle (COSTA, 2000b). In the mid-1980s, 9 million hectares in the South and Southwest regions of Pará had been converted into pasture (KOHLHEPP, 2002), as we attempted to demonstrate previously in this research.

Many of these properties began to be occupied by migrants, coming from different regions of the country, attracted by the propaganda that sold the Amazon region as a land of opportunity and easy profits. This scenario is described by a union member that migrated from the State of Goiás in 1984:

Then, one day, my uncle, named João Borges, said: Pipira, son, you are all young, I have a ranch in Pará, very far away, we intend to go on foot, it is about 240 kilometers [...] It is a place only for ballsy men, it is not for the faint of heart. Since you are all very courageous, my sons, and work in other people's land to survive, you should go work a land where you get to keep all its fruits. These lands belong to the federal government, only the federal government and the state own land there. You can arrive and just decide how much land you are able to work (SINDICALISTA, 2019)¹⁰.

In the very South of the State of Pará, in a territory formed by eleven municipalities, data from the CPT show us that, between 1975 and 1990, about 258 rural properties were occupied by migrant rural workers. The waste case of the estates of Pecosa, Nazaré, Jocon, Três Irmãos, Batente, São José dos Três Morros, Vale da Serra, Tupã Ciretran, Canaã, Cural de Pedras, Canarana, among others. In the areas surrounding the cities of São João do Araguaia, Marabá, São Domingos do Araguaia, São Geraldo do Araguaia and Itupiranga, many properties on rural leasing began to be occupied too, as it was the case of areas of Brazilian Nuttreess such as Pau Seco, Castanheira, Cuxiú, Santo Antônio I, Santo Antônio II, Fortaleza, Dois Irmãos, Vira Sebo, Terra Nova, Surubim, Rainha, Ubá, Araras and Belo Vale, among others (PEREIRA, 2015).

⁹Translated by the author. Original text: Atualmente, as terras das sociedades indígenas, as áreas quilombolas, os projetos de assentamento de reforma agrária e as áreas de proteção ambiental são o foco de ataques dos ruralistas nos âmbitos legislativo, executivo e diretamente nos espaços rurais, sendo que, por um lado, os ataques se dão no âmbito político-legislativo e, do outro, por meio de crimes contra a vida, geralmente por meio da execução de violência física contra os povos do campo (DATALUTA, 2017, p. 2).

¹⁰Translated by the author. Original text: Aí, um dia o meu tio, que era o João Borges, chegou e disse: Pipira, meu filho, vocês são novos, eu tenho uma terra lá no Pará, é longe, nós vamos de pé, é 240 quilômetros [...]. Lá é pra cabra que tem os grãos roxo. Não é pra cabra de peia não. Como vocês têm coragem, meus filhos, vivem trabalhando pra sobreviver na terra dos outros, vocês pode chegar lá e tirar o tanto de terra que vocês quiserem. Terra da União, lá só é dono a União, o Estado. Vocês podem chegar lá e abrir os braços assim e dizer: vamos tirar o tanto de terra que nós quisermos (SINDICALISTA, 2019).

Once in these occupations, the workers started to be victims of all types of violence, including expulsions and killings. Hitmen were frequently hired to carry out these actions. But also civil and military police officers, even chiefs of police, federal police agents, as well as INCRA / Executive Group for Land between the Araguaia and Tocantins Rivers (*Grupo Executivo de Terras do Araguaia e Tocantins, GETAT*) personnel contributed to the wave of violence.

Not only rural workers were the direct victims of violence (murders, attempted murders, death threats, assaults, false imprisonment and torture), but their housing and land too (expulsions, destruction of houses, barns and crops). These violent acts dismantled group bonds and social connections. These acts of violence were rarely random, generally targeting influential leaders not only to annihilate them, but to shatter their collective political strength. (PEREIRA, 2015, p.36).¹¹

According to the numbers of the CPT-Pará, 1001 rural workers were killed between 1970 and 2018. 709 of the killings happened in the South and Southwest regions of the state. A large number of these rural workers belonged to unions and were considered leaders of their communities or temporary settlements, such is the case of Raimundo Ferreira Lima (*the Gringo*), João Canuto, Expedito Ribeiro, José Piau, José Dutra da Costa (*also known as Dezinho*), Onalício Barros (*Fusquinha*), Valentin Serra (*the Doctor*), among others. As indicated previously, these killings aimed not only to annihilate these men, but also the collective political force they represented. According to Medeiros (1996):

[...] It is with these notable people that the acts of violence are particularly cruel as they are also more frequent. To reap a leader is to attempt to maim the organization, education and thinking progress of the social movements they headed. It is, above all else, not a personal attack, but a symbolic aggression towards a beacon of hope and resistance symbol (p.137).¹²

¹¹ Translated by the author. Original text: Não apenas os trabalhadores de forma direta (os assassinatos, as tentativas de assassinatos, as ameaças de morte, as agressões, prisões e torturas), mas também as suas unidades de produção e de moradia (expulsões, destruição de casas, de depósitos de cereais e de plantações), desestruturando grupos, relações de parentesco e vizinhanças. Uma violência, em diversas situações, também seletiva, recaindo, não por acaso, com maior intensidade sobre as lideranças mais expressivas com o intuito não só de tirar-lhes a vida, mas desarticular a organização política do conjunto dos trabalhadores (PEREIRA, 2015, p.36).

¹² Translated by the author. Original text: [...] é sobre essas personagens que a violência incide mais fortemente e atinge maiores requintes de crueldade. Ceifar uma liderança é também

It is paramount, however, that we do not perceive the Amazon rural working class of southern Pará as victims or passive subjects of events. The violent practices from landowners and businessmen towards the workers – frequently with the consent of the Brazilian government – also generated participation initiatives. The rural workers too devised strategies to confront, negotiate and fight back. Aligning themselves with groups and organizations with shared interests, they found ways to resist in lands that were being litigated, as well as they learn how to better navigate official channels to apply pressure in the government. According to a CPT agent, the geographical area described as South and Southwest of Pará is the breeding ground to many forms of popular participations and direct resistance to hitmen and police officer attacks:

[...] *the posseiros* developed many forms of participation. In an first step, the participation and resistance happened in the rural environment, as they confronted the direct violence perpetrated by landowners. The most used strategy was running into the woods, or “*atrás do toco*”, as they said when running away from threats and persecutions. (AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2019).¹³

The above fragment of a memory shows us how rural workers fought back the hitmen hired by landowners (with the backing of the Brazilian government) and managed to remain in the lands they had occupied. As the interviewed agent describes the “*atrás do toco*” (running into the woods) strategy, she is asserting that rural workers occupying federal lands in Southern Pará, in the 1970s and 1980s, were victims of landowners who misappropriated public lands and/or retained unproductive estates. For the rural worker the fighting was also for survival: “to shoot back was a matter of defending one’s life” (EX AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2006).

A CPT agent adds:

I have no doubt that the different forms of participation, such as the collective work and crops, were ways to display strength and were also a defense mechanism. While some

procurar destruir um longo processo de preparação, de educação, de produção de novas percepções, gestadas no interior dos próprios movimentos. E é, acima de tudo, atacar não uma pessoa em particular, mas um símbolo de resistência e a voz que porta uma utopia mobilizadora (p.137).

¹³ Translated by the author. Original text: [...] os posseiros foram desenvolvendo formas diversas de participação. Numa primeira etapa, a participação, a resistência na luta, se dava lá no campo, enfrentando as ações, as perseguições por parte dos fazendeiros. Os posseiros falavam que a forma mais adotada por eles, reagindo a atuação dos fazendeiros, era “*atrás do toco*” como eles falavam porque tinha que se defender da violência dos fazendeiros, das ameaças, das perseguições (AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2019).

worked the fields, others were busy over watching, otherwise they would not have survived, and they would have been massacred. (AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2019).¹⁴

Therefore, it is possible that the violent environment that once encouraged these rural workers communities to unite in order to better defend themselves from the hitmen attacks, also impacted in the furthering of other practices such as the collective crops and sharing the working load.

There were other important forms of participation which evolved from the fighting for land access too. Countless communities, early on, chose to settle in places that were very difficult to reach. The role of the forest, in this sense, was not only as a place that provided food, but also a place of shelter and protection. These realities facilitated new inside and outside forms of communication that intended to safeguard the community from the attacks of hitmen or other dangers from outside the estate in litigation they have been occupying. "We know that there was someone spying for the landowners", a former-*posseiro* and union member describes: "but we also had someone spying for us. We had people giving us information inside the occupation and outside too" (EX-POSSEIRO E SINDICALISTA, 2006).

Many other forms of communication were effective. A whistle or a sound mimicking a bird, blowing the front sight of the barrel of the shotgun or even mimicking a bark would alert the community about the arrival of outsiders. They also made use of other strategies such as hazardous or obstructed bridges, narrow pathways, ditches, slogs blocking the roads or the trails were all means to avoid unpredictable attacks from hitman and the police in their lands (PEREIRA, 2015; 2004).

Other communities, however, chose different strategies for showing strength and courage, even if they were bluffing, at certain times, these were also effective ways to resist. There were cases of communities that dug trenches they never used, or even discharged their weapon in the forest when they noticed the presence of hitmen nearby; they also would send threatening messages to the hitmen exhibiting their comparable fire power. Blocking roads and sequestering the cattle of the landowner

whoinvaded their territory were some of the resistance strategies they adopted to be able to remain in their crops (PEREIRA, 2015).

IV. CONCLUSION

In a context of extreme and perennial violence against rural workers, their resistance becomes the source of meaning for the opposition against the brutal reality of the rural environment in the Amazon region. The barbarism of these circumstances are derived from the realization and the consummation of the Brazilian government policies aiming national integration. The purposes behind the colonization projects had little interest in taking into account local populations and their ways of life. In that purview nature was only useful if its by-products became commodities.

We attempted to present in this study the idea that popular participation among rural workers in Southern Pará, in the Western region of the Brazilian Amazon, goes beyond the collective actions within institutionalized spaces designed to allow different levels of public oversight towards governmental policies and policy making (such as city councils, forum committees, organizations and conferences). We believe that these rural workers' experiences demonstrate that popular participation can also be found in the practices of solidarity within their communities, their mutual exchanges, the collective way of organizing the workload and the sharing of the harvest. Popular participation in some situations involves activities and actions that are not sanctioned by the government. The establishment of more than 500 Agrarian Reform settlement projects and the collective strategies of occupying unproductive rural properties – as well as public lands illegally seized by landowners - in this part of the Amazon region show us how popular participation has been crucial to the (re)existence and the reproduction of territories and territorialities of historically disenfranchised social groups. Through popular participation, rural workers have experienced the possession and occupation of land in the region, as well as they developed different and more sustainable ways to cultivate their crops.

In the context framed by this research, popular participation often happens inside the violent dispute of opposing models. Therefore, popular participation cannot be confused with democratic participation. Democratic participation frequently involves the dialogue and the receptivity to negotiation towards an agreement concerning local interests. That was not always the case for the Southern Pará disputes.

¹⁴Translated by the author. Original text: Não tenho dúvidas que as diferentes formas de participação como defesa, os mutirões, as roças coletivas, de fortalecimento interno para mostrar sua força e também como medida de segurança para poder se preservando porque num grupo enquanto uns trabalhavam, outros vigiavam e tudo mais. Então assim, na dinâmica do conflito ou os trabalhadores enfrentam e resistem ou são massacrados (AGENTE DE PASTORAL, 2019).

Currently, the confrontations are still a subversive form of participation to rural workers. They negotiate and demand a change in public policies, but still use strategies such as occupation of lands. These strategies and their fight are necessary to the survival alternatives to the expansion of large properties cultivating single crops. The large property model is irresponsible towards the environment; they also irresponsibly take down the forest and contaminate the rivers. The large property model annihilates other alternatives of life and impoverishes workers. To participate is to resist!

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