

Democracy, Environment and Agribusiness in Brazil

Dilemmas and Opportunities

WELLINGTON ALMEIDA



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ABOUT THIS STUDY

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1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the overall political perspectives and contradictions found in the environmental agenda, focusing on the agricultural/rural sphere, having as a background the structuring and progress made during the third term of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who was elected in October last year, after a fierce dispute in the presidential elections. This context of polarization is the core of our analysis, as it reflects, in terms of Brazilian specificities, the challenges to preserve democracy in a country of continental proportions, with a legacy that has roots in the countryside structuring elements of extreme political and social polarization. The country is taking a heavy toll for not having addressed a land reform after two centuries of its independence, which would enable effective asset redistribution, democratizing rural properties.

Part of the political tension experienced in Brazil in the past ten years is related to this heritage, as the agricultural sector is the economic powerhouse and has significantly extended its political influence in the past decades, particularly in the Parliament. One cannot just automatically associate agribusiness with the Brazilian historical rural elites. Currently, they consist of a plural segment with several interests, which are not always clear. In the political arena, however, the key message they convey to society is hegemonized by their most radical pole, which in the past few years boosted far-right politics, as advocates of a rupture in the national democracy.

The starting point of our analysis is the hypothesis that there will be no significant advances in the Brazilian democracy without some sort of negotiated equation (via politics, in the strategic sense), unless we can find some convergence to an agenda that fosters a political, social and democratic agreement around the conflicting and explosive dispute of interests, grounded in the relationships among agribusiness, environment and democracy in the country. It is sure a thorny issue. There is a historical deadlock involving endorsed and blocked agendas in the nation-building trajectory. The topic is also prone to encourage misleading suggestions about the feasibility of superficial consensus, particularly because of its massive insertion into the global environmental discussion. Despite all those difficulties, the environmental issue poses a historical opportunity – most probably the only one on the political horizon – capable of simultaneously opening up a new space for the country in the international context and modernizing the Brazilian agribusiness, in a democratic sense.



The text is organized around four key points. First, there is a discussion about how Brazil is back to the global scenario after the intended experience of isolation carried out by the federal administration between 2019 and 2022. Next, there is a selection of aspects considered politically important in the Brazilian agribusiness and environmental policy agendas. Based on these overviews, the idea is to debate the main contradictions and the perspectives of democratic advances needed in that important and decisive segment to set up national social relationships.

2. Brazil is Back to the Global Scenario

The election of Lula da Silva to a third presidential term in Brazil, refraining by a small number of votes from the continuity of Bolsonaro administration, led to an expected shift in the Brazilian foreign policy, which brought some relief to the international community. The unprecedented experience of having a far-right administration in the country shifted paradigms, isolated Brazil in the global scenario, and dismantled a strategic State area, disrupting minimal consensus on how to act regarding international affairs. Domestic disputes on priorities in this area and preferential options in terms of alliances have been organized in the past decades, always preserving the Brazilian space in discussion forums and deliberative arenas.

The previous administration caused seismic changes, guided by improvisation and by a mere ideological interpretation of international affairs. Its *modus operandi* generated unbelievable friction, often spreading fear among its domestic supporters, forcing authorities to produce fragile statements to avoid more impactful diplomatic incidents. There are plenty of examples and they caused damage on different occasions. The paranoia about fighting ‘international communism’ generated friction with China, the country major business partner, accused¹ of being responsible for deliberately creating the Covid-19 virus; as for South American neighbors, it criticized the electoral processes in many countries and blatantly intruded upon the Venezuelan crisis; in the U.S., it not only supported Donald Trump election, but also his attempt to throw a coup over the inauguration of Joe Biden, the president-elect; in international forums, it voted aligned with the most authoritarian regimes in the world, making Brazil retreat from the human rights agenda; in the Middle East, it supported transferring the Brazilian embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, clearly confronting the Arab countries. Finally, in the environmental arena, it completely removed Brazil from the leading role the country had been playing in the agenda negotiations and adjustments.

That is the reason why Bolsonaro’s defeat and Lula’s victory were widely welcomed worldwide. The last presidential election in Brazil, symbolically speaking, was ultimately a global dispute. Thus, Brazil return to the gameplay was something desired and celebrated.

¹ The allegation has never been official but has always been amplified in the media, via government unofficial speakers and, particularly, through a powerful network of fake news production on the internet.

After that step, it is time to figure up the main drivers of this new insertion of the country at the international debate. Sure enough, there will be changes compared to the policy adopted during the previous Lula and Dilma Rousseff terms, both because the context has changed and because there were lessons learned from the previous experience of the Brazilian left-wing party in the government.

However, the rationale of how to behave in the international arena will be maintained, with some adjustments. After all, President Lula is fond of reminding us, fairly enough, how Brazil used to have a leading role in the international scenario. Additionally, the former Secretary of State, Celso Amorim, the main formulator of the previous policy, is currently in the important position of the President chief foreign affairs advisor.

Overall, the foreign policy the new administration pursues is similar to the key concept of Active Non-Alignment (ANA). That idea was inspired by an article published by Ominami (2019), which mobilized scholars and diplomats in Latin America, with left-center political profiles, searching for a new formulation for the current geopolitical challenge that has been heavily pressing the region: the no longer veiled dispute between the United States (which sees Latin America as its natural sphere of influence) and China, which actively advanced in the past two decades in terms of economic presence, competing with the Americans all over South America, except for Colombia, so far. The article published by Ominami was the starting point for several online seminars and debates during the Covid-19 pandemic, which culminated with the publication of the book entitled *Active Non-Alignment and Latin America: A Doctrine for the New Century* (FORTIN; HEINE; OMINAMI, 2021). It consists of a broad compilation of positioning expressed by scholars and decision makers (among them five former Secretaries of State), who are working or used to work for different governments in the region in the past couple of decades.

The formulation was greatly influenced by the three Chilean authors who led the initiative. Chile has broad experience in balancing its relationship with the U.S. and China, as it is by far the Latin American country that invested most in the task of studying and understanding China. There is a consensus among those formulators that the strategic and geopolitical tension between the two powers is likely to restrict even further the autonomy of the Latin American countries due to the economic and security interests of those two key players. Thus, there is a search for a path to update concepts found in the '*theory of dependence*', which had a great influence on the Latin American mindset at the end of the last century, reorganizing the analytical instruments to understand the

contemporary international scenario. Therefore, it is a guide to navigate the troubled waters, aiming at advancing in the long search for a common foreign policy in the region.

The problems and challenges, however, remain the same that have already been previously identified. If in Europe, which has a long and advanced integration process, this common policy equation is hard to solve, in Latin America it is still wishful thinking rather than real policy. Jorge Castañeda, former Secretary of State in Mexico and the author of one of the book chapters (pp. 278-292), points out at least three obstacles to currently putting the active non-alignment idea into practice. The first one is the geopolitical and economic division in Latin America in distinct parts, particularly determined by the current relationship with both superpowers; the second one is the difficulty of projecting a symmetric, equidistant and critical relationship with both superpowers. The third obstacle, which is complementary (and even tougher), would require the entire region to embrace causes that in many countries are seen as curses. A broad commitment to the human rights agenda, for instance, would not unite all the countries in the region. What Castañeda reasonably identifies is the possibility of a few countries adopting that concept, based on an agenda capable of conveying legitimacy and leadership in global themes. In his opinion, Brazil would be the case, building up on its environmental and climate propositions.

Lula's administration undoubtedly has two robust assets to highlight the return of Brazil to the global scenario. The first was its ability to defeat the far-right coalition in the country, after a campaign with total disadvantage in terms of economic and strategic resources. It was a great victory. It is hardly impossible to defeat a candidate for presidential reelection in Brazil, as the incumbent candidate can always count on powerful State instruments to unbalance the dispute. The second asset is the pressing need for Brazil's presence in any positive equation to advance the global environmental policy, especially in climate matters. However, it remains unknown whether the country will be able to leverage both assets to get back to the world. Seeking protagonism at all levels in the international agenda is not a reasonable behavior and may harm the potential gains in both issues.

3. Government Agenda for Agribusiness

The new administration is still looking forward to building more solid bridges with the agribusiness sector. It focuses on the most modern segments, which assimilate the environmental agenda. Those sectors can understand better the international backdrop, particularly the influence the environmental issues have on global trade. That sector relies on significant representatives in economic terms, but is a minority in the political terrain, still dominated by groups that push regulations away and openly work in a political mobilization to limit democracy in the country. The current Minister of Agriculture, Carlos Fávaro, is himself a representative of this modern agribusiness side. Just like President Lula, he heavily invests in an international agenda connected to the environmental debate, making commitments to significantly reduce deforestation. He has been trying to raise funds from state-owned banks and multilateral agencies to fund the conversion of pasturelands into arable lands (MINISTÉRIO, 2023). However, his efforts have not been enough to reverse the sector resistance against the Lula administration yet, as the sector is embedded with structural elements that will not be reversed in the short term.

Undeniably, there is a heavy ideological factor in this topic, which is part of the country history. As opposed to what happened in most countries, Brazil has never been able in any given historical context to promote a minimally reasonable redistribution of assets in rural regions, via a land reform, which was the capitalist rationale adopted in other regions. This agenda that has not been addressed – and is hardly possible to handle in classic terms – left wounds and tensions that make it hard to build consensus around a nationwide project, exactly in the single geopolitical space available given the critical importance of the environmental and climate agendas.

An analysis of the real propositions made by then candidate Lula in the context of the electoral dispute last year clearly shows us divergent points when compared to the traditional and predominant agribusiness positioning. But its narrative and ideological radicalization, led by its most uncompromising segment, on the other hand, blocks many other points where the strategic consensus for the country could be sought. The elected administration, in its guidelines to elaborate its government plan, emphasized the

message to recover a ‘political, economic and institutional environment that provides for trust and security when it comes to investments targeted at the country development’ (DIRETRIZES, 2002). It set as a priority the fight against predatory use of natural resources and incentives to economic activities with lower environmental impact. It highlighted the importance of a national supply policy, including resuming regulating stocks and extending funding policies and food production policies to family farming and organic farming.

The guidelines elaborated by the new administration, in all sections related to modernization of the production structure and/or reindustrialization, point to the need for technological innovation, targeted at environmental, energetic and digital transition. In addition to environmental protection, the guidelines also highlight industrial and commercial leveraging of Brazil competitive advantages, such as biodiversity in the Amazon rainforest. They commit to strengthening agricultural production, particularly family farming, traditional agriculture and sustainable agribusiness, stating that the alliance is strategic to ‘reflect about production and consumption patterns, and about the domestic production matrix, aiming at providing the population with a healthy diet.’

Agricultural production stood out in these guidelines as decisive and strategic to food security and to the Brazilian economy as a whole, in addition to being critical to the trade balance. The document also acknowledged that the path to sustainable agriculture is a condition for Brazil not to lose momentum in the external market. Based on that finding and acknowledging the climate emergency, the administration made a commitment to resume carbon emission reduction targets according to the Paris Agreement, signed in 2015.

The guidelines point to the recovery of lands degraded by predatory activities, as well as a solid reforestation program. Likewise, the document commits to initiatives to preserve the Brazilian biodiversity and ecosystems. Included in that promise are investments in indigenous, maroon and traditional populations, encouraging a trajectory of ecological transition based on traditional and scientific knowledge. Also, it prioritizes the fight against deforestation, especially in the Amazon rainforest. The program design is complemented by the willingness to fight environmental crimes led by militias, squatters, illegal loggers, and other organizations. The main idea is to combine actions to prohibit illegal deforestation and promote net-zero deforestation, which includes recovery of degraded areas and biome reforestation.

The report produced by the administration transition team is rich in details about the environmental agenda, but not so in the agricultural and supply agenda. However, in theory, the general guidelines of the winning electoral platform should not find resistance when it comes to building a minimum agro-environmental program, capable of allowing Brazil to leverage the only strategic opportunity available for gains in the international insertion. The core points perfectly cover the agribusiness modern segments. But the challenge for the new administration remains huge because, even though there are positive signs from the most modern side of agribusiness, that sector mostly supported the reelection of then President Bolsonaro during the electoral campaign. And, during the first months of the current administration, the signs to the most modern segment of agribusiness were not strong enough to break that distance. Of course, it is not a monolithic block. There is evidence of a more modern sector that understands better the political issues when it comes to adjusting them to the international environmental agenda. But even that modern segment struggles to present itself in a more assertive way in strategic themes of the Brazilian political discussion.

When you analyze the propositions made by the sectors that are the most resistant to the new administration and subtract ideological and political positioning, you realize the propositions are also arguable. Maybe this is the path to dismantle the intransigent narrative of rural producer sectors, which refuse to think of a domestic agenda that goes beyond their own interests and their own sectarian and antidemocratic political beliefs. Some clearer repositioning around our environmental commitment in international trade negotiations, for instance, can provide for some chance of negotiation. After all, the Brazilian agribusiness is highly competitive and inclined to broad trade agreement negotiations, as highlighted by the largest political organization of the sector in the platform it submitted to the candidates in last year election (CNA, 2022). Nevertheless, as contradictory as it may seem, the very same organization that represents the sector, which is capable of producing analyses connected to the international debate, assumed a completely ideological position during the presidential election, and refrained from criticizing the *coup d'état* attempted on January 08th this year.

A minimum agenda showing domestic cohesion around environmental commitments could make the country negotiations easier for international trade, and that is a task to be conducted by the government. Take, for instance, the negotiation with the European Union about a new European regulation on deforestation-free products, approved in April by the block Parliament, effective as of June 29th, 2023. The legislation is hard to be smoothly assimilated in Brazil, despite the current administration real commitment to

halt deforestation. After all, this piece of legislation prohibits imports of goods sourced in areas with any level of deforestation, since December 2020, regardless of whether it is legal or illegal deforestation. In other words, it bypasses the Brazilian legislation (the Forest Code), which regulates deforestation activities, and it has been heavily criticized by farmers. This is the reason why President Lula decided to speak out recently at the Amazon Summit and the BRICS Summit, in Johannesburg, criticizing the idea of a 'new green colonialism'. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, that regulation will affect up to 356 Brazilian products, in seven production chains (VALOR, 2023).

Analyzing those issues concerning the relationship with Europe, we can state it is currently underpinned by many questions and little certainty. In April, when President Lula visited Spain (which took over the Presidency of the UE Council later in June), he demonstrated his willingness to sign the Mercosur-EU trade agreement by the end of this year. It is widely known, however, that Brazil wants to revise some clauses of the agreement, and the practical impact of that revision in terms of timeline is one of the questions that remain unanswered.

The embargo placed on agricultural products sourced from deforested areas, according to the terms now effective in the EU, will stress the negotiations. In addition to bypassing the Brazilian legislation on deforestation, the embargo raises the question of how to prove the exported products come from an area with no risk of deforestation (which is, in theory, an incentive to comply with environmental regulations). In some cases, that could be addressed by segregated transport. Take, for instance, Brazilian soybeans. The operation would be rather complex and would demand an increase in costs, which would likely be passed on to the entire chain.

The fear is, that instead of taking those measures, farmers may choose to look for buyers who do not have those requirements, particularly China, and other Asian countries as well. However, even this apparently obvious aspect may ultimately change, in case China, for instance, decides to advance its environmental requirements. Also, in case the European requirements lead the way in the global market, as it usually happens, it will always be easier for big farmers and traders to meet the environmental requirements, generating strategic inequalities in the production sector itself. Thus, the current Brazilian complaint is quite understandable.

Anyhow, to play an effective leadership role in the global scenario, the country must have some minimum domestic cohesion. Restrictions such as those imposed by the European



Union can be the rule in international trade with developed countries. It will not be the rule of thumb, at least not in the short term, in the Global South, but then we have two problems. The first one is the importance of environmental standards in the international trade so that sustainability commitments are for real. The second one, of a pragmatic nature, is still the relevance of those markets to the Brazilian exports. To sustain the idea of Active Non-Alignment, taking a new role in international relations, it is necessary to be aware more power also means more costs. Therefore, a common denominator must be found to balance the different views produced by each specific perspective, that is, the challenge is to find a new balance between the European view, which puts the end of deforestation at the core of the negotiation, and the Brazilian view, which makes clear commitments to halt deforestation, but does not accept those conditions to negotiate trade agreements, as in the case of Mercosur-UE agreement. They are certainly different perspectives, but what really matters for Brazil to leverage the opportunity to reassume its relevant role in environmental issues, contribute to international consensus and have economic gains with this repositioning is related to the evidence that it is possible to increase production sustainably, adopting an agricultural agenda connected with environmental transition.

4. Resuming the Environmental Agenda

The environmental agenda stood out in Lula electoral program in his race to his third term as President. The topic is addressed in a multidisciplinary manner, particularly reflecting the debate on climate emergence. Thus, the elected government aims at reinserting Brazil in the international scenario, making commitments to the environmental and energetic transition, pointing out in its guidelines the search for a new economy, capable of articulating actions of preservation, restoration and sustainable access to biodiversity in the Brazilian biomes (DIRETRIZES, 2002). The document also commits to the rights and territories of indigenous peoples, maroon communities and traditional populations. In the first six months of his administration, despite heavy pressure, either implicit or explicit, especially made by the Congress conservative majority, the commitment was kept. So far, the administration has been signaling it understands the structuring role of the environmental agenda.

In this signaling of the new environmental politics, the fight against deforestation is key, and the elected government can produce more immediate practical actions. It is a subject that can potentially gather some reasonable consensus from political and social players who have different opinions about the path the environmental agenda should take. The guidelines proposed by the administration that took over in January seek to gather those domestic players, warning them about the economic costs they may incur in the mid and long term in case the country does not address the climate issue. Therefore, the core proposition is to resume the commitments made in 2015 at the 21st Conference of the Parties (**COP21**), the United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in Paris (UNFCCC, 2023^a).

As last-minute preparation work for the Amazon Summit, held in Belem (Para State, Brazil) in August this year, the government presented, based on the alert system operated by the National Institute for Space Research (INPE), significant numbers showing deforestation reduction in the Amazon region. In areas being monitored with alerts, there was a drop of 33.6% in the first half of 2023, compared to the same period in 2022. Most likely, those figures reflect concentrated and coordinated actions between federal and state bodies in the region, enabled by the government initial actions. Those are good signs that will require continued efforts to persist. The same trend was not detected in the Cerrado, in areas that are being monitored with alerts. Instead, there was a 21% increase

in deforestation rates in the first semester, although in June there was a drop of 14.6% (MINISTÉRIO, 2023^a). The optimistic scenario points to a halt in the intense process of deregulation and destruction. But it will be no easy task, and definitely there will be no automatic return to the previous mitigation pattern. New milestones and challenges have been consolidated in the past four years.

Those are contradictions that put pressure on any government, particularly the ones with broad coalitions. So far, the first significant battle was related to the possibility of exploiting oil on the Brazilian Equatorial Margin, which ranges from the coast of Amapá to the coast of Rio Grande do Norte State. The position of the environmental technical body has prevailed, and the permit was denied. It was a sign of the prestige of environmental commitments, but that topic will certainly face future battles in this administration. This battle is far from finished, and the sectors that were defeated will put pressure to revise the position that has momentarily prevailed, according to many indications reported by the news media (O GLOBO, 2023).

Concerning the core aspect of deforestation, the government seeks to find spaces in topics capable of promoting alliances between players that compete in their profile of territories in the rural world. One of the ideas, which in theory is capable of promoting this convergence and getting support in the international scenario, is the attempt to influence the global carbon market design. During his campaign, Lula talked to the media about the creation of a group formed by Brazil, Indonesia and Congo, which would be called BIC, aimed at jointly acting in future Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COPs), to press developed countries to fund forest protection. Those three countries have the largest rainforests in the world. In case the alliance gains traction, there will be efforts to include other countries from Africa, Asia and South America (Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, as well as French Guiana).

That topic started to arouse political interest more effectively after the Amazon Summit. Leaders from the eight countries that form the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT) had a meeting with representatives from Indonesia, Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Jointly, they prepared a common political document to take to COP-28, which will be held in the United Arab Emirates. That summit also served to bring back to action the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization – ACTO, an institution that is not widely known but left the summit in Belém with a busy agenda.

In this new context, the broad discussion on payment for environmental services gains momentum once again, with the potential to boost more adequate regulation about alternatives to structure a carbon market in the country. That topic has been debated for over a decade now. After expectations are confirmed, debates about specific economic alternatives associated with reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, such as the ones via the REDD+² mechanism, will gain traction. Payment for environmental services consists of a broader agenda than REDD. But that point emerged as a source of interest for the new government. In the first seven months, the government showed little initiative in this field. In a recent speech at the Congress, the secretary in the area at the Ministry of Development, Rodrigo Rollemberg, declared the government has completed a proposition, but has not determined yet how it is going to be handled. He added they expect to have a new piece of legislation effective by COP-30, which will be hosted by Brazil in 2025 (CÂMARA, 2023).

This debate has been going on for almost two decades, though, which reflects the difficulties involved. It is necessary to acquire greater institutional capacity to put a bolder program into action, to boost carbon emission offset projects, especially via REDD+ mechanism. There is no way to extend this process without a regulatory landmark that addresses federal issues more clearly. Discussing centralization and decentralization, Toni and Ferreira (2011) identified, over a decade ago, the bottlenecks. In this sense, extremely optimistic perspectives – Caldeira, Sekula, Schabib (2020) –, for instance, should not be discouraged, but rather illuminated by pending political tasks.

REDD+ mechanism is only one of the possible modalities in the carbon market. After 14 years of debates among lawmakers, two years ago Brazil approved Law 14.119/21 (PLANALTO, 2021), which establishes the National Policy on Payments for Environmental Services (PNPSA), the National Registration on Payments for Environmental Services (CNPSA), as well as the Federal Program on Payments for Environmental Services. This policy still requires regulation and can broaden the possibilities to expand the carbon market in Brazil. Entities of the civil society, among them the Coalizão Brasil, Clima, Florestas e Agricultura (Brazil Climate, Forests and Agriculture Coalition), presented to the new administration a set of regulation propositions, focused on objective points, such as compliance with ecosystem conservation legislation; incentive policies to private

² The strategy of this mechanism is to create economic incentives to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, through forest management and conservation actions.

reserves, indigenous peoples, traditional communities and family farmers; minimum requirements for payments for environmental services agreements; and signaling to attract the private sector, designing governance, transparency and social participation models, and determining priority areas (PINTO; GUIMARÃES; MOUTINHO, 2022)³.

There is definitely an opportunity window for Brazil to leverage all the power of the global carbon market, but it is no trivial or short-term task. Anyway, having a project is a starting point. The debate on the carbon market has been dragging on for the past couple of decades, in the context of structuring the global environmental agenda, after the II United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Brazil, in 1992.

Currently, the carbon market operates in two modalities worldwide. There is a regulated market and a voluntary market. The regulated market has been operating since the Kyoto Protocol became effective, on February 16th, 2005. Adopted in December 1997, the Protocol underwent a complex ratification process (altogether, 192 countries signed the instrument). That agreement has the goal of putting into practice the framework established by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, approved in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in 1992. Thus, the regulated market put into operation the commitments described in Annex B of the Protocol, made by 37 industrialized countries or economies in transition and the European Union, whose target for the first period (2008-2012) was to reduce, in average, at least 5% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, compared to 1990 levels. For the second period (2013- 2020), the parties agreed to reduce at least 18% below 1990 levels (UNFCCC, 2023). In the regulated market, the government determines the emissions cap allowed for companies. The government regulation also determines policies to attract investors, having carbon capture as their flagship. The voluntary market has developed in parallel to the Kyoto Protocol and is the modality that actually operates in Brazil. The voluntary market relies on initiatives led by civil society stakeholders and organizations that adopt environmental, social and governance targets, commonly referred to as 'ESG'.

The public debate on the carbon market potentialities, especially the great volume of news media articles and coverage, however, does not mention the long path ahead. The number of studies about this market in Brazil is rather low. Also, analyses point to lots of deadlocks and uncertainties. In academia, Silveira and Oliveira (2021) conducted

3 Only in June this year, through Ordinance No 11.550, the Interministerial Committee on Climate Change was reorganized and determined. This will be the political instance responsible for detailing and approving that agenda (PLANALTO, 2023).

extensive research on the topic. The authors revised secondary data about the development of the carbon market in the country, aiming to understand mainly the role played by the forestry sector. The study revised the entire database of four platforms (Scopus, Web of Science, Scielo and Google). The study pointed out challenges and concerns about the incipient regulation, as well as risks and uncertainties involved in projects, both when it comes to accounting for carbon capture, and institutional and governmental deadlocks. Among the projects analyzed, there is data about Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) initiatives, Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), carbon credit generation using biomass, carbon dioxide stock, and other modalities in the voluntary market.

According to the authors (p.11), the literature points to the following as major challenges to the history of the Brazilian carbon market:

- *Risk and uncertainty involved in forestry projects*
- *Complexity and difficulties for emissions offsets to truly lead to climate benefits*
- *Monitoring and accuracy of carbon stocks*
- *How long carbon will remain in trees*
- *Risk of forest planting (wildfires, pests and diseases)*
- *Long-term investments (higher risks)*
- *Not having certification and market for their credits*
- *Lack of regulation in the carbon market*
- *Carbon price instability*
- *Uncertainty of investment due to price fluctuation*
- *Dependence on governmental actions to reduce transaction costs*
- *Difficulty in assigning a monetary value to carbon capture in forests*
- *Economic restrictions that reduce attractiveness to potential emissions offset developers until carbon prices go up*
- *Cost-effectiveness of project deployment and broad acceptance*

After having considered those variables, the authors promoted a vast review of the literature available on specific experiences involving REDD+ projects, CDM projects (which occur in larger proportion), Generation of Carbon Credits from Biomass and CO₂ Stock, Voluntary Carbon Market Projects, CERs in the Carbon Regulated Market,

Carbon Storage for Emissions Trading and GHG Emission Reduction. In addition to finding out the Brazilian market lacks standardization and a more robust legal approach, the study came to an uneasy conclusion about CDM projects, which were the ones found in greater numbers. In the past few years, there has been an increasing number of projects of this nature, particularly because of their potential to address landfills. However, there has been a drop in the registration of new projects. Difficulties with transaction costs, information and measurement gaps, as well as other difficulties related to credit trade, lead to a scenario of uncertainty about their feasibility. Identifying those real bottlenecks that emerge beyond political intentions is one more challenge on the horizon.

5. Environmental Geopolitics: the Opportunity for Brazil

The result of the 2022 presidential elections brought Brazil back to the debate about governance in the environmental agenda, especially when it comes to climate. The country reassumes its natural position in the theme. The fast-forward button has been pressed on negotiations about international cooperation resources, such as the Amazon Fund and the Climate Fund. Thus, there is a growing expectation to resume projects in several areas. Finding bearable climate balance is at the core of the global environmental agenda. Brazil is a key player in that equation, especially because of the importance of the Amazon rainforest.

That region, which projects to the world the challenges and the geopolitical opportunity offered to the country, has three remarkable historical processes, as Becker (1997 and 2009) appropriately described. The first process, whose guiding paradigm was the *society-nature/economy-nature*, is connected to the maritime expansion of European trade companies when the capitalist economy was being structured. The second one was determined by the different geopolitical strategies to keep its vast territory, even though there was no economic foundation or stable population. The third one, which interests us and currently challenges us, expresses the transition between the occupation models, including the conflicts held in the past decades, which brought to the political arena native peoples and traditional peoples, and gained a greater scale of concern, once the environment became a global topic. Therefore, the Amazon rainforest became a stage where the threat against peoples who have been resisting for centuries in the name of their cultures and traditions has ultimately met the environmental issues.

During the re-democratization process, as a form of resistance against those threats, socio-environmental networks were formed, gathering diverse experiences in the symbolic and effective dispute for the region destiny. Social and environmental conflicts exposed the project disputes around territory appropriation in the real and narrative spheres. A true *ecologic war* started, according to the concept elaborated by Almeida (2011) to characterize political fields that express distinct patterns of territorial appropriation. On one side, there are multiple experiences of sustainable use of natural resources developed by a diverse set of local players (native peoples, traditional communities, governmental initiatives), backed

by the concrete struggle in the territory and also by national and global public opinion. In the structuring of that social and environmental mesh, important achievements can be pointed out, among others the demarcation of indigenous territories, multiplication of Conservation Units, Integrated Environmental Management Projects (PGAIs) in the States, Sustainable Development Plans for Settlements (PDAS), Ecologic-Economic Zoning, advances in the protective legislation, presence of international governmental and non-governmental cooperation, highlighting macro initiatives, such as PPG7 initially, and later the Amazon Fund.

On the other side, there are new strategies to reproduce extractive resource exploitation of ores, timber, cattle breeding expansion and deforestation. There is fierce resistance to the democratization process and the acknowledgment of the rights of native peoples and traditional communities. They incrementally extend and use their economic and political influence (especially in Congress) to dismantle the legislation and weaken public institutions responsible for policies and control. Those groups were reassured in the 2018 presidential elections, which opened up the path to completely unbalance the dispute, putting achievements at risk and triggering setbacks.

That cycle was partially interrupted by last year election. Thus, a new opportunity to build a different path for the Amazon region has been created, connected to a broader nationwide project. Leveraging this opportunity window requires maturity, realism and negotiation ability. This includes the need to extend the dialogue among diverse political perspectives. To truly talk of a nationwide project, from the environmental perspective and seeking ecological transition, it is necessary to include all stakeholders in that agenda, with no vetoes. Considering this, it is absolutely critical to bring to the table agribusiness segments connected to sustainable practices, especially those that comply with the applicable regulation. The political weight of agribusiness in Brazilian society has a direct relationship with its share in the Brazilian economy, both because of the progress of their agenda and because of the incremental decline in traditional manufacturing. In 1970, agribusiness accounted for 7.5% of the GDP in Brazil. In 2020, it accounted for 26.6% of the GDP, a six percent growth when compared to 2019 (20.5%). The outlook for the sector in 2023 is about 24.5% of the Brazilian GDP (CEPEA-CNA, 2023). It is both necessary and possible to build long-term policies. We should leverage this new opportunity to rethink the country, its reinsertion in the international arena and, particularly, a new chance to catch up and reduce the inequalities present in the Brazilian trajectory over the past two centuries.

There is extensive sociological and political literature aiming at explaining the Brazilian trajectory using comparisons, especially with the United States⁴. It is easy to understand why, as both countries are similar when it comes to territory size and history of colonization and slavery. The original more significant core of those studies is internal and was based on the so-called 'essayism', from the 1930s⁵.

There are also contributions from currents that can be called Brazilianists, which started interpreting from a foreign perspective, from the 20th century on. One study conducted during that period that is not often mentioned but provides food for thought about endogenous options that caused most of the country economic lag is the work written by Leff (1991)⁶. That text proposes a critical dialogue with a point of view that for a long time was consolidated in the Brazilian literature around the reasons for our lag⁷, particularly linked to Caio Prado Jr (1961) and Celso Furtado (1982), which conveyed decisive importance to the unequal trade relationships between the metropolis and the local elite (to the detriment of the local elite). Leff suggests a different interpretation, pointing out the elite endogenous decisions, which would reflect on the consolidation of low per capita income, with high levels of inequality. Following the same rationale, historical research conducted at the end of last century by Fragoso (1998) proposed some reinterpreting of the models used to explain the colonial economy, reinforcing the arguments about endogenous amassment and the weight of the economic elite internal options in the configuration of our society after independence. That research presents exhaustive empirical data showing that part of the wealth amassed was not sent to the metropolis, but rather reinvested here, producing diversity in the activities of top traders and, ultimately, emigration of part of those traders to the profitable business of large rural properties.

Asset redistribution is a core aspect of this analysis. Leff emphasizes the decisive weight that distribution or restriction to access the land asset would have in the different trajectories of the two countries in the process of opening up opportunities to black populations - finally

4 Here, some arguments were taken from another work written by the same author (ALMEIDA, W, 2018).

5 Without ignoring other publications on how to interpret Brazil that were published from that period on and, also, others that cover the Colony and Empire periods, for the scope proposed here we limited this paper to the core arguments consolidated around the Brazilian political, social and economic lag in the 19th and 20th centuries, found especially in the interpretations developed by Celso Furtado (Economic Growth of Brazil) and Caio Prado Júnior (Formation of Contemporary Brazil).

6 I owe this finding to the brilliant and unusual journalistic work developed by Rafael Cariello (2016).

7 The word 'lag' is used in comparison to classic capitalist modernization experiences adopted in other societies with a trajectory similar to the Brazilian one.

free from slavery - and to the European newcomers, generally also poor and illiterate. He shows how in Brazil political and institutional options dramatically limiting access to land kept the predominant rationale in the colonial period, with abundant low-cost labor. That new labor supply consisting of former slaves and immigrants had not much choice other than the classic path of selling their workforce under unfavorable negotiation conditions. In the United States, it was just the opposite: salaries were going up because, despite the heavy immigration flow, extended possibilities to access land reduced the negotiation power of rural farmers and industrial owners when hiring salaried employees.

Leff efforts aimed at answering a question asked by Celso Furtado himself in *Economic Growth of Brazil* about the reasons that could explain why the United States managed to be an industrialized nation in the 19th century, looking more like European countries, whereas Brazil had the profile of a widely underdeveloped country in the 20th century. Furtado elaborates on this question, of course, discarding the superstitious reasons and the racist theories of climate and 'race' inferiority, which were dominant for a long time. Leff tries to answer Furtado concerns, reassessing obstacles to economic development before industrialization, which would only become widespread with the 1930 Revolution. He discusses arguments about sociocultural conditions, imperialism, international trade, slavery, European immigration, and elastic labor supply. He assigns the latter significant importance, as in a context of fast demographic growth schooling levels remained low.

This specific and partial angle of one of the historical factors that helped shape the Brazilian society current profile is important to the debate on how to address the current extreme inequalities and find a new inclusive pact. It sure does not explain everything, but it has a significant role. Brazil is a rare case of a nation that, having an excessive amount of land available and a population that requires access to those properties, could not come to political and institutional mechanisms to redistribute and democratize those assets. Rather, the key measures adopted in the transition process from slavery to the salaried working system in the 19th century always pointed to the maintenance of large rural properties and the creation of barriers to the expansion of small properties, ensuring on legal grounds an exclusionary territory occupation model, consolidating guidelines that would make it difficult to have capitalist labor relations (MENDES, 2009).

The Land Law, as of 1850, was a landmark in this process, with great impact in the following decades on the large landowner profile in the country and territory occupation. It disrupted the previous policy that consisted of land grants, centralized a huge amount of vacant properties in the State, and established that access to land could only occur

upon purchase and sale agreements from that point on. In reality, that law denied access to land to slaves who had been freed, making it immensely hard for immigrants to access land, laying the groundwork for the system to protect the interests of large landowners against the evident crisis of slavery. It was all coordinated by the rural elite a few years after the country independence.

Additional instruments made it easier for existing landowners to use land-grabbing mechanisms to prove ownership and expand their properties. It consisted of an endogenous option of the Brazilian elite that radically differed from the 1862 Homestead Act, in the United States, which opened up paths for vacant land grants, having attracted to the American Midwest millions of European immigrants, directly affecting negotiations around salaried employment, as pointed out in Leff research.

Conflicts around a political agenda for land reform increased from the second half of last century on and accounted for riots and fatalities in rural areas, which persist to date. But, objectively speaking, the broad land reform agenda missed its last historical and structural momentum in the 1950s, when most of the population lived in rural areas. As the process of migration from the countryside to the city increased and was consolidated, resulting in inhuman life conditions in the outskirts of large and medium cities, that agenda got lost as a strategic solution. In spite of the still significant contingent of poor people who kept their political mobilization for the land in the past 50 years, with great peaks in the years before the 1964 military coup and resuming democratic demonstration in the 1980s, a (fair) land property democratization agenda, via classic land reform, does not answer the questions posed by Leff anymore. It is not reasonable to suppose that, even though part of the population has no access to acceptable material conditions and lives poorly in the city outskirts, the current generation will go back to living in rural areas after their grandparents and parents migrated to urban areas.

Thinking of the rural reality in Brazil as it is today, it is necessary to assume that the classic agenda, unfortunately, missed its historic momentum, as highlighted by Martins⁸. It does not mean the public policy requirements presented by a broad set of social actors in the rural areas, who were excluded and oppressed by the predominant rationale, should be discarded. On the contrary, new inclusive pacts should be sought, to open up favorable horizons to democratization and address extreme inequalities found in the country, based on the objective opportunities that emerge. Political agendas proposing reforms,

8 Jose de Sousa Martins – Interview. In BORIN, Jair; VEIGA, José Eli; ALMEIDA, Wellington (2001)

modernization and democratization are always inserted in specific historical contexts and usually pinpointed by open conflicts, expressed in a number of war experiences.

Incremental changes, in a democratic context, are slower and more difficult. But this is the path chosen by Brazilian society, since the re-democratization process occurred in the 1980s, whose landmark is the 1988 Constitution. In any context, however, deeper changes require strategic consensus, capable of transforming opportunities into real actions. And partial gains obtained in the democratic period over the past three decades were huge, in spite of large setbacks in the last administration. It is necessary to value the unique importance of achievements when it comes to the demarcation of indigenous territories, the creation of environmental reserves in more than one model, and acknowledgment of territories of traditional populations, among other achievements that force the creation of public policies such as the Brazilian National Program for Strengthening Family Farming – PRONAF. The Brazilian rural scenario relies on an enviable and desirable diversity of economic, social and cultural players. In the Amazon rainforest, particularly, that wealth is also expressed as a considerable stock of community lands. Therefore, there are objective conditions to think of other strategic paths and choices that require the political construction of consensus, according to the specificities of the country.

A new historical opportunity is now presented to Brazil, considering the challenges of the global environmental agenda, especially the climate issues. To avoid missing this rare geopolitical opportunity, it will be necessary to go beyond the strategic consensus. It is critical to have a more mature debate about different ways of insertion into this new economy, incorporating proper technology processes both into traditional areas and into border areas, whenever applicable. A decisive aspect in this equation involves a comprehensive strategy in science and technology, adjusted to the plurality of production practices adopted in the country.

And, at that point, we still have to reckon the successive failures the country has been amassing since the 1980s regarding a drop in worker productivity, as highlighted by Almeida (2021) when discussing the broad diagnosis produced by two researchers in the area: *“Luna Pedrosa & Chaimovich (2015), analyzing the area of Science in the country, in the past decade, show that, in spite of praiseworthy attempts of public policy with impacts in the area (i.e.; 2011-2020 Brazilian National Education Plan) and the search for new governance models in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) - changes in legislation and the creation of social organizations to simplify management, for instance –, there was little effect over deadlocks that have been dragging on for decades. One of those indicators is worker*

productivity, which has stagnated since the 1980s. Brazil followed the predominant logic in Latin America, where an increase in social expenditure did not reflect any worker productivity improvement, except for Chile, which doubled productivity between 1980 and 2010. In fact, there was a decline in the average productivity rate." (p. 97).⁹

Any consistent political project requires formulation. In that aspect, the sophisticated research and post-graduation system available in Brazil has not been fully leveraged yet. Regarding the Amazon region, for instance, this system has been increasingly involved with high-end research and Brazil has taken the lead in studies in the region, although for a long time the studies were led by institutions in the United States. This is shown in a recent research conducted by Carlos Henrique Brito Cruz, who was the Head of Research at Sao Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) for 15 years (2005-2020) (BBC, 2023). Another aspect that calls attention to Brito study is the fact that Chinese institutions now rank in second and third positions in studies about the Amazon region.

It is necessary to formulate more propositions and organize broad debates in society, calling up all stakeholders. Fortunately, there is plenty of diagnosis production available also in the civil society. Some reference material for metrics is the report entitled 'Amazonia under Pressure', produced by The Amazonian Georeferenced Socio-Environmental Network (RAISG, 2020). It is a consortium of civil society organizations from six countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela). RAISG published its first report in 2012 and a second report in 2020, featuring comparative analyses over time, which should be taken into consideration by decision-makers. Another more recent contribution, with a perspective from the Brazilian context, was the policy proposition for the first 100 days of the administration, published by the network called 'A Concerted Effort for the Amazon' (UMA, 2022).

⁹ Brazilian chapter elaborated by the authors for the science report organized by Unesco for the 2030 Agenda.

6. Outlook and Final Remarks

Brazil coming back to the global scenario and, especially, reassuming its leading role in the environmental agenda is good news to political, social and economic players in debates on sustainability. The reach and effectiveness of a redesign of a strategic policy in this agenda depend upon the removal of significant barriers. In the Amazon rainforest, particularly, it is necessary to conduct a deeper analysis of the reconfiguration of the relationships that have been developed in the past four years. It is critical to understand the alliances made among agribusiness, mining companies and NGOs. It is equally important to understand the impacts caused by the previous administration strategy, which combined funding reduction with the promotion of 'autonomy' to indigenous people and traditional communities so they could make alliances with those players.

On the other hand, it is necessary to have a more qualified debate on this topic. It is urgent to have a better understanding of the agribusiness full context and identify strengths capable of showing it is not a monolithic segment. This will be no easy task, but this is where the agro-political debate will offer a better contribution. It is a complex situation because somehow most of the political forces that claim to be progressive see the 21st-century agribusiness entrepreneurs as natural heirs to large rural properties that remained untouched in the nation after independence, which occurred in the 19th century.

They are indeed heirs to a culture that rejects changes or any type of democratization of rural assets, via a distributive reform. Additionally, they are mostly right-wing political supporters and they also have a conservative mindset. In this sense, they do have a strong bond with the country general history in the rural areas. On the other hand, most of the Brazilian modern agribusiness entrepreneurs come from the diaspora experienced by the heirs of the settlers from the Southern region of Brazil, who had no properties or resources and migrated towards the North, occupying spaces in different states. José de Sousa Martins says, about the state of Rio Grande do Sul, that the state starts on the border of the neighboring countries in the Southern Cone and finishes on the other extreme of the country¹⁰.

10 Interview. In: (BORIN, J.; VEIGA, J;ALMEIDA,W; 2001, p. 29) .

They migrated to the North, settling colonies in the states where they passed by, especially through rural settlement programs during the military regime. But they also did that on their own, legitimately searching for new life alternatives, mingling, however, with a complex socioeconomic network, in which it is not easy to differentiate between legal business practice, land grabbing, illegal fishing, illegal mining, gold smuggling, conflicts with indigenous people and traditional communities, and, especially, resistance to environmental regulation. Mapping and making this clear differentiation is critical to advance a dialogue capable of creating an agenda negotiated with the players interested in changing the country position in the debate and the geopolitical and strategic leadership in the environmental arena.

Deforestation is a core issue in this conflict, and it heavily influences the global debate in which Brazil is a key player. From the political point of view, it has not been possible yet to remove the smoke screen that the Parliamentary Agriculture Front has been managing to release in Congress in the past decades, ensuring priority to the ideological aspect to advocate for the agricultural sector. So far, the prevailing message is the existence of a common, non-conflicting agenda for the entire sector, which allegedly is threatened by the left, which intends to abolish private property. To defend that delusion, the legislative debate gathers in the same basket people who admittedly do not comply with the environmental legislation, compliant productive segments, and sectors linked to organized crime, which increasingly gain power in the Legislative branch. A structural differentiation in the deforestation topic, clarifying the contradictions, losses and potential strategic long-term gains is a critical task in the organization of the current agro-political dialogue in Brazil.

Also, climate funding will play an important role as a compensatory financial mechanism and will emerge as one of the responses to the demands made by the governments and the Amazonian communities. Sure enough, there will be polarization around this topic, reflecting the great diversity in the region. Inequality will certainly be a theme standing out in this debate. It will be a huge challenge to find a role for climate funding capable of reducing inequalities, and we should always keep in mind it may also produce more inequalities. To avoid this undesirable reverse impact, it is necessary to shed light on some aspects that have not been discussed so far. Among them, it is worth pointing out the need to have more robust studies about the characteristics of the community lands, as well as their economic potentialities. Another relevant aspect that cannot be neglected now is



public funding, especially from the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES)¹¹ to production chains, and the financing must be regulated by operational and more transparent policies.

There is no guarantee or easy path in this potential shift of route. But it is time to think big and rethink choices, leveraging this historical opportunity. The environmental agenda is a huge challenge, but also holds a rare and new opportunity for Brazil to rethink, and address its historic issues and new problems. It is an opportunity to reaffirm and consolidate its specificity as a country of continental size, which insists on consolidating in the Global South an inclusive democracy, committed to human rights, with diversity and plurality. It is no small feat.

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