

Extended abstract

*Nature and Socio-Territorial Transformations
of the New Agro-Industrial Regions:
San Francisco Valley (Brazil) and Region
of Murcia (Spain)*



***Andrés Pedreño Cánovas (*), Josefa Salete Barbosa Cavalcanti (**),
Maria Luiza Lins e Silva Pires (***)***

(*) Universidad de Murcia, Spain

(**) Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Brazil

() Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco, Brazil***

DOI: 10.4422/ager.2025.03

ager

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

Highlights:

1. The enclaves of intensive agriculture originated in an ideology of controlling nature.
2. The state and the global food regime determine the historical nature of the agro-export model.
3. Agro-export slaves require an appropriation frontier of a cheap nature.
4. Expulsion of populations and contaminated land and water accompany the agrarian appropriation frontier.
5. Feminisation and ethnification define a cheap nature to extract low paid labour.

Abstract: This article proposes a sociological approach to the enclaves of fruit and vegetable production for global markets, considering their specific logic of social production of space and nature. The aim of the research is to integrate nature into the problems of the sociology of agriculture when studying the social organisation of labour and production in intensive agricultural enclaves. To this end, we have selected two case studies to illustrate these processes empirically: i) the Petrolina-Juazeiro fruit-growing area (Brazil) located in the sub-middle irrigated valley of the San Francisco river in the 'sertao' area in the Brazilian Northeast and specialised in tropical and subtropical fruit crops (mainly grapes and mangoes) concentrated in a few large exporting companies; and ii) the fruit and vegetable enclave of the Region of Murcia (Spain) as a productive enclave of intensive agriculture located on the Spanish Mediterranean coast and specialised in horticultural (lettuce, tomato and others) and fruit (table grapes and stone fruit) crops for export, driven by medium and small farmers organised in cooperatives, as well as by large companies with local and/or international capital. It is proposed to understand the enclaves of intensive agriculture as a historical nature shaped by a particular 'ideology of nature', from which agro-industrial capital exploits the historically specific form of nature, in that it brings its conditions of possibility to the value relation through capitalisation and appropriation.

Keywords: Ecological sociology, regional development, rural sociology, agriculture, rural geography.

Andrés Pedreño Cánovas. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8164-0461>

E-mail: andrespe@um.es

Josefa Salete Barbosa Cavalcanti. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9852-6147>

E-mail: saletecav@gmail.com

Maria Luiza Lins e Silva Pires. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9951-2687>

E-mail: marialuizapires@gmail.com

Extended Abstract

This article proposes a sociological approach to the enclaves of fruit and vegetable production for global markets, taking into account their specific logic of social production of space and nature. The aim of the research is to integrate nature into the problems of the sociology of agriculture when studying the social organisation of labour and production in intensive agricultural enclaves.

We have selected two case studies to illustrate these processes empirically: i) the Petrolina-Juazeiro fruit-growing area (Brazil) located in the sub-middle irrigated valley of the San Francisco river in the 'sertao' area in the Brazilian Northeast and specialised in tropical and subtropical fruit crops (mainly grapes and mangoes) concentrated in a few large exporting companies; and ii) the fruit and vegetable enclave of the Region of Murcia (Spain) as a productive enclave of intensive agriculture located on the Spanish Mediterranean coast and specialised in horticultural (lettuce, tomato and others) and fruit (table grapes and stone fruit) crops for export, driven by medium and small farmers organised in cooperatives, as well as by large companies with local and/or international capital. It is proposed to understand the enclaves of intensive agriculture as a historical nature shaped by a particular 'ideology of nature', from which agro-industrial capital exploits the historically specific form of nature, in that it brings its conditions of possibility to the value relation through capitalisation and appropriation.

1. Research results

1. The interior lands of Brazil were differentiated as a problematic nature since the beginning of the Portuguese colonization. Thus, on the coast, the first colonial settlements would be located, while the interior would be referred to as Sertão and meant as an empty space, but of large dimensions, strange, unknown, barbaric. These representations of an empty nature full of "natural" difficulties (including indigenous populations) are accompanied by an idea of conquest without conflict and integration in development. The conquest is represented, in terms of nature ideology, as a new El Dorado. This work is undertaken, at first, by the colonial power and, later, by the modernizing and national state.

The interior lands of Brazil were differentiated as a problematic nature since the beginning of the Portuguese colonization. Thus, on the coast, the first colonial

settlements would be located, while the interior would be referred to as Sertão and meant as an empty space, but of large dimensions, strange, unknown, barbaric. These representations of an empty nature full of "natural" difficulties (including indigenous populations) are accompanied by an idea of conquest without conflict and integration in development. The conquest is represented, in terms of nature ideology, as a new El Dorado. This work is undertaken, at first, by the colonial power and, later, by the modernizing and national state.

The modernization of the São Francisco Valley is linked to large government investments in infrastructure - which led to the construction of roads, dams, hydroelectric power plants, irrigation canals, productive restructuring and colonization of territories - especially between 1960 and 1980, transforming the semi-arid Northeast region into an important fruit production area for the national and international market.

For its part, the "local nature" of southeastern Spain, and particularly of the Region of Murcia, has to do with certain localization forces characterized by the aridity and the irregular waters of the Segura river basin. From these collective representations, throughout the 20th century, the spatial and hydric artificialization and rationalization of the Segura river basin was carried out by means of the great hydraulics; this was assumed as an authentic work of State, according to the interests expressed by a modernizing regional block. The relationship of forces between agrarian modernization and the fight against an arid nature of unpredictable effects (droughts, floods) will constitute a heroic subjectivity, the farmer-irrigator, protagonist of an epic story by which the arid lands of the peninsular southeast have become a fertile orchard that will pass, with the entry of Spain in the European Economic Community in 1986, to be called "the orchard of Europe".

2. Given their productive specialization, territories such as the San Francisco River Valley and the Region of Murcia will be shaped during the developmental stage of the Green Revolution, and will be progressively articulated with the global value chains dominated by large food distribution corporations. Thus a historical nature is forged, defined in both territories by the logics of capitalization and exploitation of labor, and its frontiers of appropriation of cheap nature, both human (unpaid or poorly paid work) and extra-human (soil, water, toxic sink spaces).

The element that opened up the developmentalist perspective of the San Francisco River Valley was its configuration as a water appropriation frontier for the irrigation of thousands of hectares dedicated to the production of high-value fruits for export. In this definition of the frontier of appropriation of cheap natural resources, the State played a decisive role.

The frontier of appropriation of cheap nature defined by the agro-industrial development of the Region of Murcia has sought to guarantee the availability of water and soil as cheap nature; this has to include the formation of a sink for agro-

chemical waste, such as the Mar Menor lagoon, an ecological ecosystem of international importance in collapse after decades of agricultural nitrate discharges.

3. The feminization and ethnification of labor that characterizes the social organization of labor in the new agro-industrial regions are based on the social construction of gender and ethnicity, according to a natural order that assigns women and ethnicized subjects certain positions in labor relations derived from their nature. It is, therefore, the essentialization of women and ethno-national origin as a "specific nature" that determines their properties, behaviors and tendencies - what they are like and what they are for - to extract cheap labor according to a logic of appropriation (not only of wage-regulated exploitation).

2. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has presented the possibilities that a nature perspective opens up for the research agenda of the sociology of agriculture. We can understand capital accumulation as a socioecological process, that is, a way of organizing and imbricating human and extra-human natures. In this way we have explored the enclaves of intensive agriculture as a historical nature shaped by a particular "ideology of nature". From this, agroindustrial capital takes advantage of the historically specific form of nature, insofar as it contributes its conditions of possibility to the value relation through logics of capitalization and appropriation.

The San Francisco River Valley and the Region of Murcia compose a "local nature", whose common characteristic is to have aridity as its main locational force, while being characterized by similar disturbances: drought imbalances, irregularities in water availability for irrigation, and floods. These imbalances of local nature are represented as "nature's revenge", that is, the punishment brought about by an uncontrolled nature towards the human societies that have been inhabiting it for centuries (in the form of prolonged droughts, floods, etc.). In such a way that the modernizing vision of this local nature is to submit it to control through the intervention of state public policies: hydraulic infrastructures for the regulation of river waters, irrigation infrastructures and agricultural colonization.

The representation of an external nature plays a determining role in the configuration of the hegemonic modernizing vision. With their specificities, both the San Francisco Valley and the Region of Murcia share a social genesis as peripheral, empty, backward historical natures, whose deficiencies determine their condition of backwardness with respect to general development. In this ideology of nature, the territory is thought without social agents or agency, without its own endogenous development strategies or social conflicts, only communities that suffer the vicissi-

tudes of an uncontrolled nature. The vision of a nature to be conquered and transformed is imposed on this collective representation and the constitution of a modernizing social block as a growth coalition, which unites interests and elites, will lead this transformation.