

DISPOSSESSED TERRITORIES: THE RESISTANCE OF THE COMMUNITIES OF FUNDO AND FECHO DE PASTO IN WESTERN BAHIA



<https://doi.org/10.56238/arev7n2-249>

Submitted on: 01/21/2025

Publication date: 02/21/2025

Wilian Ribeiro de Padua¹.

ABSTRACT

The article aims to understand the spoliation of the territory where the communities of Fundo and Fecho de Pastos live for centuries in Western Bahia, mainly in the region of Correntina/BA. The objective also extends to the perception of the mobilization of these communities, especially against agribusiness, aiming to maintain their territories and, consequently, their environment and way of life. The methodology is based on qualitative research procedures, such as field research, participant observation and field diary. The theoretical and methodological questions were based on the reflections proposed from the Geography of Labor and Agriculture. Agribusiness does not only materialize the plundering of the territories of traditional communities, because water is almost monopolized to meet the demands of monoculture, the felling of the biome to expand planting areas, in addition to the poisoning of these same rivers and soils through pesticides used indiscriminately. The State, subservient to agribusiness and silent to the needs of workers, was one of the generators of the conflict of November 2, 2017. Traditional communities continue in a constant mobilization, the attacks on their territories have not ceased and the climate of a new escalation of violence is constantly in the air.

Keywords: Traditional Communities. Territory. Agribusiness. Conflicts.

¹ Doctorate student in Geography at UFG – Federal University of Goiás
wrpadua@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The article aims to understand the dispossession of the territory where the communities of Fundo and Fechos de Pastos live for centuries in Western Bahia (Figure 01), mainly in the region of Correntina/BA. The objective also extends to the perception of the mobilization of these communities, especially against agribusiness, aiming to maintain their territories and, consequently, their environment and way of life.

Figure 01: Municipalities that comprise the West of Bahia



Source: Miriam Hermes, Jornal da Tarde, 2013

The methodology is based on qualitative research procedures, such as field research, participant observation and field diary. The theoretical and methodological questions were based on the reflections proposed from the Geography of Labor and Agriculture.

A little more than 500 km from the capital of Brazil, on November 2, 2017, one of the most significant spontaneous acts of resistance of the 21st century broke out. In Correntina, a municipality located in the west of the state of Bahia, traditional communities, which had been losing their territories for centuries, have reached their limit.

These communities make use of a secular custom, where they raise their goats, sheep and cattle free in vacant areas, as described by Santos (2010, p. 23):

Common-use lands occur in different Brazilian states and with different combinations in the relationship that peasants develop with natural resources, particularly with land. In the Northeast, the common use of the so-called "loose lands", historically engendered in the northeastern agrarian scenario since the colonial period, gains visibility. In Bahia, the correspondent of the "loose lands", safeguarding the historical and local specificities, are the "pasture bottoms and enclosures". In these lands of common use, goats and sheep are raised extensively in the Bahian hinterlands.

Santos (2010, p. 38), also adds: "Normally, this use occurs on lands considered vacant, appropriated through possession or purchase, although, in the absolute majority of cases, the groups involved have not been able to prove this fact".

The truth is that the communities of Fundo and Fechos de Pastos do Oeste Baiano have been living and surviving in their territories for at least 300 years. Certainly, there have always been problems, however, since the 1960s, the struggles for these territories have become more fierce, as described by Santos (2010, p. 16):

The social reproduction of these groups was strongly affected by the contradictory movement unleashed by the conflicts they experienced from the end of 1960, which boosted their class consciousness in the course of the struggles for the loose goat and the struggle on/for the land.

The conflicts that occurred in the 1960s were not by chance, as this period coincides with the green revolution², and one of these revolutions happened with the incorporation of the Cerrado as a new agricultural frontier. In the meantime, as pointed out by Mendonça; Pelá (2011, p. 01): "The Cerrado becomes territories in dispute".

The dispute over territory in the Cerrado biome begins to occur when it is "marked" to serve as a modern agricultural region, as described by Pereira (2015, p.67): "This is how technique and science decisively contributed to the reformulation of the map of agricultural production in Brazil, expanding the frontiers of agriculture and redefining the use of territory in the interior of the country."

Therefore, the pressures on the communities of Fundo and Fechos de Pastos began 47 years before the fateful "November 2, 2017". These pressures are the result of the power relations that occur in the territory, as described by Freitas (2015, p.199):

² The **Green Revolution** consisted of the modernization of agriculture on a global scale, **effected through the incorporation of technological innovations in production**. It was based on genetically modified seeds, agricultural machinery and chemical inputs, such as fertilizers and pesticides. In Brazil, the technical incorporation was done through government incentives concomitantly with the expansion of agricultural frontiers to the Cerrado regions.

In view of the different power relations that materialize in the territory, it is possible to affirm that there are several conflicts regarding its use and appropriation – based on the different interests of the actors that compose it. In the midst of these conflicts, the State appears as the great mediator, when it is recognized that it is symbiotically linked to the territory, and a strategy for such mediation occurs precisely through public policies.

In Western Bahia, "the mediating power of the State was begged", pretended not to know the existing problem and, from small to small conflicts, November 2 was reached, a time when the communities could no longer bear the aggressions suffered decades ago, as described by Gonçalves; Chagas (2020, p. 03):

On November 2, 2017, a holiday of the dead in the Catholic tradition, the municipality of Correntina, in the west of Bahia, was the scene of a conflict that made national news and international repercussion. The event involved between 600 and 1,000 people in an action on two farms of the Igarashi group where power transmission equipment, sheds, hydraulic pumps, pipes, tractors and irrigation pivots were destroyed.

Only after the fateful clash was the State forced to intervene. Thus, when the state power perceives the organization of the "Feicheiros", it is forced to listen to them, as defended by Poulantzas (1980, p. 153): "In this way, although the State serves to organize the dominant classes and to disorganize the dominated classes, it can, through organized and recurrent contestations of the subordinate classes, be dysfunctional to the intransigent interests of the bourgeoisie".

First, the traditional communities organized and rebelled, and with the "unexpected" support of the population of Correntina (Figure 02), the state played its mediating role. Then, for some time, it turned its eyes to the "Feicheiros", but with the passage of time, Agribusiness returned to act against the land, water and the way of life of the communities of Feicho and Fundos de Pastos.

Figure 02: Public act in the center of Correntina in favor of the affected communities



Source: Pivots of Discord Book

However, almost six years after the peak of the peasant revolts, the State returned to play its role, turned its gaze to the owners of capital, once again ignoring problems of land grabbing, devastation of the Cerrado, use and contamination of soil and water. Polantzas (1980, p. 171) already identified this role of the state, as described:

In general, the capitalist state as a whole is condensed in the contradiction intrinsic to class struggles and, in this way, reconditions its role in order to favor the hegemonic class and disarticulate the working class. Thus, "the state apparatuses consecrate and reproduce hegemony by establishing a (variable) game of provisional compromise between the bloc in power and the fraction of certain dominated classes."

The state being mostly part-time and ignoring the needs of the "invisible" classes, makes this scenario favorable for Agribusiness to appropriate the territory used for centuries by the communities of Fundo and Fechos de Pastos.

AGRIBUSINESS AND TERRITORIAL DISPOSSESSION IN WESTERN BAHIA

There was a time when the only way to connect with the West of Bahia was the São Francisco River, and it was precisely the river that made the first occupations in the region possible. Rebouças et al (2009, p. 03) describe that:

The history of the occupation of Western Bahia is marked by the importance of the São Francisco River, which was the only means of connecting the region with other spaces, and later its main tributaries, located on its left bank. Além São Francisco and Gerais – as the lands on the left bank of the river and those near the borders with other states were called, respectively – were far from the Bahian network of greater demographic and economic dynamism, the coast of the state, characterized by the cultivation of sugarcane in the fertile soils of massapê. The two regions are separated by the dry and inhospitable hinterland and intermittent rivers, which also hindered the flow, since the technical transport networks were incipient.

The beginning of the occupation of the region took place in the seventeenth century and was accentuated in the eighteenth century, during the period of the gold cycle. There is no consensus on the arrival of the first "Feicheiros", as it is believed that it was in the mid-seventeenth century.

The West of Bahia is inserted within the Cerrado biome, and it was precisely from the eighteenth century that it began to stand out, as described by Nogueira (2022, pg 26):

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the Cerrado undergoes a considerable increase in its population. Until then occupied by indigenous ethnicities, the biome also began to be occupied by a migrant population of European and African origin that until then was concentrated in areas near the coast. Subsistence agriculture began to coexist with a new economic activity, mining. This new activity allowed the occupation of the regions where the current states of Minas Gerais, Goiás, Mato Grosso do Sul and Mato Grosso are located.

Since the first movements of occupation of the Cerrado biome in the eighteenth century, it has gone through several expansive phases. These were named as occupation fronts. The first happened with migratory movements; the second began with the construction of railroads and roads that entered the territories. The march to the West is considered the third phase of occupation of this biome.

Until 1970 Brazil was a rural country, and at that time, in a way, even today, the rural is/was a sign of backwardness. Now, a so-called "backward" country, with the majority of the population living in a rural environment, was not something well regarded, as described by Gomes (2006, p. 30): "The rural, even more so the rural of a country considered underdeveloped, such as Brazil, would be the paradigmatic representation of backwardness".

At the beginning of the 1970s, not only was Brazil seen as being backward, but the Cerrado was also not well regarded. It was understood as only suitable for raising cattle. However, in the middle of this decade, the government began to encourage the economic exploitation of the Cerrado through agriculture with public policies. In the EMBRAPA-Cerrado yearbook (2015, p. 08) it describes that:

The great agricultural development of the Cerrado was driven by the ease of removal of native vegetation and by positive factors such as temperature, luminosity, flat topography and great availability of limestone. Socioeconomic factors that benefited this development were: low land prices, infrastructure, research, technical assistance, investment policies with subsidized interest and long-term terms, migration of farmers from the south of the country, accustomed to more intensive agriculture and the developing market.

With the advance of Agribusiness in the Cerrados of the Midwest of Brazil, it did not take long for them to reach the West of Bahia. Thus, with his arrival, it would not take long for the problems with traditional communities to increase, as seems to be customary in Brazil, as Mitidiero argues; Goldfarb (2021, pg. 31):

In the Brazilian case, these impacts are enriched by the frequent and violent expulsion of traditional communities, indigenous peoples and peasant producers to make room for the expansion of this agricultural model, added to the historical pressure, which has become more evident in recent years, against the Amazon Rainforest and the Cerrado/Pantanal.

However, agribusiness does not only materialize the plundering of the territories of traditional communities. In addition, water is almost monopolized to meet the demands of monoculture, the felling of the Biome to expand planting areas, in addition to the poisoning of these same rivers and soils through pesticides used indiscriminately, as attested by Mitidiero; Goldfarb (2021, pg. 27):

It is the choice to encourage the constant renewal of the primarization of the Brazilian economy to the detriment of the health of workers, environmental health and sovereignty over our natural resources and territories, discouraging industrialization and ensuring the best conditions for rentism and plunder in the country's economy.

Agribusiness has managed to foist on the Brazilian population the view that agribusiness is synonymous with technology, popularity and totality, as attested by Carvalho; Oliveira (2021). This modern agribusiness confronts the "old agribusiness", backward and unpopular.

Consequently, those who suffer the most are the small rural landowners, those who are invisible to the eyes of the State. This invisibility leaves the owners of capital free to "grab" ³the lands of these peasants. However, the "Feicheiros" have already understood that the only way is resistance, even if this implies some kind of violence.

VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE

Every morning we receive news from all over the world. And yet, we are poor in surprising stories. The reason is that the facts already come to us accompanied by explanations. In other words: almost nothing that happens is at the service of the narrative, and almost everything is at the service of information. Half of the narrative art is in avoiding explanations. In this Leskov is masterful. (Think of texts like The Fraud, or The White Eagle.) The extraordinary and the miraculous are narrated with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological context of the action is not imposed on the reader. He is free to interpret the story as he wishes, and with that the narrated episode reaches a breadth that does not exist in the information. (The narrator, Walter Benjamin)

The struggle to maintain their territories has been going on for a long time, and as the conflicts to maintain them have increased, the communities of Fundo and Fechos de Pastos began to expose to state agents and society as a whole, what happened to them.

In general, information is "created" by the holders of capital or by those who support them. Consequently, the real information ended up not reaching society. Therefore, only when traditional communities understood that if they remained passive as they were, their territories would be taken away from them, since then, violence has begun.

The Igarashi farm began its activities in the south of the country in 1975, expanding its activities to the Northeast and Midwest of Brazil. On its official website it is possible to read words highlighting the importance of the farm for Brazil and, especially, for the region where it is installed: "With the hiring of local labor, IGARASHI contributes to the development of the regions where it operates. In addition, the collection of taxes – own, from its employees, suppliers and service providers – associated with the income generated for its employees, is a strong and essential development agent for municipalities and local communities⁴".

Therefore, with a closer look it is possible to identify the contradictions between the official discourse and the practice; Since the struggle of the communities was not based

³ Land grabbing is the term used for the practice of illegally taking possession of public or third-party lands. The word land grabbing comes from an old practice of falsifying land titles where criminals used crickets to age these documents and give the impression that they were old.

⁴ <https://igarashi.com.br/>

only on the issues of land misappropriation. Problems such as deforestation, excessive and improper use of water and the exaggerated use of pesticides were also criticized.

For MAB activist Andreia Neiva, "The State, subservient to agribusiness and negligent to the needs of workers, was the one that generated the problem. It was not our fault, it was the fault of the State and agribusiness. We only reacted" (Neiva, 2018). For Harvey (2005, p. 43) "Accumulation is the engine whose power increases in the capitalist mode of production".

The State and agribusiness are really to blame for the events that occurred on November 2, in Correntina-BA. The State for closing its eyes to the existing problem, and agribusiness for making these eyes remain closed. This promiscuous relationship is only possible thanks to the capital available in the hands of agribusiness.

The more territorial expansion there is, the more agribusiness accumulates, the more it accumulates, the easier it is to please the agents of the State. However, the traditional communities, seeing their territory threatened, went to fight.

The images in Figures 03 and 04 circulated widely in the "world of agribusiness", in addition to illustrating several media reports, which already delivered the information all "ready", in general electing minorities as the only ones responsible for alleged losses of R\$500 million reais.

Figure 03: Results of the clashes at the Igarashi farm



Source: Canal rural, 2017.⁵

⁵ <https://www.canalrural.com.br/noticias/mil-ribeirinhos-invadem-fazenda-quebram-tudo-69620/>

Figure 04: Result of the clashes at the Igarashi farm



Source: Canal rural, 2017.⁶

Linked to the images of the conflict at the Igarashi farm, dozens of condemnatory notes made by agribusiness and agribusinessmen were flooded in the most diverse media, such as that of the Igarashi farm on November 4, 2017⁷:

"Invaders promoted an unjustifiable and criminal act of vandalism, even injuring one of their employees" highlighting that "all the activities developed have the environmental authorizations which, in turn, "went through all the procedures before the competent environmental agencies, and the activities were only started after regular completion of all the processes of authorizations and licenses with their studies, inspections, surveys and conclusions.

However, what the news broadcasters do not show are the attacks suffered by traditional communities. Every day, these people suffer attacks from gunmen and land grabbers. The latter simply invade the lands that have been occupied for centuries and begin to build fences (Figure 05) trying to forcibly take over the territories of the "Feicheiros".

⁶ <https://www.canalrural.com.br/noticias/mil-ribeirinhos-invadem-fazenda-quebram-tudo-69620/>

⁷ Available at: <https://ongdip.wordpress.com/2017/11/04/igarashi-emite-nota-de-esclarecimento-sobre-invasao-de-fazenda-em-correntina/>

Figure 05: Fence post installed at night



Source: Padua, Wilian, 2023.

Another subject not disclosed by the media is water pollution, in Figure 06, it is possible to observe the São Desidério River, near the municipality of the same name. Although visually the river water is "beautiful", it is so polluted that residents are receiving water through water trucks.

Figure 06: São Desidério River completely polluted



Source: Padua, Wilian, 2023.

In response to accusations from the Brazilian countryside, 35 entities came out in support of traditional communities; now, being accused of bandits, terrorists, among many other untrue adjectives. These entities published, on the same day as the statement from the Igarashi farm, a long note exposing the ills that the "feicheiros" were experiencing and also the society dependent on the water of the Arrojado and Correntes rivers.

Part of the note released by the entities defending the cause of the secular holders of the disputed territory reads:

"For decades, agribusiness (has had its own) performance, based on a tripod that has as its central axes: the invasion of public lands through land grabbing and gunmen; the use of public money for the implementation of megastructures and monocultures of grains and cattle ranching; the irresponsible use of natural goods, common goods, with irreversible impacts on the environment, especially on water and biodiversity, in addition to immeasurable social impacts".

The omissions of governments, societies and the media are anchored in a discourse where agribusiness and all the ills brought with it are justified by the pseudo-development trumpeted by agribusiness. However, development is not something simple and finished, as Amaro (2017, p. 77) argues:

The theme of development continues to give rise to various approaches and controversies. For some, it remains a goal and a dream to pursue with determination. For others, it is nothing more than a myth, which continues to mobilize and attract peoples and nations, in a way that is not justifiable, because it is unattainable. For still others, it is a piece of an ideology and a strategy of domination of the powers over the peripheral countries. For others, it is a "zombie" or dying concept, which must be banned and replaced by more appropriate ones. For still others, it is a concept in renewal, open to new paths and leads.

This development promised by agribusiness never arrives. On the other hand, what arrives is manipulation, coercion, confrontation, disrespect for the environment, indiscriminate use of water, illness and lies. In addition to the communities of Feicho and Fundos de Pastos suffering, society, in general, carries with it the evils of this activity, often deceived by the discourse of "agribusiness". But after all, everyone eats from the same contaminated land, drinks from the same contaminated water, and breathes the same contaminated air.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A research seeks to apprehend the contradictions that exist in the appropriation of territories. This appropriation, which involves illegality, exploitation of workers, deterioration of environmental conditions.

In a way, these attitudes generate conflicts, because, despite social inequality, workers inserted in the appropriate territories or in the process of appropriation, do not remain silent, they do not tire of fighting for what belongs to them since ancient times.

For many members of the communities of Fecho and Fundos de Pasto in Western Bahia, raising their "animals" free in Gerais is the only way of life they know and want. It's not much, it's a simple life, a hard life, but that's what they learned from their ancestors, and that's what they want to continue to do and pass on this ancestry to their descendants.

Agribusiness, armed with the power of the owners of capital, does not want to know about traditional communities, they want to make a profit, grab land, increase production and accumulate even more.

The State is silent about the power of the owners of capital, perhaps because agribusiness is an "investor" in electoral campaigns for public office. Perhaps the inertia of the State is intentional, or, sometimes, because it is naturally slow.

Given this, the truth is that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. The scenario for the "feicheiros" is not the best, despite the resistance and the struggle, the combat is unequal. The power of capital "cripples" the combatants, who just want to live and survive and hope that tomorrow will be a new day, and that this one will bring better news.

REFERENCES

1. Amaro, R. R. (2017). Desenvolvimento ou pós-desenvolvimento? Desenvolvimento e... Noflay. Cadernos de Estudos Africanos. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/cea/2335>. Retrieved on August 2023.
2. Benjamin, W. (1994). O narrador: Considerações sobre a obra de Nikolai Leskov. In *Magia e técnica, arte e política: Ensaio sobre literatura e história da cultura* (pp. 197-221). São Paulo: Brasiliense.
3. Carvalho, J. T., & Oliveira, A. R. (2021). O agronegócio no Brasil: O discurso da fração de classe reinante. *Revista NERA Presidente Prudente*, 24(58), 28-55. Available at: <https://revista.fct.unesp.br/index.php/nera/article/view/8082>. Retrieved on August 2023.
4. EMBRAPA. (2015). *Anuário EMBRAPA Cerrado*. Brasília: Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária.
5. Gonçalves, C. W. P., & Chagas, S. B. (2020). Os pivôs da discórdia e a Digna Raiva: Uma análise dos conflitos por terra, água e território em Correntina – BA. Curitiba: Editora Bom Jesus.
6. Gomes, J. R. M. (2017). Desenvolvimento em (des) construção: Narrativas escalares sobre desenvolvimento territorial rural [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia Presidente Prudente]. Available at: <https://repositorio.unesp.br/handle/11449/105042>. Retrieved on August 2023.
7. Harvey, D. (2005). *A produção capitalista do espaço*. São Paulo: Anna Blume.
8. Mendonça, M. R., & Pelá, M. (2011). O Cerrado Goiano numa encruzilhada de tempos: Os territórios em disputa e as novas territorialidades do conflito. *Revista Geográfica de América Central, EGAL*. Available at: <https://www.revistas.una.ac.cr/index.php/geografica/article/view/2368>. Retrieved on August 2023.
9. Mitidiero Junior, M. A., & Goldfarb, Y. (2021). O agro não é tech, o agro não é pop e muito menos tudo. São Paulo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueiros/brasilien/18319-20211027.pdf>. Retrieved on August 2023.
10. Neiva, A. (2018). Não é uma questão momentânea, é um processo histórico de roubo de água [Interview]. Escola Politécnica de Saúde Joaquim Venâncio – FIOCRUZ, Rio de Janeiro. Available at: <https://www.epsjv.fiocruz.br/noticias/entrevista/nao-e-uma-questao-momentanea-e-um-processo-historico-de-roubo-de-agua>. Retrieved on August 2023.
11. Nogueira, S. H. de M. (2022). Desmatamentos no bioma Cerrado: Contexto, padrões e tendências, impactos e alternativas [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade Federal de Goiás]. Available at: [Tese Sérgio - Caracterização do desmatamento e uma análise de alternativas para a paisagem do bioma Cerrado.pdf]. Retrieved on August 2023.
12. Pereira, M. F. V., et al. (2015). *Estado, políticas públicas e território*. São Paulo: Outras Expressões.
13. Poulantzas, N. (1980). *O estado, o poder, o socialismo*. Rio de Janeiro: Graal.
14. Rebouças, F. dos R., et al. (2009). Análise da criação do Estado do Rio São Francisco sob a caracterização socioeconômica da região Oeste do Estado da Bahia. In *EGAL*, 12^a, Montevideo. Available at: <http://observatoriogeograficoamericalatina.org.mx/egal12/Geografiasocioeconomica/Geografiadelapoblacion/33.pdf>. Retrieved on August 2023.
15. Santos, C. J. S. (2010). Fundo de pasto: Tecitura de resistência, rupturas e permanências no tempo-espaço desse modo de vida camponês [Doctoral dissertation, Universidade de São Paulo]. Available at: <https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8136/tde-06062011-163321/pt-br.php>. Retrieved on August 2023.