

## **Ethanol workers in Brazil: the other side of wealth**

*Fabiane Santana Previtali, Sérgio Paulo Morais and Cilson  
César Fagiani*

### **ABSTRACT**

The article examines the transformations that the agrarian capitalism in Brazil has been going through, focusing on the sugar and alcohol sector, primarily in the last decades of the twentieth century. The text presents reflections on the migration of the workforce involved in sugarcane farming, especially during the harvest, and shows the persistence of poorly paid manual workers who lack legal rights, which is the predominant reason why the country fits into the globalisation context. Only partial results are presented, because the research is still in progress. The article is divided into two parts and a conclusion. The first part presents the characteristics of the sugar and ethanol sector in Brazil, from its beginnings until today, where ethanol, a by-product of sugarcane, is an international commodity. The aim is to demonstrate how the sector has been restructuring the production process, involving technological innovation, geographic relocation, and foreign capital inflows. The second part discusses labour within the sector, which is marked by seasonality, informality, and poor working conditions, particularly during the sugarcane harvest.

### **KEYWORDS**

Agrarian Capitalism, Slave labour, Ethanol, Brazil

## Introduction

Sugarcane has been in Brazil since Portuguese colonial rule and has gone through various development stages. The country's insertion in the global dynamics of mercantile capitalism in the sixteenth century was as a Portuguese colony, and as a supplier of raw materials and farm products, especially sugarcane, to European countries. Recently, this economic sector has shifted, through state incentives, not to produce sugar, but ethanol, a bio fuel alternative to petroleum. Within this context, the sugar and alcohol sector has been undergoing a restructuring process that involves redefining geographical-spatial production units, and the introduction of new technologies in the production process, which requires new skills from workers. At the same time, a significant number of manual workers in poor working conditions remain at the base of the production chain. In order to better understand this apparent contradiction, an analysis of the dynamics of the development of this sector within the international division of labour and capitalist accumulation becomes fundamentally important.

The article is divided into two parts and the conclusion. The first part overviews the sugarcane sector in Brazil, from its beginnings until today, when the ethanol by-product of cane sugar became an international commodity. The aim is to demonstrate how the sector is going through a restructuring process involving geographic relocation and foreign capital inflow, with adverse implications for local communities and the environment. The second part properly discusses labour within the sector, particularly during the sugarcane harvest, which is marked by seasonality, informality, and poor working conditions.

### 1.1 – The Brazilian sugar and ethanol agro-industry

The colonization of Brazil started through a system of granting hereditary captaincies, which, when proven ineffective, was replaced by the *Sesmarias*<sup>1</sup>, an allotment regime. The *Sesmarias* system was imposed by the metropolis,

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<sup>1</sup> *Sesmaria* is a Portuguese legal institution, present in legislation since 1375. It regulates the distribution of land for production. This system arose in Portugal during the fourteenth century when an agricultural crisis hit the country. The newly formed state had no skills to organize food production so it decided to bequeath this function to deserving nobles. When the conquest of Brazilian territory became effective from 1530 onwards, the Portuguese state decided to use this system in the colony.

and remained in force for 300 years, and was only repealed in 1822, with the country's independence.<sup>2</sup> Brazil, as a colony, was characterised by concentrated land ownership, export monoculture, and slave labour. After independence in 1822, the country was under a government controlled by the rural aristocracy, who created the Land Law of 1850, an important strategy of state intervention which hindered the acquisition of lands by former slaves and farm workers.

This period was marked by large rural properties, export-oriented monoculture, and strong state intervention. From the standpoint of the international division of labour, an agrarian economy was constituted, maintaining ties of dependence on the central economies, and entering global capitalism as a supplier of primary commodities.

Within this context, the emergence of the peasantry occurred in two ways. The first was through immigration, as a solution to the problem of a workforce shortage after the abolition of slavery. This process brought millions of poor peasants from Europe to live and work in agriculture, especially in the Southeast and South of the country. The second originated in the crossbred populations between whites, blacks, and natives that were formed during colonization. These were workers who, prevented by the Land Law of 1850 to become smallholders, began a long journey in the countryside, populating it as well other parts of the territory, where they were engaged in subsistence agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

The modernization of the Brazilian agrarian economy became more systematic after a model of dependent industrialisation was adopted in 1930, directed by Getúlio Vargas and the industrial bourgeoisie, whose main feature was the subordination of agriculture to industry. It is noteworthy that the association between "modernity" and "agriculture" in Brazil has a long history. It can be ascertained that since the second half of the nineteenth century, proposals for the modernization of rural agriculture or industry had been strongly opposed by a would-be traditional agriculture, or by the traditional practices of agricultural enterprises. This was the case with the replacement of sugar processing mills in the northeast region of the country, which were highly favoured by state governments, claiming the country

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<sup>2</sup> FURTADO, Celso. *Formação Econômica do Brasil*. 34th Edition. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Cia das Letras, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> STEDILE, João Paulo. *A questão agrária no Brasil. O debate tradicional: 1500 – 1960*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2005.

needed modernisation,<sup>4</sup> and, in terms of labour relations, with the replacement of slave labour by immigrant wage work.

In the 1950s, the country experienced the impacts of the post Second World War international need for capitalist accumulation<sup>5</sup> and, in the 1960s, went through the so-called Green Revolution, when third world countries started to play the role of "world storehouses", offering food needed for the reconstruction of war-torn nations. The growth of the sector was strongly driven by the development of sugar exports, especially after the Cuban trade embargo.<sup>6</sup>

During this time, a number of technological changes were introduced to agricultural production, namely, the intensive use of modified seeds (particularly hybrid seeds), industrial inputs (fertilisers and pesticides), and the use of mechanization in planting, irrigation, and harvesting. Such changes brought about the need for the adequacy of the peasant population to the new production model, based on intensive exploitation of labour for extraction of surplus value. At the same time, under the influence of strikes among different categories of urban workers in São Paulo, the different categories of rural workers, such as sharecroppers, tenants, neighbours, comrades, and squatters, started to organize themselves to fight against social inequalities in the country by placing the issue of land concentration and land reform at the centre of the political debate.<sup>7</sup>

Stein<sup>8</sup> highlights the strong presence of the Brazilian Communist Party – PCB, and of the Catholic Church, in the process of organising farm workers, which culminated in the formation of the Brazilian Farmers and Agricultural Workers Union – ULTAB, and the emergence of the Peasant Leagues, both in 1954. Another important event was the creation of the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers – CONTAG, in 1963. However, these

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<sup>4</sup> HEREDIA, B.; PALMEIRA, M.; & LEITE, S. P. "Sociedade e Economia do 'Agronegócio' no Brasil. *RBCS – Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*. São Paulo: Anpocs. vol. 25, n. 74, October 2010, pp.159-196.

<sup>5</sup> FURTADO, Celso. *Formação Econômica do Brasil*. *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> CARVALHO, Eduardo. *As transformações Socioterritoriais Do Capital Sucroalcooleiro em Iturama, Pontal Do Triângulo Mineiro*. Unpublished Master's Dissertation, Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> SCOPINHO, Rosemeire & VALARELLI, Leandro. Orgs. *Modernização e impactos sociais: o caso da agricultura sucroalcooleira na região de Ribeirão Preto/ SP*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FASE, 1995. And STEIN, Leila de Menezes. *Trabalho, círculos operários e política: a construção do sindicato de trabalhadores agrícolas no Brasil (1954 a 1964)*. São Paulo: Annablume/Fapesp, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*,

movements were harshly repressed and criminalized with the establishment of the military dictatorship in 1964.<sup>9</sup>

A policy of agricultural modernization began in the 1970s, as the export of agricultural and agribusiness products internationally assumed great importance, and also as capital from different sources, including foreign, was used for such enterprises.<sup>10</sup> In 1975, the PROALCOOL – National Alcohol Program, was created by a Decree-Law in order to stimulate the production of ethanol to replace petroleum, which was popular in the international market. There was an impulse to expand sugarcane planting, replacing rural food production areas, where cassava and beans were produced, for example, and expanding the agricultural frontier into the central areas of Brazil. Three phases of the program deserve special highlight: the first phase, 1975-1979, when the effort to create anhydrous ethanol for blending with gasoline was marked. During the second phase, 1980-1986, the government began to systematically invest in the sector, creating bodies such as the National Alcohol Council – CNAL and the National Alcohol Executive Committee – CENAL, as well as encouraging the manufacture of alcohol-fuelled cars, thus creating a demand for ethanol. The third phase started in the late 1980s and continues today, with the deregulation of the sector by the state; in other words, when markets, faced with globalization, were opened up for internal and international competition.

It is noteworthy that the modernization policy did not include the issue of land reform. In the 1970s, less than 1% of landowners owned more than half of all rural properties. The agricultural census of 1975 showed that 52% of the country's farms had less than 10 hectares, occupying only 2.8% of all land used. In contrast, 0.8% of the establishments had more than 1000 hectares, occupying 42.6%. That is, land concentration summed up to more than half of the land owned by less than 1% of the owners.<sup>11</sup>

As changes were disseminated, rural-urban migration processes were intensified, favouring the emergence of temporary farm workers, a category of salaried rural workers working in various fields, but not owning their own land.<sup>12</sup> These workers, largely bereft of labour rights, even migrated to distant

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<sup>9</sup> Military rule began with a coup by the Armed Forces in 1964 and ended with the resumption of democratic government in 1985.

<sup>10</sup> SZMRECSÁNYI, Tamás. *O planejamento da agroindústria canavieira no Brasil (1930 – 1975)*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1979. And HEREDIA, B.; PALMEIRA, M.; & LEITE, S. P. “Sociedade e Economia do ‘Agronegócio’ no Brasil. *op.cit.*”

<sup>11</sup> MARTINS, José Souza. *Expropriação e violência: a questão agrária no campo*. 2nd Edition. São Paulo: Ed. Hucitec, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> SILVA, Maria Ap. Moraes. *Errantes do fim do século*. 2nd Edition. São Paulo: Ed. UNESP, 1999.

regions of the country, and still make up the vast majority employed in sugarcane harvesting today. At the same time, the social forms of rural land occupation were maintained, such as the riverside populations, the Quilombolas,<sup>13</sup> indigenous peoples, small-scale subsistence farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and settlers who yielded to the most diverse employment contract forms.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, the economic development policies that have stimulated the advancement of industrialisation in the field did not represent an improvement in working conditions and income of the peasant population, but rather contributed instead to their displacement from the rural areas and to an even higher concentration of land ownership.

In the 1980s, the Brazilian government began to redefine its role as an interventionist player in the sugar and alcohol sector. This context was marked by mergers, acquisitions,<sup>15</sup> and intense efforts to standardize ethanol in order to make it a new *commodity*.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth mentioning that this period was marked by an intense internationalization and globalization process of economic sectors under the aegis of neoliberalism. The need for capitalist accumulation beyond the limits of the nation state in the late 1970s in the core economies resulted in an expansion process via globalization, aiming to conquer new markets and witnessed the development of complex domination and dependence relations among peoples from different countries and regions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Quilombos were communities formed by runaway black slaves in Brazil during the slavery period. They were also common in other Latin American countries that used such a workforce between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The Brazilian Constitution currently recognises the right of the Quilombolas to inherit the land occupied by their ancestors. However, of the three thousand existing communities, only 200 had their land titles secured by 2008. (CPT, 2008). CPISP – Comissão Pró-Índio de São Paulo – CPISP. <[www.cpisp.org.br/comunidades/html/i\\_brasil.html](http://www.cpisp.org.br/comunidades/html/i_brasil.html)> Accessed February 19, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> BESERRA, Luiz. & DAMASCENO, M. N. "Estudos sobre educação rural no Brasil: estado da arte e perspectivas". *Educação e Pesquisa*, v. 30, no. 1., jan.-abr. 2004, pp. 73-89.

<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that six corporations control 85% of the grain market (including Cargill / USA, Mitsui / Japan, and Louis Dreyfus/ France); fifteen control about 90% of the cotton trade, and seven account for about 60 % of the coffee trade. Mark, 2008. MARCOS, Valéria de. "Agricultura e mercado: impasses e perspectivas para o agronegócio e a produção camponesa no campo latino-americano". In: PAULINI, Eliane Tomiasi and FABRINI, João Edmilson. orgs. *Campeinato e territórios em disputa*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2008, pp. 191-212.

<sup>16</sup> Goods with little or no degree of industrial processing, such as minerals and agricultural products, are mass-produced and internationally commercialized with prices regulated by the world market through specific stock exchanges.

<sup>17</sup> HARVEY, David. *Condição Pós-Moderna*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1998; BIHR, Allan. *Da Grande Noite à Alternativa: o movimento operário europeu em crise*. São Paulo: Ed. Boitempo, 1998.

The central features of the globalization process were: (a) greater interpenetration and interdependence of central economies, along with a higher degree of competition, resulting in an enterprise specialisation process, and (b) a new international division of labour that tended to overlap the one based on the exchange between raw materials and manufactured products, developing a division founded in the opposition of industries and sectors.<sup>18</sup>

Gereffi<sup>19</sup> proposes a new approach to the analysis of such a world-transforming process, based on the concept of a global commodity chain. The commodity chain approach aims to study global capitalism, and not national development, since the prospects of development of countries are conditioned by the form of its incorporation in global industries. Commodity chains are thus “ties between the successive stages of raw materials supply, manufacturing, distribution, and sales, which result in the final product available for individual consumption”.<sup>20</sup> Countries thus enter global commodity chains by providing goods and services to the world economy.

In the case of economically peripheral countries, such as Brazil, the author stresses that these have five major exporter roles:

- a) The export of primary products;
- b) Export processing zones – labour-intensive assembly of manufactured products from simple imported components, typically in foreign factories (the large foreign company is fully responsible for providing the input);
- c) Subcontracting to supply components – manufacturing and exporting components in technologically advanced industries in newly industrialised countries, with final assembly usually conducted in developed countries (the large foreign company is fully responsible for the purchase of the components);
- d) Original equipment manufacturing – manufacturing of finished consumer goods by hired producers, often in domestic factories. The supply of raw materials and the manufacture of the final product are the responsibility of the contractor, and the product is distributed and marketed abroad by large commercial enterprises, foreign retail chains, and brand marketers;

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<sup>18</sup> COX, Kevin R. "Introduction: globalization and Its Politics in Question". In: COX, K. R. ed. *Spaces of Globalization: reasserting the power of the local*. London: Guilford, 1997.

<sup>19</sup>GEREFFI, Gary. “International Trade and Industrial upgrading in the apparel commodity chain”. *Journal of International Economics*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1999, pp. 37-70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Original brand manufacturing – the final stage of the development of an export economy, as there is a brand-owned establishment that allows exporters a more visible presence among local and foreign retailers.

In light of such categories, it can be said that the impact of globalization on Brazilian agriculture relates to the reconstruction of agricultural product export platforms, geared towards intensifying the primary export model, with emphasis on opportunities for great flexibility in distribution and services that aggregate the product.

The mechanical innovations introduced in the field had four types of effects: (1) reduced time to perform certain tasks; (2) reduced demand for the workforce employed to carry out these tasks; (3) decrease of the need for resident employees; and (4) introduction of a qualitative change in the demand for workers, as people with higher qualifications and skills are needed, especially tractor drivers, drivers, and agricultural machinery operators. This significantly reduced the sugarcane harvest workforce demand, especially in the southeastern region of the country.

If the main export of the national economy was primary products, in this new context only countries with advanced technology could survive in the international market in light of standardization, quality, and price requirements. Thus, technological investments in agribusinesses now represents a large part of national investment in agricultural production. Given the high levels of land concentration in Brazil, only agricultural exporting sectors, such as soy and sugarcane, benefit from these investments.

Moreover, it should be noted that land ownership enjoyed an intense process of recovery, and became a property with a store of value, which Kageyama<sup>21</sup> called “capital territorialization”, further accentuating land concentration. With the increase in land value, small production was weak in the face of capital pressures, causing many small farmers to give up their land. It is estimated that thirty million Brazilians traded the countryside for the city in the period between 1960-1980.<sup>22</sup>

Until the 1990s, the sugar and alcohol sector was concentrated in the northeastern states, such as Pernambuco and Alagoas, and in the mid-South, especially in the state of São Paulo, the largest producer in the country. There is currently an expansion movement towards other regions in Brazil, such as Goiás, Minas Gerais, and Mato Grosso, but, so far, with little or no representation in this activity. These regions encompass the Cerrado and

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<sup>21</sup> KAGEYAMA, Angela et al. *O novo padrão agrícola brasileiro: do complexo rural aos complexos agroindustriais*. In: DELGADO, G. C. et al. orgs. *Agricultura e políticas públicas*. Brasília: IPEA, (Series IPEA, 127), 1990, pp. 113 – 223.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.



Pantanal biomes, as well as a large number of populations of indigenous people and Quilombolas. The repossession of these regions implies the replacement of local crops, such as cassava and beans for the domestic market, by the planting of export-oriented sugarcane. Another consequence of such repossession is the change in the migration process of the workforce employed in the sugarcane harvest. Until the 1980s, the population that migrated to the sugar plantations in São Paulo came from the Jequitinhonha Valley (Minas Gerais) and the northeastern states of Brazil, such as Alagoas, Pernambuco, Piauí, Bahia, and Paraíba. With the relocation of the sector, this migration flow has been altered to suit most crops in the Midwestern region, redefining the land occupation process.

It is worth highlighting that the notion of territory must be understood in the context of power relations, control and forms of resistance from the social groups involved. In this sense, from the late 1990s and especially in the 2000s, the rise of social conflicts in these regions can be clearly seen, as well as the ousting of local populations. In the state of Minas Gerais alone there are about 494 Quilombola communities, and of these, only one had achieved official recognition of their land by 2007.<sup>23</sup>

In this context, the state, which acted by regulating prices and production quotas, labour rights, and the relations between mill owners and suppliers, began a process of deregulation, specifically in 1999, introducing the system of free production and marketing of sugarcane, sugar, and alcohol. Despite the sector's deregulation, the state remained present through grants and funding for research on genetic sugarcane improvement, and the implementation and expansion of ethanol production plants. All of this was based on the new international demand, namely, energy alternatives to reduce global warming and environmental problems. The investments from national public funding through the National Bank for Economic and Social Development – BNDES and the Bank for the Development of Minas Gerais – BDMG were very significant. The BNDES, after 2000, started strengthening its credit lines for the sugar and ethanol sector. In May 2012, the bank launched the Sugar and Ethanol Sector Support Program – PASS, in order to finance the storage of ethanol fuel, providing R\$500 million for the sector.

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<sup>23</sup> Data from the Federação das Comunidades Quilombolas do Estado de Minas Gerais (CedeFes).

<[http://www.cpis.org.br/comunidades/html/brasil/mg/mg\\_lista\\_comunidades.html](http://www.cpis.org.br/comunidades/html/brasil/mg/mg_lista_comunidades.html)>

Accessed on 19 Feb. 2013.

Table 1 below shows the new momentum the Brazilian government is providing for the cultivation of sugarcane for ethanol production, as of the harvest of 2004/2005. It appears that sugarcane cultivation reached the states of Rondônia and Acre, located in the northern region of the country, thus increasing deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. Note the expansion of cultivation in the state of Minas Gerais, with a 152% increase of the amount of sugarcane tonnage processed in the period from the 2004/2005 until the 2010/2011 harvests.

**Table 1: Sugarcane Processed by Brazilian Mills (t) 2004-2011**

		SUGARCANE PROCESSED BY BRAZILIAN MILLS (t) 2004-2011						
STATE / HARVEST	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	
AC	0	0	0	0			33.834	
RO	0	0	0	0	106.292	111.252	136.690	
AM	267.767	252.672	224.700	318.141	303.350	211.750	346.992	
PA	580.999	510.086	697.400	575.525	626.865	623.409	521.847	
TO		95.314	179.300		55.456	45.160	238.983	
MA	1.275.119	1.797.490	1.660.300	2.134.604	2.280.160	2.209.385	2.327.485	
PI	349.329	492.369	706.000	689.130	900.181	1.014.076	836.696	
CE	79.444	40.709	27.400	8.250	122.355	154.471	36.262	
RN	2.917.677	2.356.268	2.397.400	2.047.750	3.186.768	3.515.678	2.729.169	
PB	5.474.229	4.291.473	5.107.700	5.555.712	5.885.978	6.241.756	5.246.317	
PE	16.684.867	13.858.319	15.293.700	17.535.548	18.949.518	18.259.333	16.923.679	
AL	26.029.770	22.532.291	23.635.100	29.444.408	27.309.285	24.269.759	28.958.180	
SE	1.465.185	1.109.052	1.136.100	1.367.813	1.831.714	1.480.831	2.058.963	
BA	2.268.369	2.391.415	2.185.600	2.522.923	2.541.816	2.094.547	2.791.971	
<b>NE AND NW REGIONS</b>	<b>57.392.755</b>	<b>49.727.458</b>	<b>53.250.700</b>	<b>62.199.804</b>	<b>64.099.738</b>	<b>60.231.407</b>	<b>63.187.068</b>	
MG	21.649.744	24.543.456	29.034.195	35.723.246	42.480.968	50.573.227	54.629.096	
ES	3.900.307	3.804.231	2.894.421	3.938.757	4.373.248	4.009.626	3.524.817	
RJ	5.638.063	4.799.351	3.445.154	3.831.652	4.018.840	3.258.726	2.092.723	
SP	230.280.444	243.767.347	263.870.142	296.313.957	346.292.969	361.260.727	359.438.092	
PR	28.997.547	24.808.908	31.994.581	40.369.063	44.829.652	45.578.529	43.320.725	

SC	0	0	0	0	0		
RS	77.997	57.976	91.919	128.980	107.184	48.346	81.780
MT	14.447.155	12.335.471	13.179.510	14.928.015	15.283.134	14.045.632	13.660.681
MS	9.700.048	9.037.918	11.635.096	14.869.066	18.090.388	23.111.237	33.519.668
GO	14.006.057	14.559.760	16.140.043	21.082.012	29.486.508	40.075.735	46.612.721
<b>MID-SOUTH REGION</b>	<b>328.697.362</b>	<b>337.714.418</b>	<b>372.285.061</b>	<b>431.184.748</b>	<b>504.962.891</b>	<b>541.961.785</b>	<b>556.880.303</b>
<b>BRAZIL</b>	<b>386.090.117</b>	<b>387.441.876</b>	<b>425.535.761</b>	<b>493.384.552</b>	<b>569.062.629</b>	<b>603.056.367</b>	<b>623.731.376</b>

Source: SIAMIG – Association of Sugar and Ethanol Industries in Minas Gerais (2012).

It is worthwhile highlighting that such production does not happen by itself, but requires a significant seasonal workforce volume. As with all planted areas, workers who manipulate the sugarcane move around the country in search of farm work and temporary income, living in makeshift camps in neighbouring towns. These shifts must be analysed so as to understand the working relationships that are established in the sugarcane cycle, which have singularities that allow for thorough exploitation of the workers.

## 2.1 – Labour in the sugar and ethanol sector

In Brazil, workers “consent” to migrate due to the absence of work in their native cities. That is, they are forced to migrate to other areas for survival.

The search for agricultural work is rarely accomplished together with one’s family, as was common in Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s, when entire families sought housing and work in the industrialized south-eastern centres.<sup>24</sup> The search is generally done by young males who start working with few resources to support them outside their homes. They venture out in precarious transportation, usually with the “father's blessing”, and transform the search for work into a rite of passage to adulthood and financial independence.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>SADER, Emir. *Quando novos personagens entram em cena: experiências e lutas dos trabalhadores da grande São Paulo, 1970-1980*. 3rd edition. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Paz e Terra, 1988, pp. 61-115.

<sup>25</sup>MARTINS, José Souza. “A escravidão nas sociedades contemporânea – A reprodução ampliada anômala do capital e a degradação das relações de trabalho”. In: MARTINS, J. S. *A sociedade vista do abismo: novos estudos sobre exclusão, pobreza e classes sociais*. Petrópolis: Ed. Vozes, 2002, pp. 151-162.

In contrast with the paradigms that the term “migration” usually imply, and as previous research glimpsed at in São Paulo has shown,<sup>26</sup> we used the notion of a transitional movement of workers. The living conditions that lead to the search for work comprise the list of production relationships of sugarcane workers, for example. The transition from one place to another generates debts for, among other requirements, transport, food, initial accommodation and medicine. Besides it is clear that seasonal shifting has not been conducive to networking and living in the workplace, as workers spend “some time” living in an improvised manner distant from their families.<sup>27</sup>

Seasonality, in turn, has moved thousands of people to work in sugarcane production, to harvest oranges, to do reforestation work, and finally, forwards them to rural or even urban work activities, with or without a regulated contract. Thus, workers leave their homes aiming for a quick profitable compensation, but due to the scarce income, they end up constantly moving to other places searching for more work. They follow crop harvests, engage in various activities, move around during certain periods of the year looking for an [often] uncertain occupation as a wage labourer.<sup>28</sup>

In this respect, it should be noted that the region of the *Triângulo Mineiro*<sup>29</sup> in the state of Minas Gerais was one of the areas hardest hit by the expansion of the sugarcane agro industry. In our study, taped interviews were conducted with workers and trade unionists working in this region, trying to understand what qualifications are currently required to work cutting sugarcane, an activity that attracts about 70,000 workers to the region.<sup>30</sup> The material shows that the hiring done by the contractor derives from a visual assessment, relying only on indications of physical force and “health”. In the words of an interviewee:

the “guy” who is coaxing cutters. He goes like [...] He looks at a lad. [The lad puffs up his chest, ‘cause he thinks: “this one will give me work”]... If the worker only has a medical clearance, the contractor suspects him – he has to SEE the person. If the lad is weak, he thinks “he won’t be able to handle the work [...] cutting

<sup>26</sup> DURHAM, Eunice. *A caminho da cidade: a vida rural e a migração para São Paulo*. 2nd edition. São Paulo: Ed. Perspectiva, 1984, pp.19-44.

<sup>27</sup> MORAIS, Sergio Paulo & ALMEIDA, Paulo Roberto de. “Em movimento: trabalho em canaviais e trajetórias de trabalhadores no Triângulo Mineiro nas últimas décadas”. *Revista Mundos do Trabalho*. Florianópolis: v. 4, 2012, pp. 146-162.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-152

<sup>29</sup> The Triângulo Mineiro region is one of the ten regions of the state of Minas Gerais. It consists of 35 municipalities and 4 microregions. It is located between the rivers Grande and Paranaíba, which form the Paraná River.

<sup>30</sup> ALMEIDA, Paulo Roberto; RESENDE, R. C. & MORAIS, Sérgio Paulo. Interview with Eurípedes Batista Ferreira, President of the Family Farmers and Rural Workers Union in Centralina and Araporã, Minas Gerais, Brazil. *Revista História e Perspectivas*. Uberlândia. n. 41, 2009, pp. 213-227.

sugarcane”. Because to handle all the cutting... you have to be mighty healthy. They only choose the big boys of around [...] twenty or thirty, I think. That’s it. Because you have to be “tough” to handle all the work. So, it isn’t really the doctor who does the exam, it’s the coaxers’ “eye meter”. So, lad’s there... [imitates a weak person]: “I wanna go cut sugarcane”, he says: “we’re already done, mate; we’re already full”. The big boy’s there too, the coaxer says: “gimme your papers”, looks at him... so healthy... so, the doctor only really signs the clearance...<sup>31</sup>

Work in sugarcane and unskilled agricultural activity is highlighted by the demand for physical strength and good overall flexibility, as indicated by the "what you have to do" situations which evidently dispense with any requirements of knowledge, expertise, or even previous work experience.

Selection criteria that dispenses skills and experiences, focusing on the strongest and youngest etc., coupled with being in another city, without any resources and looked down on by residents, allow for situations of extreme labour exploitation. Worker flows required for sugarcane regions has strongly impacted bordering towns, plantations and industries, causing decreased food supply, the growth of underemployed rural and urban workers, and increased rent values.<sup>32</sup>

Such a situation has resulted in several worrying consequences. Many sources indicate a precariousness in housing and the use of urban services (such as hospitals), as well as constant strikes, in which workers fight to receive unpaid wages at the end of their contracts, dispute the criteria for weighing and accounting for the tons of sugarcane cut,<sup>33</sup> die from overwork<sup>34</sup> and are even subjected to modern slavery.

Regarding legislation, among all agreements signed between the Federal Public Ministry, the Ministry of Labour, trade unions, and entrepreneurs are the "Contratos de Safra" (Harvest Contracts), created to constrain instances

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<sup>31</sup> Interview conducted in 2009 from *Histórias, Memórias e Cidadania: Estudo Sobre os Fluxos Migratórios de Trabalhadores para o Triângulo Mineiro nas últimas décadas*. Supported by FAPEMIG – Foundation for Research Support of the State of Minas Gerais (2008-2010).

<sup>32</sup> ALMEIDA, Paulo. Roberto.; RESENDE, R. C. & MORAIS, Sérgio. Paulo. Interview with Eurípedes Batista Ferreira. *op.cit.* p.221.

<sup>33</sup> SOUZA, Andrezza Gomes & CLEPS JR., João. “Concentração de poder no agronegócio e (des)territorialização: os impactos da expansão recente do capital sucroalcooleiro no Triângulo Mineiro”. *Caminhos de Geografia*. Uberlândia: Ed. Edufu. v. 10, n. 31, Set. 2009, pp. 249-264.

<sup>34</sup> ALVES, Francisco. “Porque morram os cortadores de cana?”. *Revista Saúde e Sociedade*. USP. São Paulo. V. 15, n. 3, Set.-Dec, 2006, pp. 90-98.

of enslavement of sugarcane workers. Under "Recruitment and Selection of Employees" it reads:

It is advisable that worker recruitment is done in the very region where the farm is located. However, whenever that is not possible due to the shortage of necessary or adequate manpower, worker recruitment in another region or state must occur taking into account some cautionary measures, to avoid future labour and legal problems. The following steps and precautions are suggested: (a) recruitment should be done directly by the prospective employer or through an agent (representative). The use of "contractors" is outlawed, leading, inevitably, to situations of fraud to labour legislation and to legal problems; (b) the employer must arrange the listing of selected workers, identifying them by their Employment and Social Security affiliation number (if not possessing an employment record book), home address (at least the city), detailed information about the function to be performed, the amount of the salary adjusted to the crop in reference, identification of the company / employer, and location. This listing must be made in two copies. One must be delivered to the nearest unit of the Ministry of Labour and Employment (state or region of origin of workers), and the receipt must be retained. The duplicate of the list, together with the receipt, shall be checked by Labour Inspection; (c) the transport of workers to the workplace (in a vehicle suitable for carrying passengers), food, lodging, and return transportation, should be borne by the employer, being forbidden any discounts on workers' wages (see Art. 207, paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code); (d) people under 18 years of age are prevented from exercising arduous, unhealthy or dangerous rural activities, and people under 16 are forbidden to work; (e) upon offering the job, the employer or agent shall first thoroughly inform the employee what the real working conditions and salary shall be. Thus, the employee should be aware of their workplace, lodgings (if any), employer, amount and form of payment, etc. before starting activities. It should be noted that recruiting workers under false pretence is a crime (see art. 207, paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code).<sup>35</sup>

Based on the Brazilian Penal Code, and not only in labour legislation, the above relates to living space and working conditions, highlighting that it is "advisable" that the workforce be recruited among people living in the vicinity of the crop, something that the dynamics of predatory labour exploitation has avoided. For, as already indicated, transposition, debt, and the flexibility of the economic activity, among other factors in the temporary

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<sup>35</sup>Contrato de Safra: *Manual*. Brasília: MTE – Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego / SIT – Secretaria de Inspeção do Trabalho, 2002, pp 20-21.

nature of the seasonal work, have established, on one hand, strong mechanisms of social control and the economic domination of thousands of workers, and, on the other, enhanced profits for mill owners and workforce recruiters.

Thus, reports of large numbers of slaves rescued from sugarcane plantations have been recently reported in the Brazilian press and in studies by various human rights agencies. In 2008, in one sugarcane mill alone, 401 sugarcane workers were found to be working and living in degrading situations. In this and other monocultures, hundreds of other workers were "rescued", because they were not effectively free to leave the field and had no adequate food and drinking water.<sup>36</sup>

It is commonplace to find that these plants do not comply with labour laws, for example, and operate with excessive working hours, unpaid overtime, no rest periods, lack of breaks, arbitrary termination of employment contracts, Sunday working hours, irregular protective equipment, and the lack of risk assessment and occupational health and safety measures. Sanitation problems are also common; e.g. unhygienic toilets and substandard accommodation.

In Minas Gerais, the "Memorandum of Intention to Eliminate the Burning of Sugarcane in the Sugar and Ethanol Sector", signed in August 2008 by the sector and the state, indicated the intention to "eliminate fires" and further mechanize the harvest. This would officially mean "environmental benefits, such as reducing carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, encouraging the use of the straw for energy production, and the sustainable development of the sugar and ethanol sector."<sup>37</sup>

The mechanization of sugarcane plantations, in theory, would cause a strong decrease in the number of employees in the fields in the coming years. However, the exploitation sometimes found in manual cutting has yet to be changed, for the recurrence of slave conditions on lands planted and cut by machines is still significant, as recorded in Goiatuba, a town near the Triângulo Mineiro:

Thirty-nine workers were rescued under a regime similar to slavery during an operation carried out in the municipalities of Vicentinópolis and Goiatuba. The workers were hired for the

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<sup>36</sup> PYL, Bianca; SANTINI, Daniel; HASHIZUME, Mauricio. "Atualizada, 'lista suja' do trabalho escravo chega a 294 nomes". *Repórter Brasil*. 30/12/2011. <<http://www.reporterbrasil.org.br/exibe.php?id=1978>> Accessed 18 April 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Secretária de Estado de Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento de Minas Gerais. Agência Minas. Protocolo Regula Queima da Cana-de Açúcar em Minas. 2008. <<http://www.agricultura.mg.gov.br/noticias/719>> Accessed 24 Oct. 2012.

harvest and transport of sugarcane, and were submitted to workdays of over 24 uninterrupted hours of exhaustive work. The operation was held between September 27 and October 14, and was headed by the Regional Superintendence of Labour and Employment in Goiás (SRTE), in partnership with the Ministry of Labour (MPT), the Federal Police (PF) and the Federal Highway Police (DPRF). The workers occupied roles in mechanized sugarcane harvesting, operating machinery, tractors, and trucks. The property owner had only two teams that took turns in either 12-hour work days (12 hours working and 12 off), or in relay weekly shifts, sometimes in 24 hours shifts (24 hours work and 24 off). Adding up the shift hours of journey, each worker covered from 15 to 27 daily work hours. The working hours exceeded by more than one hundred percent the ones established by law. Currently, every shift worker can work 6 hours a day, and regular, fixed schedule workers, 8 hours daily. Despite earning wages, workers did not get paid overtime or paid weekends. According to the auditors, workers were already feeling the effects of overwork. At least two accidents had taken place on the property, both involving drivers. In one incident, a worker fell asleep on the wheel of a truck loaded with sugarcane. By the time he woke up he had already hit the contour. Working an employee to exhaustion is considered to be analogous to slavery. The labour auditors have issued thirty-nine unemployment insurance applications for each of the workers, who will receive three instalments of a minimum wage each. In addition, they will receive severance payments totalling R\$ 946,000, plus payroll taxes.<sup>38</sup>

Some researchers have dealt with the issue of slavery in the Brazilian agribusiness<sup>39</sup> and others have shown interest in examining the mechanisms and the enforcement actions that have been conducted in different regions of the country.<sup>40</sup>

The problem deserves, however, greater attention from humanities scholars for, as we see it, the "green economy", and other positive attributes resulting from the use of sugarcane as ethanol needs to be analysed from different angles, both academically and politically. A few critics have called attention

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<sup>38</sup> "Fiscalização resgata 39 pessoas em trabalho escravo em Goiás". *Rede Brasil Atual*. 17/10/2011. <<http://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/trabalho/2011/10/fiscalizacao-resgata-39-pessoas-em-trabalho-escravo-em-goias>> Accessed 12 May 2013.

<sup>39</sup> MARTINS, J. S. *Fronteira. A degradação do outro nos confins do humano*. São Paulo: Ed. Hucitec, 1997, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> BARELLI, Walter & VILELA, Ruth. "Trabalho Escravo Hoje. Depoimento de Walter Barelli e Ruth Vilela. *Estudos Avançados*. v.14, n. 38, Abril 2000, pp. 78-81. COSTA, Patrícia Trindade Maranhão. *Combatendo o trabalho escravo contemporâneo: o exemplo do Brasil*. ILO – International Labour Organization, Brazil Office. Brasília: Satellite Editors, 2010, p.57.



to dissonance around the "green" environmental element. James Lovelock, the British scientist who formulated the "Gaia Theory", elaborated, in 2006, on the production of bio fuels. According to him,

to produce sugarcane [...] one must either occupy the space devoted to food production, or cut down trees, which help regulate the climate. This is counterproductive. A few years ago, many scientists thought that bio fuel was the right fuel. Now that we know how serious the problem of global warming is, we realise that this is not the best solution. We scientists owe the Brazilian people an apology.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, there is still something that needs to be taken into account: namely, the evaluation of economic growth and profit accumulation versus productive relationships that cause impoverishment, deaths, and the enslavement of thousands of workers in Brazil.

### 3 – Closing remarks

We may say that the pattern of rural development in Brazil has maintained the impossibility of access to the land and severe concentration of land ownership. Such a framework does not encourage poverty reduction and intensifies social exclusion in rural areas. Changes are confined to mechanized harvesting, biotechnology, genetic engineering, and information technology. While these innovations could create new jobs and occupations previously non-existent in rural areas, they involve highly selective workforce recruitment with few prospects for workers with low professional qualifications.

Taking into account the aspects mentioned above, the influence exerted by the old colonial metropolises, the modernization of rural areas, and the encouragement of large agro-businesses are factors that underlie the current condition of Brazil as a commodities exporter. The initial reasons why sugarcane was brought to Brazil kept on being strengthened during the development of capitalism in the country, maintaining a source of huge profit extraction and an unequal and exclusionary land ownership structure.

The expansion of the sugarcane agribusiness in the Triângulo Mineiro must be observed not as an isolated event, but as part of an agricultural policy that

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<sup>41</sup> LOVELOCK, James. In: SILVA, Maria Ap. & MARTINS, Rodrigo Constante. "A Modernidade da Economia Junker à Moda Contemporânea do rural paulista: a degradação social do trabalho e da natureza". *Retratos do trabalho no Brasil*. Uberlândia: Edefu, 2009, pp.279-328.

prioritizes the expansion of the sector in a country which is closely integrated in the international labour division.

