



# ***The peasantness of Brazilian agriculture in the Campos de Cima da Serra region: the communities bordering Caxias do Sul***

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## **Abstract**

Contextualized within the broad scope of contemporary Brazilian rurality, this multidisciplinary research was conducted in the rural districts of Caxias do Sul (Vila Seca and Criúva) and São Francisco de Paula (Cazuza Ferreira and Juá) in southern Brazil. It presents the theoretical-methodological contours of the ethnographic study conducted from 2011 to the present, while applying the notion of agrarian systems and comparative cartographic analysis to deepen the study of the landscape of the habitation of the place. This combination provides insights into the peasant livelihoods of the farming families who engage in semi-extensive beef and dairy cattle farming and local colonial polycultures. In the Atlantic Forest Biome, among the mosaic of autochthonous fields and mixed rain forest, there is a conflicting interface: this specific peasantry plays a leading role in conserving the landscape that supplies water to the populations of the two cities, however the existence of that peasantry is threatened by the environmental and sanitary regulations originating from the municipal authorities. Regarding this issue, the land and community arrangements currently found in the studied rurality are discussed. The reflections that arise point to the importance of proper and concatenated consideration of the peasant characteristics of the *Campos de Cima da Serra* region in the contexts of public policy of the urbanities contained within it.

**Keywords:** Periurban rurality. Peasantry. Conservation. Ethics.

**A campesinidade da agricultura brasileira na região dos Campos de Cima da Serra:  
o entorno de Caxias do Sul**

### Resumo

Contextualizada na abrangência compreensiva da contemporânea ruralidade brasileira, a pesquisa multidisciplinar efetuada nos distritos rurais de Caxias do Sul (Vila Seca e Criúva) e de São Francisco de Paula (Cazuza Ferreira e Juá) ao sul do país embasa esta contribuição acadêmica. São apresentados contornos teórico-metodológicos do trabalho etnográfico, conduzido de 2011 ao presente focado no aprofundamento do estudo da paisagem da habitação do lugar, guiado pela noção dos sistemas agrários e com investigação cartográfica comparativa. Tal conjunto permite o conhecimento das vivências familiares agrícolas de características camponesas: a pecuária bovina semiextensiva de corte e leite e as policulturas coloniais. No Bioma Mata Atlântica, em mosaico de campos autóctones e floresta ombrófila mista encontra-se conflituosa interface: a específica camponesidade protagoniza a conservação da paisagem que contém a água para o abastecimento da população urbana das duas cidades. Contudo, esta ruralidade específica tem sua existência dificultada pela incidência das normatizações ambientais e sanitárias originadas pelas autoridades municipais. A partir desta problemática discorre-se sobre os arranjos fundiários e comunitários atualmente encontrados na ruralidade estudada, com derivadas reflexões apontando para a importância da consideração própria e concatenada das características camponesas dos Campos de Cima da Serra nos contextos de política pública das urbanidades nesta região igualmente contidas.

**Palavras-chave:** Ruralidade periurbana. Campesinato. Conservação. Ética.

### La campesinidad de la agricultura brasileña en la región de los Campos de Cima da Serra: el entorno de la ciudad de Caxias do Sul

### Resumen

Contextualizada en el amplio marco de la contemporánea ruralidad brasileña, la investigación multidisciplinaria realizada en los distritos rurales de las ciudades de Caxias do Sul (Vila Seca y Criúva) y de Sao Francisco de Paula (Cazuza Ferreira y Juá), al sur de Brasil, sustenta esta contribución académica. Se delinean los elementos teórico-metodológicos del trabajo etnográfico, realizado desde el 2011 hasta el presente momento, centrado en la profundización del estudio del paisaje de la habitación del lugar, guiado por la noción de los sistemas agrarios y con una investigación cartográfica comparativa. Este conjunto permite conocer las vivencias familiares agrícolas de características camponesas: la ganadería bovina semiextensiva lechera y para carne, y las policulturas coloniales locales. En el Dominio del Bosque Atlántico, en un mosaico de campos autóctones y de bosque ombrófilo mixto, se encuentra una interfaz conflictiva: la específica camponesidad es protagonista de la conservación del paisaje que contiene el agua para el suministro de la población urbana de las dos ciudades. Sin embargo, esta ruralidad específica tiene su existencia dificultada por la incidencia de normativas ambientales y sanitarias originadas por las autoridades municipales. A partir de esta problemática, se discurre sobre la organización comunitaria y de tierras encontrada actualmente en la ruralidad estudiada, con reflexiones derivadas apuntando hacia la importancia de la consideración propia y articulada de las características camponesas de los Campos de Cima da Serra en los contextos de política pública de las urbanidades igualmente contenidas en esta región.

**Palabras clave:** Ruralidad periurbana. Campesinado. Conservación. Ética.

## 1 Introduction

The backdrop of this reflective writing is the contemporary ‘national rural world’<sup>1</sup> — understood in terms of its own stable reality, defined by historical, geographical, social, cultural, economic, and ecological particularities, aspects which collectively shape its various modes of existence within Brazilian society, resulting in ‘various and diverse worlds.’ According to the classic analysis by Favareto and Wanderley (2013), a specific rural world can be viewed as a distinct intersection of space and time – i.e. an existence rooted in a particular place and moment. This world may be seen either as a regressive stage to be surpassed, and thus destined to vanish, or as something that will gradually dissolve into a *continuum*, ultimately transforming into a faint remnant within predominantly urban spatialities.

Alternatively, rural specificity is seen to emerge, as Abramovay (2003, p. 53, author’s italics) states, as a social *value* in contemporary times, whose defining characteristics include agriculture as the predominant economic activity, a close relationship with nature, low population density, and proximity to urban dynamics. Wanderley (2001, p. 37) echoes this view, emphasizing the distinction between the countryside and city retains its significance. However, the author highlights that the relative differentiation of rural spaces arises from the social processes shaping the occupation of these territories, being understood as a place for living. Hence, the particularization of this space emerges through the identity and citizenship references of those who inhabit it, whereby the spaces of this rurality are viewed as collective goods closely connected to the activities of farming families. In these families, according to the same author, a distinct culture resides that must be reproduced to support the “technical-economic, environmental, and sociocultural” dynamics unique to this milieu. From another perspective, Favareto (2006, p. 98), drawing on the work of various contemporary scholars, notes the relatively recent emergence of this rural configuration within Brazilian society, marked by complexity and a scope extending beyond agricultural activities. According to him, this recent social world now encompasses a broader environmental dimension, including issues such as “access to land, watershed management, forest and river conservation, and the valorisation of the landscape and biodiversity”.

To understand the relationship between the so-called ‘new Brazilian rurality’ and the broader social context, it is crucial to consider the idealization of progress identified by Favareto and Wanderley (2013) in the national case. The process of development in Brazil has become hegemonically linked to the industrialization and urbanization trends observed in the country since 1930. However, it is equally important to address the counterpoints to this view, as highlighted by the same authors. Drawing on the works of Celso Furtado (1959) and Florestan Fernandes (1960), they present a more complex historical narrative, where rural and urban contexts are interconnected in the development of Brazilian society and are distinctly shaped by the current patterns of inequality. In this context, Favareto and Wanderley (2013), referencing José de Souza Martins (1994), also emphasize the persistence of

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<sup>1</sup> Double quotation marks are used for literal quotations and single quotation marks are used for our highlights and those of the authors (quotation marks or italics), the latter being indicated at each occurrence.

“backwardness as an instrument of power” – a dynamic that is reflected in the current, deeply unequal constitution of Brazilian civil society. The *latifundia* support a dominant rural class, which is in turn a fraction of the national ruling class. Furthermore, they argue that the land structure of these vast estates serves as a tool for the domination of local subordinate classes.

Finally, the same two authors identify that the diverse ways of life within this particular scope of analysis coexist in varied cultural forms with distinct local and regional implications. These rural realities are structured around three core aspects regarding their place in the Brazilian development process: the construction and reproduction of land assets, the relationships of belonging to a small group, and the need for integration into larger spaces beyond the place where they live and work, especially at the municipal level. In essence, Favareto and Wanderley (2013) argue that these elements shape the expectations of those living in contemporary rural Brazil. Such inhabitants desire to conserve key aspects of this rurality while also seeking access to goods, employment, and services available in urban areas. Equally, in their specific analysis, the authors highlight that the general path for the future design of Brazilian society lacks definition. Within this comprehensive framework, the concept of the rural oscillates between two contrasting views: as “a space for investment” or as “a place for living.” Thus, current urbanization and industrialization trends may reinforce the dominance of “large landholdings as the preferred model for rural enterprise”, perpetuating the privileges of the “old regime” and maintaining the reproduction of traditional power hierarchies. By contrast, the alternative vision outlined by the authors sees modernization as the means to provide rural inhabitants with the goods and services necessary to empower them to exercise a citizenship rooted in and “practiced from their place” (Favareto & Wanderley, 2013, pp. 42-45).

Within this comprehensive assessment, in a more focused approach, the present case study involves, in particular, the identification of the living conditions within family-based agricultural arrangements in association with debates on the peasant character of their existence. This analysis is grounded in multidisciplinary research conducted in southern Brazil. Specifically, the study’s empirical field, centred on four rural districts within the municipalities of *Caxias do Sul* and *São Francisco de Paula*, is detailed together with its theoretical and methodological frameworks. Through a temporal exploration of this unique cultural dynamic, associated with a landscape predominantly inhabited by farming families who emically self-identify as “*campesinas*”, the discussion centres on the continuity of these specific agricultural practices in this rurality that is subjected to a normative framework shaped by the demands of the surrounding metropolitan area.

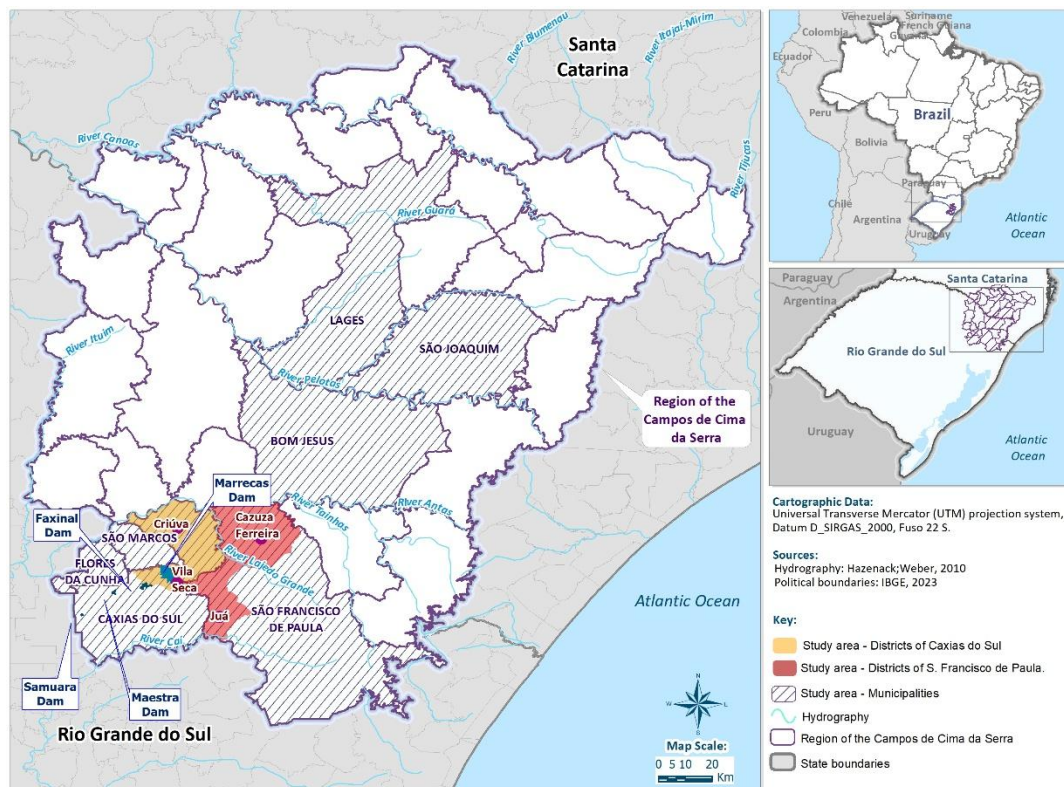
## 2 Study area

This research is situated within a region that spans areas in the neighbouring states of Santa Catarina and Paraná, part of the Atlantic Forest Biome. According to Boldrini (2009) and Overbeck *et al.* (2009), this area is known as the *Campos de Altitude do Planalto das Araucárias* or *Campos de Cima da Serra*. This study is rooted in knowledge of the ‘the farming of the place’ among the grasslands of southern Brazil, centred on a mountainous plateau in the north-eastern corner of *Rio Grande do Sul*. In its development, the core of the empirical research is based in the predominantly



rural districts of *Vila Seca* and *Criúva* in *Caxias do Sul*, as well as *Juá* and *Cazuza Ferreira* in *São Francisco de Paula*. It is important to note that the ethnographic journey extended beyond these districts to include other neighbouring municipalities, as illustrated in Map 1. These include *São Marcos*, *Flores da Cunha*, and *Bom Jesus* in *Rio Grande do Sul*, and *Lages* and *São Joaquim* in *Santa Catarina*.

Map 1 — Location of the Study Area



Source: Authorship Claudia Ribeiro, cartographic elaboration by Silvia Olinda Soares Aurelio

*São Francisco de Paula* originally encompassed all the districts under discussion. Its name first appeared in 1852, with the designation ‘de Cima da Serra’, as a district subordinate to the former municipality of *Taquara do Mundo Novo*. In the near future, this historical connection may become purely symbolic, as *Cazuza Ferreira* and *Juá* are actively pursuing annexation into *Caxias do Sul*<sup>2</sup>. Despite being foreseen as the future headquarters of the *Serra Gaúcha* Metropolitan Region (created in 2013 but still under regulation) Ferreto (2022) characterizes *Caxias do Sul* as having the profile of a medium-sized city. It is unique among cities of its scale in *Rio Grande do Sul* due to its significant industrial sector. According to 2021 estimates, the city’s

<sup>2</sup> Similar to what happened in *Vila Seca* and *Criúva* decades before. By State Decree No. 7842 of June 30, 1939, confirmed by Federal Decree-Law No. 1307 of May 31, 1939, the district of *Vila Seca* (previously known as *João Pessoa*) was transferred from the municipality of *São Francisco de Paula* to *Caxias*. *Criúva* came into existence as a district through Municipal Act No. 25 of January 9, 1903, which registered its creation in *São Francisco de Paula de Cima da Serra* (ALVES, 2010, p. 267 and 268; IBGE, 2010c). Its incorporation into *Caxias do Sul* was made official by State Law No. 2531 of December 15, 1954, after two plebiscites were held.

population has surpassed half a million inhabitants, making it indisputably the largest urban centre in the vicinity of the study area. In contrast, *São Francisco de Paula* has a population of just over 20,000. A closer look at the 2010 Demographic Census reveals that 3,916 people resided in *Vila Seca* and *Criúva* (two rural districts of *Caxias do Sul*), which together span 624 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for 38% of the municipality's total area. Meanwhile, *Cazuza Ferreira* and *Juá*, in *São Francisco de Paula*, cover 1,014 km<sup>2</sup> -roughly 30% of the municipality's area — and are home to 2,095 people. Together, these 6,011 inhabitants are understood within this discussion as fully immersed in the studied rurality, even though the IBGE classifies some small population clusters in these districts as “urban” (IBGE, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c).

### 3 Methodology and Results

The study of the landscape of the place that focuses on understanding its unique rurality, began in 2011, guided by a theoretical-methodological framework rooted in ethnographic research. This first phase, which extended until 2014, documented this landscape's trajectory<sup>3</sup> in close connection the agricultural history of its geographic context.

The adoption of an ethnographic perspective has significant theoretical implications for the research, which is multidisciplinary in origin, an aspect that also strongly influences the methodological choices. Central to this approach is the process of understanding agrarian systems. As outlined by Mazoyer and Roudart (2010), the importance of this process lies in its capacity for intellectual and methodical analysis of the agricultural reality, achieved through an understanding of its organization and functioning. By examining the historical dimensions and geographical characteristics of the various agricultural forms found in the study location, this theoretical framework aids in identifying changes affecting production processes and their interaction with a specific milieu. This includes their relationships with nature and coexistence with non-agrarian production systems. Miguel (2018) further emphasizes that the study of the evolution and differentiation of agrarian systems begins with an analysis of the cultivated ecosystem in its diverse historical manifestations. The initial phase involves recognizing the agrarian space — specifically by interpreting its landscape — which results in its regional zoning. This process incorporates the geomorphological and pedological characteristics of the empirical area under study, along with how these features are perceived by the surrounding population. Subsequently, the research seeks detailed information about the agricultural practices and their connections to the rural world, with the goal of understanding the corresponding social production system in its unique organization and functioning. This enables the identification and description of the various activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural, that have historically contributed to the formation of this agrarian landscape. Ultimately, this approach aims to uncover the factors driving cyclical fluctuations in agricultural practices and the shifts that define their distinct agrarian production systems.

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<sup>3</sup> This conjugation unfolds across space and time as a dynamic process where objective and subjective elements intertwine in a society's relationship with its terrestrial extension (a relationship that constitutes a milieu) (BERQUE, 2011a, p. 193).

The reconstruction of the evolution and differentiation of agrarian systems began with the consultation of valuable works by local authors, supplemented by cartographic analysis and prospective fieldwork. Following this, the landscape was examined through progressively deeper ethnographic engagement with its inhabitants, whose knowledge of agrarian history proved essential. The initial ethnographic phase employed participant observation during the cycle of celebrations of the Festivals of the Divine Holy Spirit, which successfully identified a profound feeling of landscape in the districts of *Vila Seca* and *Criúva*, enabling the reconstruction of a ‘narrative of its trajectory’ across four agrarian systems that have shaped the region, namely: the indigenous system (10,000 B.P. to 1760), the ‘*sesmeiro*’<sup>4</sup> system (1760 to 1912), the colonial system (1912 to 1980), and the contemporary system (1980 to the present).

Thus, the agricultural activities of the inhabitants of this particular rurality, which, over time and space, come to constitute the milieu as perceived through the notion of landscape, are described. Ribeiro, Dal Forno, and Miguel (2015) highlight that the subjective aspects of this study were guided by the empirical criteria developed for this purpose by Augustin Berque<sup>5</sup>. Through this framework, the presence of a feeling of landscape in *Vila Seca* and *Criúva* was clearly identified, which, moreover, is recognized as a shared dynamic cultural resource — a common good — subject to social dilemmas, as theorized by Hess and Ostrom (2007) and Leite (2012). On the other hand, from the objective side of the constitution of this landscape, the enduring dynamism of agricultural activities is evident. These activities, rooted predominantly in family-based production systems, are closely intertwined with the mosaic of native grasslands and forests characteristic of the Atlantic Forest Biome in the region.

Insights gained from reading his archival materials and interviewing Osmar Possamai revealed the existence of a historical map of part of the study area: the *Sesmaria Palmeira dos Ilhéus* map (1871), which encompasses nearly the entire *Criúva* area and a significant portion of *Vila Seca* and provides detailed measurements of fields and forests (Possamai; Rizzon, 1987, p. 44). Subsequent negotiations with the State Historical Archive secured access to the original document, allowing high-definition photography, geo-referencing, detailed cartographic analysis, and comparison with other historical records, including the *Planta da Fazenda nos Ilhéos* (The Plan of the *Ilhéos Farm*) by Ernst Müzell, part of Measurement Report No. 1534 under Law 1850 by Serafim José Gonçalves. Based on this preliminary information and the existing knowledge of the landscape, the primary analytical categories for the cartographic survey were established: the distribution of field and forest areas.

Simultaneously, permission was obtained from the Autonomous Municipal Water and Sewage Service of Caxias do Sul (SAMAE) to use 2011 satellite images of the municipality. Additionally, maps from the Brazilian Army were incorporated, enabling the study to establish three key temporal markers of objective

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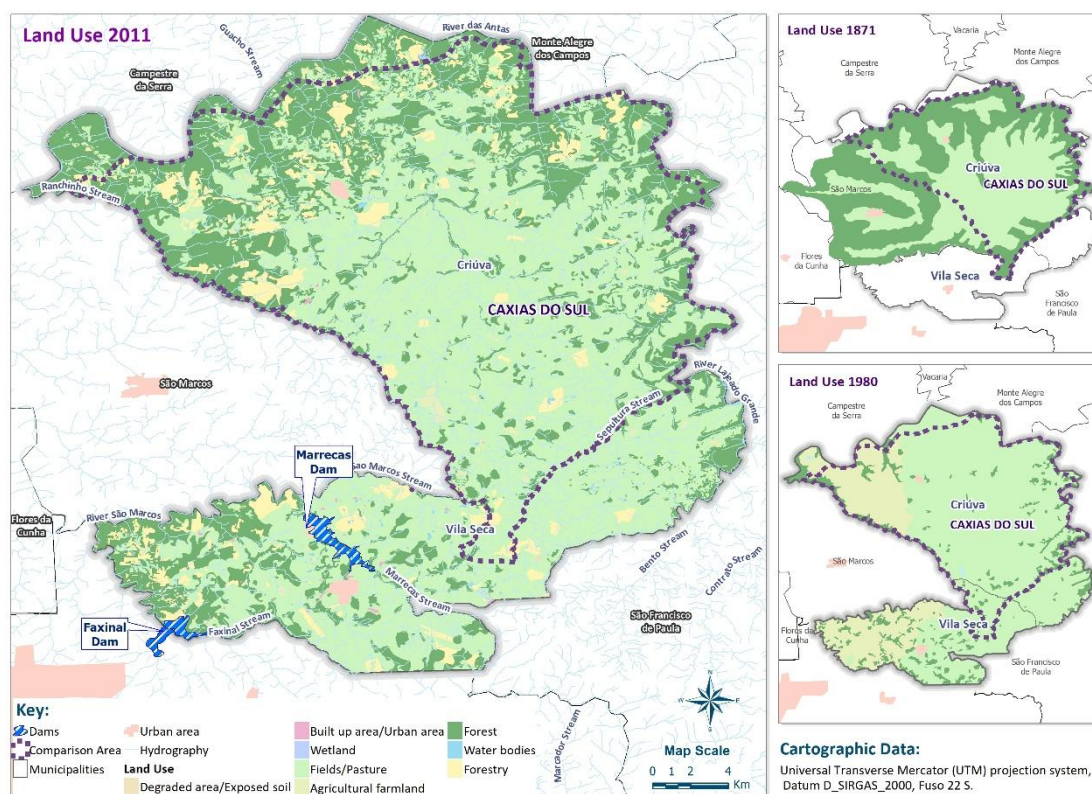
<sup>4</sup> The term *sesmaria* refers to lands allocated under a legal framework established in Portugal at the end of the 14th century and later adopted in Brazil to regulate colonization practices. The recipient of these lands was known as a *sesmeiro*. (MOTTA, 2005, p. 2)

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see Ribeiro (2014, p. 264-271), comparing these criteria from Berque (2011b, p. 201) with the ethnographic evidence gathered in the first phase of this knowledge act.



measurement for field and forest areas within the same spatial section (DSG, 1980; Müzell, 1871, p. 49; Satélite\_GeoEye-1, 2011). This comprehensive set of primary sources allowed for a detailed and unique cartographic study of land use, conducted alongside the ethnographic immersion. By analysing the *sesmeiro*, colonial, and contemporary agrarian systems, the research objectively demonstrates the cyclical persistence of the landscape of the place, as illustrated in Map 2.

Map 2 — Comparative Mapping of Land Use and Cover



Source: Authorship Claudia Ribeiro, cartographic elaboration by Silvia Olinda Soares Aurelio

Topographical measurements recorded by Müzell in 1871 indicated that the land was then composed of 55.4% Mixed Ombrophilous Forest and 44.5% native grasslands. However, by 1980, army maps revealed that much of this forest, predominantly consisting of araucaria, had been nearly eradicated. Following the intensive exploitation of timber from these pines, only 7.4% of forest cover remained. In the emic saying of the farming inhabitants that reflect the well-documented phenomenon of predatory deforestation<sup>6</sup>, “the woods disappear, and the fields begin to dominate the landscape.” By this point, native grasslands had expanded to cover 76.9% of the land, with other uses accounting for the remaining 15.7%. Once the urban process of large-scale timber extraction from this rurality had ceased, the

<sup>6</sup> According to De Boni and Costa (2011), logging in the region’s forests began in Bom Jesus before 1910, saw a significant rise in 1930 within the municipality, and later expanded in regional scope, reaching its peak in 1956 and including Caxias do Sul in this context.



landscape began to regenerate. By 2011, forest cover had increased to 33.3% of the studied area, native grasslands occupied 55.5%, and other uses comprised 8.2%.

In summary, over the past 150 years, the autochthonous mosaic of fields, grasslands and woods has coexisted stably with semi-extensive livestock farming and small-scale colonial polycultures. This enduring characteristic of the two districts reflects the deep appreciation their inhabitants have for the landscape of their homes. Originally, this landscape closely resembled that of nearby municipalities such as *Jaquirana* and *Bom Jesus*, as well as other districts of *São Francisco de Paula* — areas that also experienced significant logging activity during that time, including *Cazuza Ferreira* and *Juá*.

The ethnographic work in the second phase of this process of knowing, concluded in 2018, focused on understanding the landscape through the perspective of its inhabitants by closely following their way of live and daily tasks. This phase was guided by the studies on collective memory articulated by Rocha and Eckert (2013, p. 28) and their theoretical framework for the ethnography of duration, while also drawing on Ingold's (1993; 2012) perspective of dwelling, exploring the patterns and lines of life found within the community.

Recognizing the preference for the use of images in the empirical locality under study, the systematic collection of visual and auditory elements (photographs and videos) enabled the creation of a filmic narrative with the consent and collaboration of the place's "*campesino*" inhabitants. This narrative integrates and interacts with the illustrated text of the final academic work. During this phase, the research expanded to three points of engagement within the empirical study site, namely: i) the daily routines of a farming family within the landscape; ii) the organization of the *Festa do Pinhão* (Araucaria Pinenut Festival) and the production of *Queijo do Divino* (Cheese of the Divine); and iii) examination of the normative interface between rural-urban relations, involving attendance at meetings with public officials and revisiting the historical efforts of the *Comissão de Defesa Ambiental de Vila Seca* (Vila Seca Environmental Defence Commission) and a former mayor of *Caxias do Sul*, particularly in addressing the municipality's structural challenges, such as water treatment and solid waste management. The research also drew on private collections of photographs and video records within the region, offering invaluable insights. Equally significant was the access to historical archival materials housed in the City Council of *Caxias do Sul*, including newspaper articles and the official minutes of council sessions, which were instrumental in recovering and contextualizing the region's historical narrative.

As a result, this research has documented the existence of a particular world of vision in which the "*campesino*" residents of the districts in and around the Brazilian municipality of *Caxias do Sul* maintain ecumenal relationships that constitute their milieu (not the environment). For these communities, the landscape where they live is perceived as a common good, intricately tied to the territories they utilize. Moreover, it was observed that this mode of dwelling, which is dynamically constitutive of the landscape, also exhibits emancipatory and ethical dimensions. Through close engagement with their complex daily lives, the research gained a deeper understanding of recurring tasks in local livestock management, revealing rhythms and practices that reflect distinctly peasant temporalities.

In addition to beef cattle, one of the region's most emblematic products is its traditional cheese, called locally "*queijo serrano*" (*serrano* cheese), a name it has borne for over 150 years. This cheese is traditionally made from raw milk sourced from cattle grazed predominantly on native pastures. Its production takes two main forms in the area: the making of the regular truckles of cheese on family-run farms and the creation of a single, large cheese wheel during a complex community ritual held in the district of *Criúva* as part of the annual festivities held in honour of the Divine Holy Spirit. However, these long-standing practices now exist in a precarious context, facing ongoing criticisms regarding their legality. These challenges are further compounded by ethnic stigmatizations targeting the mountain inhabitants, who are viewed as 'mixed' compared to the 'white European' urban standard. Consequently, the landscape is marked by a dissonant clash of discourses of urban-origin — primarily concerning environmental and health regulations — that impose pragmatic and often coercive pressures on regional and local agricultural practices (RIBEIRO, 2018; 2021; RIBEIRO; ANJOS; RADOMSKY, 2015).

#### 4 The family farming of the place and its peasantry

Wanderley (2014) is a pivotal scholar for understanding the rich diversity of peasantry, in terms of life and work within the Brazilian context. She describes the vigorous theoretical and political debates that emerged in the 1970s, which ultimately led to the establishment of the category of family farming in Brazil. This recognition marked a significant milestone, as it allowed the scale and importance of family farming to be formally acknowledged for the first time in the 2006 Agricultural Census. However, Wanderley emphasizes that the concept of peasantry in Brazil extends far beyond this categorization. Drawing on a wealth of influential studies, including the works of Maria Isaura de Queiroz and José de Souza Martins, among others, she highlights the need to examine the actions and survival strategies of peasant communities. These strategies are deeply rooted in the process of their constitution within the internal and external interstices of vast estates reliant on slave labour during the colonial era.

Wanderley argues that through strategic acts of resistance, small-scale farmers — the peasants — are able to cultivate "another type of agriculture," one deeply rooted in family and community relationships. She emphasizes that this alternative agriculture is fundamentally spatial in nature, as it involves the "creation of spaces that, either legally or practically, escaped the control of landowners". These acts are historically anchored in the period surrounding the enactment of the 1850 Land Law. Between Brazil's proclamation of independence in 1822 and the full implementation of this law across the country, a legal vacuum allowed small-scale occupiers to seize land for mixed farming — the only productive activity foreseen at the time. Another avenue for land access during this period was through precarious agreements involving various modes of residence and labour on large estates previously claimed as possessions.

In essence, Wanderley underscores that farmers who can be said to be peasants are distinct from landowners and employers, as their livelihood is derived primarily from their own labour resources, in productive modes linked to the land, in activities conducted by and for the family. The defining characteristic of the

peasantry, in her view, lies in its family-based organization, both in the goals it pursues — meeting the needs of the family — and in its cooperative structure. Extending her analysis beyond production, she suggests that the concepts of peasantry and family farming are effectively interchangeable. Both terms, she argues, aim to distinguish a specific way of life and culture. Wanderley also highlights the significance of this discussion by addressing the need to recognize the scope of what became classified as family farming. Based on the opportunities for study arising from this classification, she notes that various approaches have identified situations of fragility of survival and, therefore, of the reproduction of this category as such. These include not only issues of food security but also broader forms of deprivation, encompassing material dimensions (as measured against poverty thresholds) and sociocultural challenges (WANDERLEY, 2014, pp. 26, 27, 33).

The 2017 Agricultural Census revealed that 76.8% of agricultural establishments in Brazil are family-run. This finding, echoing previous studies, underscores the vital role of family farming in the country's food production and its importance as a source of livelihood for a significant portion of the population. At the same time, however, the census data highlight the persistent concentration of land ownership that has historically characterized Brazilian rurality. Despite the predominance of family establishments, they account for only 23% of the total area used for agricultural activities (IBGE, 2020).

In contemporary efforts to analyse the family farmer in relation to the concept of peasantry, the understanding of this figure — categorized as 'predominantly a farmer' — begins with an intimate perspective on their world, centred on their work and its visceral dependence on activities tied to a specific piece of land. Woortmann (1990, pp. 19, 23) builds a subjective framework for understanding this notion through his theory on the existence of a peasantness, which he identifies across different times and places, that culturally articulates what he terms the "main core categories" of said peasant societies: the land, the family, and the work. From this viewpoint, the adopted centrality is not that of the family as the origin of the labour force necessary for material production but rather as the custodian of cultural production and value over time. This property (which the author suggests characterises of the peasant) is envisioned as a continuum that spans time and space, in which the maximum and minimum incidence are defined as an ambiguous individual appropriation, wherein "modern times are used to re-establish traditional time." This situation shows that peasant agriculture can be seen in distinct forms even within the same historical moment, varying at both the collective level and for the subject in his/her individuality.

This specific and varied peasant rurality within Brazil aligns with Leite's (2020) revisit of the concept of rurality in the country. Drawing on a robust body of literature, Leite compares the Brazilian rural panorama with those of Latin America and Europe, while critically examining both the notion of rural specificity and the discursive frameworks of public policies aimed at fostering its possible development. The author highlights a prevailing reductionist perspective in the Brazilian context, where rural areas are often politically institutionalized primarily through their agricultural production. This perspective frames the rural as a demographic void contrasted with the densely populated urban sphere. This recognition of rurality's multifaceted roles (and, by extension, the acknowledgment of diverse ruralities)

coexists with a purely productivist model. Leite (2020, pp. 231–232) reflects on this duality, pointing out the limitations of approaches that merely attempt to mitigate the negative consequences of such reductionism or pragmatically consider rurality's non-agricultural roles, which include, among others, the conservation of landscapes and the maintenance of a specific way of life. Further, Leite (2020), referencing Araújo (2015) and Bitoun *et al.* (2017), underscores the importance of understanding the rural as a historical category shaped by locally specific ways of life that are interdependently aligned with the urban context, rather than existing in opposition to it.

Medeiros *et al.* (2014, pp. 119, 133, 138) discuss the “slow but significant process of redefining the rural,” emphasizing the importance of historicity and interrelation in understanding the dynamics between rural and urban areas. Their study, which analysed the master plan and related legislation for the municipality of *Caxias do Sul*, included interviews with “key people” involved in its development, “seeking to uncover the vision of ‘city’ (our emphasis) being produced”. In their description of the municipality’s “rural zone” the immense area of which these inhabitants and rural activities are integral part are not even mentioned. This omission, while unsurprising, highlights a broader issue. Urban interviewees, including “representatives of civil society and government agencies,” view rural areas primarily through the lens of infrastructural improvement programs, such as providing machinery for paving roads. These initiatives are framed as facilitating access to the city for rural residents to obtain necessities unavailable in their own communities. Regarding sanitation policies, what remains for these rural zones – which the authors conclude are seen by the urban sphere as “residual”, are regulations concerning “soil, water, and effluent conservation.”

Drawing from the broader understanding of national peasant rurality, this study emphasizes the critical importance of deeply engaging with the unique ‘rurality of the place.’ This concept, irrevocably tied to its relationship with nearby urban centres, provides a framework for examining the distinctive characteristics of the rurality found in the “*serranos*” districts surrounding *Caxias do Sul*. The following discussion addresses pressing and singular aspects of these areas, which historically or presently maintain connections with the neighbouring municipality of *São Francisco de Paula*.

The ethnographic insights of Ribeiro (2014; 2018) shed light on how struggles for land ownership unfold locally, intricately linked to the transformation of productive activities, which, in turn, are connected to the broader processes of urban and industrial development within the region. Ribeiro (2014) provides a detailed, step-by-step account of the historical and geographical trajectory of the agrarian systems’ landscape in *Criúva* and *Vila Seca*. This analysis was later expanded in Ribeiro (2018) to encompass a broader scope, including *Juá* and *Cazuza Ferreira*, as well as extending beyond *São Francisco de Paula* and *Caxias do Sul*, as the research followed additional paths.

#### 4.1 The land issue

The indigenous agrarian system (10,000 B.P. to 1760), characterized by hunting, gathering, and early agricultural practices along the floodplains of rivers in



the *serranos* districts near present-day *Caxias do Sul* (formerly part of *São Francisco de Paula*), came to an abrupt end with the near-total extermination of the region's original inhabitants, the Kaingang. This came about during the establishment of *sesmarias* and the later colonial settlements in the era of Imperial Brazil.

In this context, it is crucial to examine the struggle for land tenure that unfolded between the *sesmeiro* (1760 to 1912) and colonial agrarian (1912 to 1980) systems across three distinct instances. The first involves the families of the original beneficiaries of the *sesmarias* in the region<sup>7</sup> — comprising Portuguese and Azorean settlers, and Brazilian-born individuals, all connected to the royal power network. The second instance pertains to those emically referred to as “the nationals”: precarious workers from the original *sesmarias* or farmers deprived of land. These individuals often hailed from other parts of what would later become the state of Rio Grande do Sul or from other emerging Brazilian states. Many among them were of Indigenous or Afro-descendant origin, frequently existing within or at the margins of slave labour systems. Besides these two forms of land occupation, governments sought to repurpose vacant lands in the region for European colons once the areas designated for the initial settlements, which formed the first urban nucleus of *Caxias do Sul*, had been fully allocated.

In this rurality of the *serranos* districts, the first landowners are, for the most part, individuals with some level of economic resources, who come to “make land” by enclosing much more than initially granted to them and later requesting the legal title of the appropriated areas. European colons (mostly Italians, but also Germans and Poles) have their initial settlement process clearly defined by the government, paying for their first plots of land. However, this does not prevent them from eventually adopting the local land appropriation strategy. The so-called “nationals” are the most vulnerable group in this context, as they begin the land allocation process without property. Their precarious housing and reliance on “work relations” with landowners gradually push them to the “*peraus*” (also known as “*fundões*”) — lands located along the steep river valleys that cut through the Araucárias Plateau (*Campos de Cima da Serra*). This displacement occurs as better-off squatters first physically occupy desirable lands and later validate their claims through legal means. As a result of this dynamic, the land structure in the “*peraus*” remains precarious, with most farming families holding only tenuous and unofficial “ownership documents”. Unsurprisingly, farming families facing the most challenging living conditions (including extreme poverty) are concentrated in such locations.

Between the colonial agrarian system (1912–1980) and the contemporary one (from 1980 onwards), a distinct form of land redistribution emerged. Numerous accounts describe how, following the end of the logging cycle, many farmers transitioned to urban life, taking up industrial jobs in the city. However, there are also stories of those who chose to stay in the countryside, working for wealthier landowners. Notably, the researched landscape includes several examples of families who, after this rural exodus and a period of urban employment in *Caxias do Sul*, managed to buy their own land and establish productive family plots. These

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<sup>7</sup> This analysis aligns with the historically precise recoveries documented by Alves (2010) for the districts of *Criúva* and *Vila Seca* and by Oliveira (1996) in a broader regional context.

individuals often declare that they would return to their birthplace, emphasizing that they never considered relocating elsewhere. An emblematic expression of this sentiment is captured in the local saying: “*The (a person born in the “Fundos da Mulada”, one of Criúva’s peraus always) returns to his land.*”

In the contemporary rural landscape, a new dynamic has emerged: aging landowners often find themselves unable to maintain agricultural operations, or the productive activities undertaken on the land no longer ensure a livelihood for the younger generations. Many younger family members, driven by the need for education, employment (often in non-agricultural sectors), and access to essential services like transportation, schools, healthcare, and communication (telephone and internet), choose to relocate to the central villages of these districts rather than to urban *Caxias do Sul*. As a result, those lands “native fields” are frequently leased out temporarily. Families are reluctant to sell these lands, recognizing their value as family assets is much greater than modest income generated through leasing. These lease agreements vary in rules and arrangements. For instance, some contracts limit the number of cattle or specify restrictions on crops, such as extensive planting of “*salada*”, “*eliotis*” or “*eucalipto*” (market gardening, pine or eucalyptus plantations), seen as harmful to “native fields”, are often discouraged. A particular source of concern is the recent introduction of transgenic soybeans. Previously absent from this region, it is now appearing in the vicinity of these districts, particularly on the best lands (those less rugged), raising significant concerns for peasant agriculture and its traditional methods of managing native fields. On the other hand, some lease agreements are less restrictive, permitting the removal of native vegetation for monocultures that rely heavily on pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

#### 4.2 Community action defends the landscape

The reinvention of the rituals of the *Festa do Divino Espírito Santo* in the two districts of *Caxias do Sul*, the creation of the *Festa do Pinhão* in *Vila Seca*, the *Festa Sabores de Criúva* and even the attempts to reimagine the *Cavallhadas* in *Cazuza Ferreira* clearly draw exemplary paths of survival in and adaptation to the new order in the contemporary agrarian system in this region around *Caxias do Sul* and *São Francisco de Paula*, as proposed by Woortmann (1990, p. 19). Rooted in the predominant Catholicism, these events incorporate secular innovations emphasizing creative agency, and even community incursions to the Azores, the cradle of these cultural manifestations. Hence the reinterpretations of the ritual constructed in each district. These annual community practices, with their dynamic and free movement beyond institutional geographic limits, are seen here as an indisputable strengthening strategy. It is clear, when observing this space-time design — this trajectory — that this form of agriculture with peasant characteristics resists in various small family enterprises, as evidenced by the conscious, affective and persistent choices to maintain this way of life in this place: an ecumenal ethic.

Notably, in the narrative reconstruction undertaken, this aspect frequently emerges in a somewhat incoherent manner, particularly in the interplay of rural and urban dynamics across the four districts. Pronounced asymmetries often characterize relational specificity that develop between these two population groups from the neighbouring municipalities.

On one hand, the technical and institutional actions originating from the urban environment show little regard with the permanence of the agricultural activities and culturally rooted rurality of the local inhabitants. At times, this attitude seems to imply that it might be more convenient for the land to be free of farmers and their activities, making it available for other urban-driven purposes. On the other hand, this urban-centric priority, which demands compliance with various normative requirements, is met with strong resistance from local residents. A notable example of this resistance occurred in 1993, when vigorous protests organized at both municipal and state levels successfully halted plans to construct a new municipal sanitary landfill in the area. Ironically, this opposition later enabled the construction of the *Marrecas Stream* reservoir, designed to meet much of the city's drinking water needs. In a cruel twist, many of these same residents saw their lands expropriated to make way for the dam.

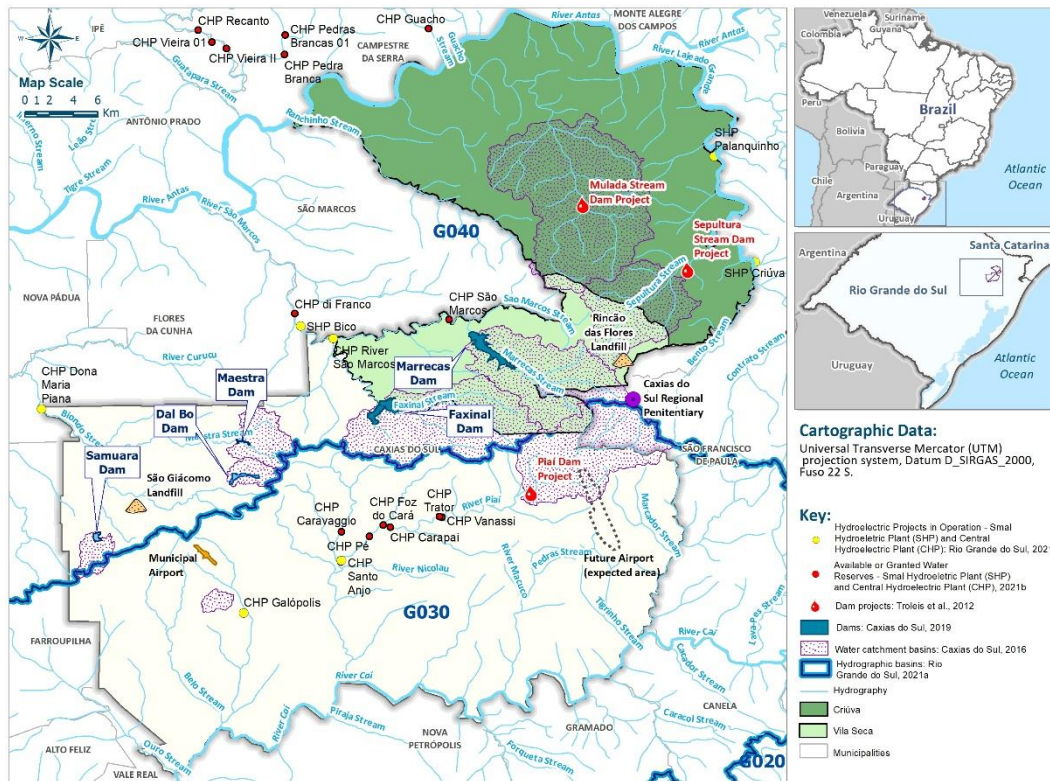
These issues can be spatially analysed using Map 3, which highlights the hydrographic features of the study area centred on the municipality of *Caxias do Sul*. The map identifies existing dams on local watercourses as well as those proposed for future construction, based on publicly available information and the legally defined "catchment basins in the water zones" (CAXIAS DO SUL, 2005; 2016; 2019).

Regarding the use of water resources for human supply, future intentions are outlined as described by Troleis *et al.* (2012, p. 193). Although potential flooding scenarios for the proposed *Sepultura Stream* dam have been considered by the municipal sanitation authority, alternative locations for the dam have yet to be disclosed (REIS; BELLADONA; VARGAS, 2016). Another publicly available set of plans involves proposed dams for hydroelectric purposes<sup>8</sup>, as detailed in the projections of the *Taquari-Antas Basin Plan* (RIO GRANDE DO SUL, 2012). These various data points were cross-referenced with the most recent listings in *Brasil* (2021) and *Rio Grande do Sul* (2021b). The latter reference was prioritized in constructing the aforementioned map due to its greater completeness and geographical specificity.

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<sup>8</sup> The documents consulted define the distinctions between a Hydroelectric Plant (HP), a Small Hydroelectric Plant (SHP), and a Central Hydroelectric Plant (CHP) based on electricity generation capacity and flood area sizes, as established by Brazilian legislation. The primary difference lies in their scale and regulatory complexity: CHPs have the highest generation capacity and are subject to the most stringent regulations, HPs are smaller projects with simpler implementation and presumably less environmental impact, while SHPs represent an intermediate category.

Map 3 — Hydrographic map of the empirical area of the study.



Source: Authorship Claudia Ribeiro, cartographic elaboration by Silvia Olinda Soares Aurelio

Additionally, this survey of public debates on water uses in the geographic area encompassing portions of the *Taquari-Antas* and *Caí* river basins mentions existing bans on damming. These restrictions stem from public planning processes for multiple water uses, conducted under the regulatory framework of the State through its respective Water Resources Management Committees. Given the complexity and scope of these guidelines, it was not feasible to overlay the licensing and granting regulations for the so-called “water resources” onto Map 3. Instead, these regulations are presented on a dedicated map, which, along with their historical context, can be accessed in *Rio Grande do Sul* (2017, 2018, and 2019).

Through this critical comparison of the mapping history, it becomes evident that not all the projects mentioned in *Rio Grande do Sul* (2012) are cited in the information currently available, nor are they always georeferenced. A notable example is the previously mentioned plan to construct a future dam on the *Sepultura Stream*. This discrepancy underscores the challenges citizens face in tracking the implementation status of such projects over time or even engaging in the public discussion phase concerning dams proposed for specific hydrographic areas.

## 5 Reflecting on the landscape in the regional context

The daily lives of these “*campesino*” farmers, as revealed in ethnographic detail through this research, underscore their strong critique of the urban-centric attitude that ultimately facilitates the construction of the new dam, exclusively



serving the drinking water needs of *Caxias do Sul*. This autocratic process, grounded in legislation defining the “zone of waters”, imposes strict prohibitions regarding access to sites traditionally enjoyed by the local rural population for activities such as bathing and fishing among others. Additionally, the regulations severely restrict the use of water resources (which were previously available to all) for traditional farming practices. The construction and use of small dams for watering livestock and irrigating small-scale crops has become exceedingly difficult, and even animal manure, once valued as fertilizer, is now deemed a pollutant. The series of licenses and reports required for compliance has rendered it nearly impossible for smaller farmers to meet the new demands. As a result, only large-scale producers — mainly fruit and vegetable growers from outside the region — can adhere to these regulations. These larger operations, drawn to the area’s affordable land and mild climate, typically rely on intensive agronomic practices, including the heavy use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and large-scale irrigation.

The resident “*campesinos*” question the contradictions inherent in the discourse that both prohibits or severely restricts agricultural activities in the region, while simultaneously permitting high-environmental-impact projects in the same water catchment area, which supplies drinking water. They challenge the ethics behind a ‘environmental conservation’ that allows the best pastures, with excellent waters, in the *Rincão das Flores* — reserved for raising the best animals, where one could dismount from a horse and cup and drink fresh water in your hand — now to suffer the consequences of urban waste disposal. Despite their mobilization, which ultimately proved unsuccessful, the city went ahead with plans to establish two waste disposal sites in the area, including for both domestic and hazardous industrial waste, as well as a prison — precisely on the sources of future water supplies, supposedly safeguarded for the city’s use. Following this, the farming community faced serious problems: despite claims of advanced slurry treatment, a severe water contamination episode occurred, and cattle often die from ingesting plastic bags blown by the wind.

Similar inconsistencies can be observed in *São Francisco de Paula*, along the floodplain of the River *Lajeado Grande* which has been dramatically altered by the *Cazuza Ferreira Small Hydroelectric Plant* intervention. Official signs now border the area, prohibiting activities that residents once carried out freely, effectively marking the territory as an institutionalized ‘environmental’ possession — a form of territorial appropriation that has become increasingly common in this region.

In this situation, it is also difficult to understand the regulations that make it extremely difficult for local farmers to use wood from an *Araucaria* tree that has naturally dried out, while allowing the government to cut down thousands of these trees while they are still alive — only to leave them to rot in piles in public view on the banks of the new *Marrecas Stream* reservoir. In a highly emblematic move, the farmers question the logic behind this “agreement or deal” that rejects the long-standing practice of managing native fields with fire, yet institutionally supports the destruction of these fields — for instance, by allowing the construction of automotive industry warehouses and the planting of monocultures reliant on pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Another aspect of this conflict arises from a recent government initiative aimed at encouraging farmers to invest in the establishment of more than two dozen

agro-industries in the localities. However, these facilities were soon rendered unviable due to inspections carried out by the very government agency that had originally promoted the rural development initiative.

The understanding of rurality that underpins this contribution is inseparable from its historical development and its relationship with the urban formation. In this context, reconstructing the dynamic trajectory of the feeling of landscape offers a new perspective on this specific rural region. In demanding to be heard, through various actions, these “*campesino*” inhabitants have vehemently voiced their opposition to the disruptive effects of ill-considered regulations of urban origin imposed on their daily lives, presenting an emancipatory counterpoint to the perverse modernization of agriculture.

One must consider why this peri-urban rural area in southern Brazil still experiences a significant level of extreme poverty, despite being located in a region nationally recognized for its success in family farming and close to an urban centre - Caxias do Sul — which boasts some of the highest development indexes in the country. It is crucial to examine the convergence of factors at play: the indicators of critical survival, linked to ethnic disparities in land appropriation, and the subsequent challenges these communities face in developing agricultural activities. These challenges are compounded by poor soil quality, rocky terrain, and steep slopes.

In the contemporary agrarian system, an in-depth understanding emerges ‘with these farmers who raise cattle,’ of the constitution of their milieu within a mosaic of native fields and forests. This space is increasingly at odds with urban aspirations to appropriate it, often reinforced by normative mechanisms originating in the city. Such mechanisms, however, appear primarily driven by the need to fulfil spatial functionalities: the urban area, with its near-metropolitan characteristics, has acted as a generator of diverse demands, which are projected onto the rural space for resolution.

What becomes evident is a lack of deeper reflection on the critical interdependence between these two spheres. The continuity of this contemporary rurality may, in fact, be essential for addressing many of these urban demands. For this reason, there must be greater attention given these human beings that are farmers, who, with their “*campesina*” sciences, are the true shapers of this unique landscape. The conservation of which is crucial for sustaining life in the neighbouring urbanity.

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