New rural identity as emancipation: Freirian reflections on the agroecological social movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil

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“Without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle”
(Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed)

Introduction

Over time, both resistance to, and support for, large agribusinesses from civil society actors have increased in Brazilian agriculture (Fontoura, 2015). On the resistance side, agroecology has consolidated itself in the country as social movement as the most effective opposition against agribusiness, which has been dominant in Brazil since the adoption of the practices of the Green Revolution (Delgado, 2008). Going explicitly against the capital-intensive practices introduced by this model, agroecology turns to intensive knowledge, mostly directed at small farmers and highly diversified areas. At the same time, it emphasizes the ability of local communities to promote grassroots innovation through research carried and transmitted ‘from farmer to farmer’ (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013). But how exactly is this happening on the ground? How has agroecology become one of the most vocal social movements in Brazil over the past few decades? And how has the agroecological movement crafted a common identity and passed on its knowledge from generation to generation as well as across different localities in Brazil? To investigate these questions, this paper offers a range of historical reflections on the formation process of the movement in the municipality of Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil.
We draw our historical analysis of the movement’s formation phase in Araponga based on the studies of Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian educator and author of the celebrated *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) amongst other contributions towards the development of a critical dimension in education. By doing so, we develop the historical reflections on the movement from Freire’s emancipatory education theoretical background that stresses self-organization through collective experiences, the learning process that enables the strengthening of the autonomy of action, the dependence relationship within the process of investigation and the mechanisms of oppression involved (Freire, 1970, 1982).

With this paper we aim to contribute to the organization studies (OS) literature on resistance, social movements and civil society organizations. Recent studies on these themes in OS have stressed that not all social movements are the same and struggles are fragmented and can be articulated in an array of different discourses, practices and strategies (Parker, 2002; Sutherland et al, 2014; Misoczky and Moraes, 2011; Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011; McAdam and Boudet, 2012). However, there is considerable lack in OS in understanding rural social movements, particularly those situated in the Global South. There is also a focus prevalent in OS that sees resistance, either formal or informal, largely within formal, often corporate organizations (Spicer & Böhm, 2007). There is also an implicit assumption that resistance that is not organized by formal groups and institutions is mostly short-term. Finally, there is considerable lack in OS studying how grassroots resistance movements build, over time, viable alternative organizations that are able to build sustainable livelihoods and identities.

The paper aims to analyze an empirical case that might provide some answers to the above questions, filling some of the research gaps in OS. It structured as follows: first, we will introduce the agroecology movement and its assumptions and practices; then we will discuss Paulo Freire’s approach to emancipatory education; then the methodology will be discussed before we provide a detailed case description and analysis of the agroecological movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil. We will close the paper with some final, Freirian reflections about education, agroecology and grassroots resistance movements.
Agroecology and its meanings

Although they have gained more prominence over the past few years, the ideas of agroecology are everything but new and its practices ‘are as old as agriculture itself’ (Luzzi, 2001).

Agroecology is very knowledge-intensive, participatory, organised and innovative, and implies farming methods based on diversification, biological interactions and agroecosystem synergies which generate and enhance soil fertility, productivity and crop resilience. In addition to its emphasis on sustaining the environment and social inclusion through participatory frameworks, agroecology-based models have produced impressive economic results in terms of yields, productivity and efficiency. (Mckay, 2012, p.5)

The term ‘agroecology’ has been used with different meanings around the world (Almeida, 2003) and the three most common ways refer to agroecology as: science, movement, and agricultural practice (Wezel et al., 2009). Some researchers defend agroecology as a science that seeks to understand the internal operation of agricultural systems, which includes the central role of the human being (Altieri, 1995; Gliessman, 2007). On the other hand, some approaches in agroecology as science (2000s) turn beyond the field of agro-ecosystems and vision to a broader focus on global food system of production, distribution and food consumption (Wezel et al., 2009). For agroecology practitioners (such as farmers, peasants, co-ops, NGOs and others), agroecology relates to a method of cultivation which focus on agro-ecosystem management and non-use of external inputs (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013).

Consequently, this is seen as a barrier to the technologies introduced from the so-called ‘Green Revolution’ highly based on agricultural biotechnology practice (Sauer, 2008; Delgado, 2008). The debate on agroecology strengthened in the 1970s, fundamentally in opposition to the established conservative agricultural model. According to Bauer and Mesquita (2008, p. 29), the Green Revolution “introduced a new social reality into the universe of family farming, with the replacement of the traditional knowledge for a scientific and instrumental one”.

Resisting the Green Revolution and its capital-intensive practices, agroecology turns to intensive knowledge, directed at small-scale farmers and highly diversified areas. It emphasizes the ability of local communities to promote grassroots innovation through field research carried and transmitted ‘from farmer to farmer’ (Rosset et al, 2011; Holt-Giménez;
Altieri, 2013). This promotion of the engagement of farmers and other people involved in farming goes beyond the understanding of the agriculture knowledge for a specific land, ecosystem and type of production. That is, agroecology does not only concern to some technical proposal to be adopted by farmers, but it also refers to a political proposition as it transcends the operational aspects and questions that lies in the current productivist logic of hegemonic of power in rural areas (Guzman et al, 2000). In other words, changes in the balance of power among technicians, farmers, nature, public institutions and market seem to be the basis of the development of agroecological experience, not only as a goal to be achieved, but as a condition for its development (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013).

In the early 1980s, agroecology became more consolidated because of the growing interest of society in environmental issues. Since then, agroecology has been advocated in two central ways: 1) a way of protecting natural resources, b) as a roadmap to design and manage sustainable agro-ecosystems by linking sustainability and agriculture (Altieri, 1995). Also in the early 1980s, hundreds of NGOs in Africa, Latin America and Asia started to promote thousands of agroecology projects. These projects incorporated traditional knowledge to modern practices of agroecological science (Pretty, 1995; Altieri et al, 1998; Uphoff, 2002). After the financial and food crisis of 2008, agroecological practices have become recognized worldwide, as intensive agriculture is increasingly seen as playing an immense role in land and livelihood degradation, climate change and other global environmental and social challenges (Holt-Giménez, 2002; De Schutter, 2010).

Furthermore, in the 1990s, especially in the U.S. and in Latin America, the term agroecology turned to describe a movement, to express a new way of practicing agriculture and its relations with society. Currently there are different social movements that share a view of agroecology (Wezel et al., 2009). The expansion of agroecology in Latin America as a farmer and indigenous resistance movement produced technological, cognitive and socio-political innovations that have been related to the new political scenarios in Ecuador, Bolivia and Brazil (Ruiz-Rosado, 2006), while recognizing that they have been rapidly changing recently.

It is important to point out that, in Brazil and in other Latin American countries, grassroots movements in agriculture have focused on the claims of ‘food sovereignty’ and ‘the autonomy of local people’ in order to resist the rapid advance of agribusiness. In Brazil, such movements are considered extremely strong, as is the case in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná and Santa Catarina, (Caporal and Morales Hernandez, 2004). In the 2000s, the international social movement La Via Campesina started a strong presence in Brazil. The
movement is now the largest international social movement in agriculture (The Guardian, 2013). In Rome, 2008, La Via Campesina signed a statement highlighting agroecology as the solution to small farmers to tackle food crisis (Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2010). These new developments suggest that the international call for food sovereignty is beginning to take root in networks of agroecology of small producers too. Therefore, agroecological local networks merge with international agricultural movements, such as La Via Campesina, which increases the social pressure for both food sovereignty and agroecology in global agri-food system. This is of big relevance since most peasants and small-scale farmers practice “low-resource” agriculture, based mainly on the use of little to no use of fertilizers, local resources and traditional seeds (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013). Additionally, in many countries, small-scale farmers represent the very large share of the poorest in the population (IFAD, 2010).

Amongst the poorest there is a growing resistance to the agrarian capitalist development through the agroecological movement worldwide, more specifically, in poor and development countries. Turning the focus from this type of development to the very peasant highlights that:

agroecologists, whether farmers or scientists, are working together to defend rural communities and agroecological cultures against the negative impacts of capitalist industrialization. If the science of agroecology is separated from the agrarian social thought and movements with which it has grown up, we would argue that its transformative potential will be lost and agroecology will become just another instrumental discipline in the continuing saga of capitalism’s struggle to overcome its own internal contradictions. (Guzmán and Woodgate, 2013: 42).

Bernstein (2014) also acknowledges the plural demands of agroecology as social movement, which avoids any generalization of being co-opted to large multinational companies or not. The author highlights (2014: 1057):

Such resistance is typically socially heterogeneous, involving multi-class movements, whose assessment always requires a ‘concrete analysis of a concrete situation’ rather than the (‘verificationist’) accumulation and celebration of the ‘emblematic instance’ counts here, as always, is trying to grasp the social dynamics and contradictions that generate such movements and that pervade them”.

All these different positions around agroecology stress the relevance of unveiling agroecology movement’s ways of crafting collective identity in Brazil and in global agri-food system field of struggle. Before we discuss the case of the emergence of the agroecological movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil, let us introduce the work of Paulo Freire, one
of the most influential Brazilian thinkers on education, social struggle and emancipation, whose educational approaches and practices have played an influential role in the Brazilian agroecological movement.

**Freire’s emancipatory education in the agroecological movement**

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was one of the most important and influential Brazilian philosophers and pedagogues (Gadotti & Torres, 2009). He was deeply concerned with critiquing modes of education and pedagogy that reproduce domination, oppression and cultural exploitation. Dominant, often Eurocentric educational regimes, produce, in his eyes (Freire, 1970), a dehuman Other that is only recognized as the recipient of information:

> Dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed. (Freire, 1970, p. 44)

Colonisation for sure is about military, economic and political might, but it is also about cultural oppression, where the colonizer seeks to impose their own ‘progressive’ forms of knowledge and understanding (Moraes & Antunes, 2011). The result is that local, indigenous, colonized cultures begin to be not only denied, but the oppressed begin to not recognize themselves anymore. A sense of identity is lost:

> The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom.” (Freire, 1970, p. 47)

Freire (1970) hence advocated a process of unlearning oppression; a process of relearning freedom to know, freedom to learn and freedom to be yourself without being told by the oppressor of what to think, know and feel. This is a process of what he (1970) called ‘critical consciousness’, which is an act of self-learning, de-colonisation (Cardozo, 2012) and self-organising amongst communities of the oppressed. Most importantly, this is not something that comes through an act of charity, the oppressor’s guilt-driven, missionary way of loving the Other, fuelled by self-interest and mirror-faced identification:

> ...the fact that certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, thus moving from one pole of the contradiction to the other... Theirs is a fundamental role, and has been throughout the history of this struggle. It
happens, however, that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know. Accordingly, these adherents to the people's cause constantly run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as malefic as that of the oppressors. The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity. Our converts, on the other hand, truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust. (Freire, 1970, p. 60)

In the context of dominant agricultural practice, there has been little trust in the people, particularly peasants and smallholder farmers. Instead, the so-called ‘green revolution’ has been mostly about importing Western, Eurocentric techniques of working the land, establishing dependency structures on non-indigenous knowledge, capital and technologies, favouring multinational agri-businesses (Fontoura et al., 2016).

A Freirian approach to peasant agriculture is hence about developing strategies of mobilization, education, and self-organization that redefine the self-identity of the peasantry and smallholder farmers and their relationship to, and understanding of, social, economic and cultural relations in their locality. A grassroots, rural pedagogy of liberation is about developing a critical consciousness, enabling the oppressed peasantry and often landless to reflect upon their own rural reality, empowering and self-organising themselves to transform that very reality (Freire, 1970).

In the context of Brazilian agrarian matters, this has precisely been the approach taken by the influential Movement of Landless Workers (MST):

the MST places education at the center of the debate, understanding that the struggle for land is also an historical struggle over education. To conceive of an agrarian reform project implies taking sides in the struggle for hegemony between opposing projects and in the battle of ideas. Thus, the MST posits a durable link between
resistance, education and politics, as the central pathway toward breaking the metaphorical enclosures of latifúndio and knowledge. (Barbosa, 2016, p. 8)

For the MST, agroecological education has been at the forefront of their rural mobilization strategy, aiming to produce food sovereignty rather than reproduce dependency that is associated with the dominant agri-business model of the ‘green revolution’. Rather than training peasants, landless farmers and their children in “virtues of high technology and resource intensive production”, which reproduces what Freire (1970) called a ‘banking model’ of education. Instead, the MST’s “focus is on using a Freirean dialogic approach that synthesizes academic and peasant knowledge systems. Through these dialogic encounters, students work to understand the cultural and political economic forces behind a farmers’ production system” (Meek & Tarlau, 2016, p. 249) as well as non-intensive, indigenous and agroecological methods of farming that are in line with local crop varieties, knowledges and cultural systems.

In 2005, La Via Campesina established the Paulo Freire Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA-PF) in Venezuela, the first international peasant university, where the “daughters and sons of peasants and indigenous people are trained to be the future of leaders and cadre of their organizations, with political organizing and agroecological skills” (McCune et al, 2014: 33). The idea behind this initiative was to gradually but firmly establish a pedagogical and political thought committed to the social dynamics of the rural and popular struggle. The IALA-PF first class had students from the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST, Brazil), the Ezequiel Zamora National Campesino Front (FNCEZ, Venezuela), the Organization of Struggle for the Land (OLT, Paraguay), the Rural Workers’ Association (ATC, Nicaragua), and others (McCune et al, 2014). So, being part of the agroecological movement is firmly seen as an educational process. In this sense, to name this university Paulo Freire is very representative of the importance of seeing “the political nature of education” and “the educability of the political act” (Rossi, 2013: 75).

A Freirian approach to agroecological education is hence about creating spaces of learning and self-organization outside formal, state-driven educational systems. But more than anything the tools Freire has given us are tools of liberation and freedom; tools that can liberate the oppressed, whether in a rural setting or not. The purpose of this paper is to study the historical emergence of such a process of liberation in the case of one specific rural setting in Minas Gerais in Brazil. Before we present this case, let us introduce our methodological approach.
Methodology

This study relies on primary and secondary qualitative data (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). In this historical investigation, we seek to trace the stories and experiences of different actors in the municipality of Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil, which attribute meaning to events in the context of the agroecological movement formation process. Therefore, the empirical research was carried out by one two of the authors in their stages of data collection in their doctoral research. In this way, data were collected in two different periods: 1) from March to April 2004, and 2) from April to May 2005.

We emphasize that the validity of the data collected in 2004 and 2005 lies in the fact that they show a step of great importance and agroecological movement achievements in the area of Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais. These data have not been previously examined from the perspective of OS. Also, as pointed before, it was in the period that the agroecological experience in Araponga began to gain prominence in the country, for instance, the Brazilian Association of Agroecology (ABA) was created in 2004. Considering the importance of this period of the agroecological movement in the country, most of the historical narrative produced lays on the movement formation process and not exactly on the actors’ lenses of this same process.

Likewise, our historical analysis is highly based on oral accounts obtained through semi-structured interviews and secondary sources. From abovementioned period between 2004 and 2005, the interviews were conducted by one of the authors during its PhD. The interviews were with agroecological farmers; technicians of the Centre of Alternative Technologies of Zona da Mata (CTA – ZM); union representatives (Union of Rural Workers – STR); and a university professor who worked as a partner in the experience. In addition to those who are directly involved in the construction of agroecological experience, six semi-structured interviews have been conducted in this period in other organizations that are traditionally involved with the dynamics of agribusiness and government agencies such as The State Forest Institute (IEF), the Technical Assistance and Rural Expansion Company (EMATER), as well as the Araponga town hall.

Respondents were selected for their relevance in the process of resistance and production of a new collective identity in the agroecological experience in Araponga, a municipality belonging to the micro-region of Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais.
Secondary data included a wide range of academic books and articles, media sources and ‘grey’ literatures on agroecology in Brazil. Multiple sources of evidence were important to allow us to better understand the way the movement was organized from the beginning.

As mentioned in the first section, we draw our data analysis inspired by the educational–political praxis of the Freirian legacy (Freire, 1970, 1982). As pointed by Barbosa (2013:8):

For many social movements, this critical awareness of education has implied an understanding of the foundations of the model of modernity in Latin America, particularly by identifying the educational–pedagogical dimension of how power is built, as well as the subjective conditions for the expansion of capitalism and how it has defeated and subjugated lives and cultures.

Therefore, from Freire’s emancipatory education theory, we focused on unveiling the aspects of self-organization, learning process to the autonomy of action, the dependence relationship in the beginning of the agroecological movement and the mechanisms of oppression embedded (Freire, 1970, 1982).

The history of the agroecological social movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil

In our research analysis we found that that, the agroecological experience in Araponga, as a social phenomenon, cannot be understood only as the result of a direct intervention of certain organizations. It is neither a result of a local arrangement, of the interests of the farmers themselves or the unplanned, “natural”, consequence of the social relations in this space.

From political, social and economic changes in the country we found out three parts of the processes of the emergence and strengthening of the movement around the alternative agriculture and the agroecology in the ‘Zona da Mata’ region of Minas Gerais: a) the intervention of NGOs linked to these issues; b) the establishment of rural workers’ syndicates in this region; and c) the social and historical development of the region.

The municipality of Araponga - located between the drainage-basins of the rivers Doce, Paraiba do Sul and Casca, which presents extremely irregular relief -, has already been, until the nineteenth century, covered by Atlantic forest and inhabited by indigenous people, especially by the tribe of the ‘Puris’. Nowadays, the Atlantic forest is reduced to only 7.6% of the original and indigenous people. Also, like the original local people, the forest was
decimated. In the nineteenth century, the region in which it would be formed the municipality of Araponga received black slaves who were brought to work in the gold exploitation and, with the decay of this activity, they began to work on large coffee plantations.

Still in this period, with the transition to free labor and low availability of controllable paid employees, the coffee production was organized in a way that the farmers offered to workers partial access to the land exploitation through settlement, sharecropping and, more recently, with the partnership\(^1\). Thus, landowners held, by the control of this resource, the power to define the contours of production, and the social and political organization of the region. This is a mark of the social construction of Araponga.

In the twentieth century, the break-up of farms due to the coffee crisis, sharing goods and inheritance allowed some settlers and rural workers to have access to small portions of land, forming the basis of family agriculture in the municipality. In small farms - up to 50 hectares (IBGE, 1996)- the production is diversified, ensuring part of the household consumption, which represents 85% of total establishments and only 37% in the region. Medium and large properties represent about 15% of the establishments, occupying 63% of the area and are dedicated to coffee growing and cattle breeding. These numbers show that although most of the land is in the hands of large and medium owners, there are a significant number of small farms that support several families. We must consider that the quality of land is also different. Large producers occupy areas of easier cultivation, flat, with higher fertility. Small farmers are in hillside regions, of fragile soils with lower fertility, in transition areas with the State Forest Preserve of ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’.

The access to land has provided, historically, unequal power between large landowners on the one hand and family farmers and rural workers on the other. So, from the twentieth century to the current days, the land access in Araponga constitutes therefore a dynamic structure of oppression that is not restricted to land ownership only, but involves all the meanings and possible achievements from the relationship that a farmer and his family establish with the land. Because of that, in the production context, for example, power relationship among those actors is also unequal. Farmers are representatives of agribusiness and, therefore, they use and impose to partners the agricultural model based on monoculture (coffee) and on the use of agrochemicals, damaging the quantity and quality of products for

\(^1\) Held the specificities of each one, these forms of production and life have in common the fact that farmers deprived of land cultivate in others’ properties and share the results of the crop with the landowners (Dias dos Santos and Florisbelo, 2004).
self-consumption of families that so demand more products from the market. Likewise, the relationship of family farmers with the market takes place predominantly on the demand side since the processing and commercialization of coffee are made by farmers. The extent of that control goes beyond the productive aspects. The poor infrastructure involving roads, health centers, transport, for example, meant that in urgent cases - especially in cases of health problems – the family farmers needed to depend on the goodwill from the owners of the land to seek medical attention. This situation strengthened the dependence relationship and patronage, allowing farmers to control also the political demonstrations and positions from partners and rural workers. Thus, the access to land represents a central control tool and oppression mechanism that establishes hegemony at the local level by large landowner farmers, agribusiness representatives. According to Alves (2006, p. 276):

farmers from Araponga build their identity through the image that they make from themselves and the values they share as opposed to ‘others’- the ‘big ones’. This is due to the fact that the history of the region, in view of these family farmers, is marked by the duality ‘violence /resistance’, necessarily represented by two groups - on one side, the ‘big ones’, the oppressors; on the other side, the ‘small ones’, the victims of the violence made by the first, but actors of resistance processes.

In 2004, during a research interview, a farmer, president of the Rural Workers Syndicate of Araponga (STR) pointed out that:

A major cause of poverty is the presence of large farms. Where people depend on farmers, there is poverty. If you get sick on the farm, you depend on the owner of the land. São Domingos [a rural community from Araponga] is an example: there, the staff is more sick and underfed. They only grow coffee and you need to buy everything outside. You cannot plant a vegetable garden or fruit. And there is no investment on the farmer’s property. There are people who die on the farm and no one knows what the cause was. Many times, the family is expelled from the farm and sent to the peripheries of the city.

This does not mean, however, that family farmers and rural workers do not adopt strategies of resistance to continue on the land, take care about their families, in order to be actually farmers.
The strengthening of family and neighborhood ties established mutual aid networks and space for reflection that formed the basis of the self-organization of family farmers of Araponga. Many of the local ideas and initiatives emerged from meetings around the Basis Ecclesial Communities (CEBs)\(^2\), which worked in the region since the late 1970. For many family farmers and also for the technicians who are at the origin of the agroecological movement in Araponga, “everything began in the CEBs”. Alves (2006) states that the CEBs acted as a catalyst for local social processes in Araponga, dialoguing with values, desires and projects that were already part of the repertoire of family farmers and rural workers from the region.

These informal initiatives allowed family farmers to organize and implement resistance initiatives against the control made by large landowners, starting with claims to ensure the land access. That was their strategy to tackle dependence and poverty – two directly related aspects, as mentioned by the interviewee:

The conventional [agriculture model established in Araponga] has no future perspective. There are people who are in the conventional model, as the partner, that cannot develop the conventional and sees no option to have a better quality of life. Who has their own land, at least can dream: today I have no money, but I'm not tied to the boss, I do not use poison, I eat good things, [things] of quality, then the dream, we see it clear. The dreams of people: I will build a yard, I will get quality for coffee and through this quality the coffee will have more value and will generate a greater financial return. (interview with a family farmer, president of STR from Araponga, 2004).

So, in 1977 and 1978, three small scale-farmers, which were brothers, decided to gather all the available agricultural production, managed to get some money and bought land that was divided between them. The debts were paid gradually with agricultural products - a sacrificed process since they needed to recover the land, make investments and ensure good productivity. However, with this opening act and autonomous of coping, this group of farmers made possible what seemed to be impossible. On their land, they could make their own decisions and began to experiment alternative forms of production, according to principles from the CEBs, as highlighted in 2005 by an agroecological farmer from Araponga, during an

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\(^2\) CEBs are the axis of work of the Catholic Church through the II Vatican Council, especially among the “popular” levels in Latin America. The theological principle that guides their practices, called “Liberation Theology”, seeks to reconcile the Christian faith with an emancipator praxis (ALVES, 2006).
academic interview: “We have never used poison because of the CEBs. They were always saying to staff what were poisons, why it came to Brazil, because they could no longer sell it out and wanted to sell here. People involved in this organization have a different consciousness from others”.

In the 1980s, the possibilities of new partnerships decreased, many farmers allocated cropland for cattle breeding and intensified the control over the partners’ work, leading to an increase on the rural exodus. For partner farmers, that model of production and life turned to be seem as unsustainable, avoiding families to eat in a proper way, to have access to basic services such as health and education, to invest in the production or do savings. It was stressed in 2005 by an executive coordinator of the CTA-ZM:

Even because it has changed about the form of partnership that had existed before. Formerly, people used to plant with partnership, but they could also grow in the fields. So, they planted coffee, but grew corn, beans, coffee, then, they diversified from the coffee production. And in latest years, at that time, what was happening? It was growing cattle breeding, coffee monoculture was growing, … there was no longer traditional settler, who had labor problems with the farmers. So, the staff begun to improve the coffee production. Thus, where they used to plant fields, now they had to plant grass.

At the same time, the workers who remained in the city and adopted productive practices disseminated by the Green Revolution could not obtain sufficient resources to support their families, featuring what farmers call as the “impossibility” to live from the land, as mentioned in 2004 by a syndicalist farmer: “In 1992, we moved to Belo Horizonte. We sold the land and bought an allotment in Contagem. (...) That happened because we had planted a lot of coffee, corn, beans and nothing grew”.

In 1987, it was created the non-governmental environmental organization, environmental NGO, called Alternative Technology Center of ‘Zona da Mata’ (CTA-ZM) which started to develop projects in Araponga. Although some alternative technologies such as seed production, green manuring techniques and soil conservation were being implemented since 1988, there was still much resistance to the work of CTA-ZM, one of the organizations that sought to expand agroecology in the region and the proposal of Alternative Technologies Project (PTA) network - main actor in building the agroecological movement in Brazil:
Well, at first, at the beginning, the focus was much more on the alternative technologies. So we got to work almost with the spread of a package; an alternative package, which was level curve, compound, covering, grouts. And gradually, we were feeling the need to... We are spreading miracle cures! Solutions that are general to any situation but they were not. (...) So, we needed to understand more about the agro-ecosystems. This was the first step. It was when we came out from this approach of alternative technology to the agroecology. Because we started from the diagnosis and make a better analysis of agro-ecosystems and, from this, think about the process of building alternatives, and so the role of family farmers was also gaining importance as experimenters, generators of the own solutions. (interview with an executive coordinator of the CTA-ZM, 2005).

Additionally, as pointed in 2004, by a small-scale farmer from Araponga: “The CTA did not bring money, but something different, but something that was in the hands of those who wanted to work. CTA supported what we already thought. We already planted Creole corn before CTA; when they came to explain, we found what you were looking for”.

This change, experienced in Araponga, has also been incorporated as the basis of the agroecological movement in Brazil:

So, this effort to build identity from the experience is essential. Without it you do not build identities. If you get talking in the abstract, people do not identify because they are very different, and it is good they are. Because respecting cultural, environmental differences and everything is one of the key things for people to meet with the concept of agro-ecology. (...) They have their own identity, it is essential to keep it, to grow it, but at a higher level, they are all family farmers, everyone is thinking about the prospect of economic viability, they all are concerned about the regeneration of natural conditions, because future generations depend on nature and family farmers think about the future generations, they think about the son, grandson. (interview with an executive director of AS-PTA, 2005).

In 1989, after many struggles and conflicts, it was created the above mentioned, STR, a rural workers union. The proposals of the union movement at the time, focused on the conflicts between employers and employees (farmers and rural workers), were not accepted by the farmers from the municipality, strengthening the non-recognition of the rural worker identity but the family farmer identity. Issues related to production have always been central
in Araponga and STR building its legitimacy, unlike other unions, defended this perspective, while dealing with labor disputes, demands for retirement and other rights. In this sense, in 2004, the president of STR from Araponga stressed:

We can cite [the actions that make up the agroecological experience] as innovation, but suddenly, people had already a potential that, because of encouragement lack, did not appear. Sometimes, it was missing a push, with someone to help us, like me who started working in the union without knowing anything... and I had not discovered I could do something. Our people have a lot of potential that has not yet been discovered. We had the potential, but to expand the work we needed a little push. As the non-use of poison, for example, and the chemist, which I did not like to use, but had no choice and had to use. Hence, when CTA came up with alternatives, we let it go: I no longer enjoyed that ‘thing’, so now we have a choice, then...

Thus, the resistance of farmers to the strictly technical proposals from CTA-ZM and STR made these organizations to revise positions and strategies, and make them to approach to try to assemble and support the needs of family farmers. It was a critical moment, with great poverty in rural areas, young people leaving the countryside, farmers selling land and leaving the city. With the support of STR and CTA-ZM, 10 years after the first collective purchase of land, small-scale farmers who initiated the process and those involved with the CEBs, decided to extend to others this practice. The process, called “conquest of the land” involves a group of landless farmers or rural workers organized by solidarity ties (familiar ship, neighborhood). In the group, they all provide agricultural products (along with loans from other people) that are sold and used to buy land in cash that is divided among the participating families. The debt will also be paid in agricultural products, in the same amount, regardless of the amount in each period.

The collective purchase of land held in 1989, mediated by STR, reflects the formalization and institutionalization of self-organization experience of family farmers against the oppression established by large landowners farmers. Alves (2006, p. 271) notes that “since the beginning of the ‘conquest of the land’, from 1979 until 1989, there was no documentation about the loans for land purchases, since ‘it was all based on trust’, as many farmers say”.

Although many rural workers are unable to gather necessary resources or organize themselves according to the land conquest principles (values also based on CEBs that drives
groups formation for new purchases), the land conquest had managed to settle down, until 2005, 100 families distributing 498 hectares of land.

This process, along with the change in the form of action of CTA-ZM, incorporated the defense of agroecology and with a union focused on the interests of family farmers leveraged the family farming in Araponga, which crafted an identity for the agroecological movement in the region.

The construction of this identity is guided by autonomy. According to reports, many farmers were frightened at first with the lack of more direct guidance, standards, since they were used to the Green Revolution’s ‘closed package’ for the agricultural production in all agriculture scales, as pointed by a technician from CTA-ZM, in 2004:

Are there principles? There are... that you will follow... but people sometimes come close to wanting the recipe. Then they discover it is not like that and start to walk away... Hence, we see that it is not about the proposal. Some people get ungrounded, but soon they find themselves. It is a social thing: we are made up of models... when you say you can decide how to do, the person gets ungrounded.

This entire process centered on the demands, on the collective learning and on the active participation of farmers, brought new meanings to the farmers:

I feel different [as a farmer] today than before. In agriculture, before, I was like a blind man who could not see and now I can see. It seems that cleared the eyes and I keep studying... I am a student today. Before, I thought I just had to work (interview with a farmer from Araponga, 2004).

Also, during an interview with a farmer from Araponga who participated in the land conquest in 2004, he highlighted:

From one year and a half to now, we entered in agroecology. There is already organic coffee to harvest... the concern about health was a reason for us to come to agroecology. Today, there is where to produce and to give welfare to the family and we had a lot of change: small children were always sick, today no more. I do not know why, but I think it was because of the poison. Before, I had to use all kinds of poison in the production [he was partner from another producer] and the clothes we take home, I think, was bad for the child’s health. Now, we do not have to run to the
The identity of the agroecological movement of Araponga around the demands of the strengthening of family farming has as formal mark: the realization of a participatory diagnosis that aimed to approximate the demands of family farmers and construct meaning for their actions, STR and CTA-ZM:

The diagnosis has changed the profile, the work of the union and the CTA as well. It was through the farmers, their interests. It does not matter if someone come and talk: ‘this is the way for the farmer’, if he did not see that way... because he is who is going to walk the way, he has to realize it as the path. It may be the perfect job, but... It does not matter to start the job if everybody does not see, observe… (interview with the president of STR from Araponga, 2004).

The five problems listed by farmers in the diagnosis made in 1993 (1st – the problem of the State Forest Preserve of ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’; 2nd - Weakening of the land; 3rd - Lack of land; 4th - Seeds: Maize and other; 5th – Health) (FARIA, 1994) and, more specifically, the fact that they all came to be effectively discussed and addressed jointly by farmers, by the CTA-ZM and STR, were a mark for the expansion of the movement. The concrete achievements resulting from the confrontation of these problems, which already informally occurred (as in the case of land conquest), attach greater legitimacy for farmers, STR and CTA-ZM, which resulted in changes in the power relations relative to farmers, rural workers and government representatives.

Between 1996 and 1997, Araponga farmers connected to the CEBs mobilized and discussed the issue about the education of their children. The idea of urban schools, disconnected from the rural reality and the family agriculture was considered by them an error that encouraged the departure of young people from the rural areas and was a barrier innovation and local development. During this period, also in the state of Minas Gerais, the construction of the movement of family agricultural schools, influenced by the alternation pedagogy, from French tradition, and coordinated mainly by the Catholic Church groups begun. Several family agricultural schools were created in Minas Gerais, in the 1990s, among them the Popular Agricultural Educational Community in the rural area of the municipality of Viçosa (an Araponga’s neighbor city), in which most students were from Araponga. The purpose of this school was to create a teaching-learning environment consistent with the
country life, but, after several conflicts between the parents of the students and representatives of the Catholic Church, the school was closed in 1998. However, the farmers from Araponga did not give up on the idea that their children should have access to a quality education, adequate to their reality.

In 2001, Araponga and other municipalities around ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’ participated in the creation of the City Plan for Sustainable Rural Development (PMDR) in partnership with the CTA, some STRs and other public organizations. In this plan, it was raised, among other things, the demands of family farming in relation to health, agriculture, education, endorsing the discussion about the creation of an Agricultural Family School in the city. The discussion about the model of education and the construction of a school in the alternation pedagogy regime also occurred in preparing the project for implementation of the ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’ territory, which sought to support in the public policy of fostering territorial development. Therefore, when at the same year, a new collective purchase of land (land conquest) was carried out, the farmers who participated in the discussions decided to cut a piece of the area that would be up to each one and donate small parcels totaling about 2 hectares designed to the construction of the Agricultural Family School. The goal was to use the school and the education to strengthen the ties of children and youth with the land and with the rural so that the achievements of that time could be valued, preserved and continued in the future.

In 2002, the association that coordinated the school from Viçosa (CEPA) was regularized and transferred to Araponga and was renamed as Puris Agricultural Family School Association, the same name given to the newly created Agricultural Family School of Araponga. CEPA, composed by small-scale farmers from Araponga, then began to devote the necessary requirements to structure and operate the school.

In 2003, it was created the Territory of the ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’ and CEPA sent a project to raise funds from the Territorial Development Program of ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’ to build the school head office. Until 2007, no funds had been released and the association decided to start the school in the house of Mr. Cosme and Ms. Amélia, farmers’ members of Puris Agricultural Family School Association, which always had involvement with social movements. They arranged the house, built a temporary space in a community task force, mobilized families and students, selected tutors, made a team planning, prepared a week of adaptation and started the school activities on February 11\(^{th}\), 2008. Later that year, the
construction of the school head office began and in 2010, according to Ferrari (2011), it was working out in the own head office, with 3 high school classes and 45 students in the Vocational Technical Course integrated to the high school, with specialization in Agriculture and emphasis on Agroecology.

Since the beginning of the movement, the market issue was important for family farmers, which originally characterized a dimension of great dependency and oppression suffered by them. With higher availability of land, innovations in the production and diversification, farmers and technicians realized the need to “build” a space in the market for their products. In 2003, they created the market of the Association of Family Farmers of Araponga (AFA) or the AFA grocery store that started to receive and commercialize the products of the farmers involved in the agro-ecological movement. In this space, foods are sold fresh and some processed, as brown sugar, fruit pulp, flour, all produced without the use of pesticides. Many of these items, before the experiment, were not even produced and today they are traded through a structure designed and managed by them, helping to supplement the family income. The implementation of the AFA market enabled learning about processes (cost, price, quality control, customer service, etc.), about the relevance of the work done by family farmers and about their capacity to engage new activities.

In 2005, the AFA discussed how to able the access to the institutional market, so that farmers could sell their products for school meals of the municipality and region, for example. This practice was made possible through the national public policy with the Food Acquisition Program (in Portuguese, PAA).

Initiatives focused on coffee marketing were also prioritized, starting with the improvement of the product quality (farmers linked to the movement won coffee quality contests), the pursuit of certification alternatives for organic coffee and partnerships for processing and commercialization, escaping from large farmers and local middlemen: “Then, [farmers] have begun to feel bad because they used to keep these farmers under control through a coffee processing structure, the trade of the coffee and they were losing it” (interview with an executive coordinator from CTA-ZM, 2005).

Around 2000, the importance of the local agroecological movement coordination with the public policy began to be outlined. It was the intervention on the implementation of State Forest Preserve of ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’ and then on the deployment of the Territorial Development Plan of ‘Serra do Brigadeiro’ that showed the importance of this type of joint.
In 2001, the creation of the Sustainable Rural Development Plan and the City Council for Sustainable Rural Development contributed to legitimize, consolidate and expand the actions of the agroecological movement in Araponga region.

Hence, it can be said that it opens a new front of struggle for the agroecological movement in the region that puts its principles and values beyond the group that supported the experience and, in turn, they become to constitute the guidelines for the development of the municipality of Araponga. It does not mean that these principles will be respected and it is still necessary to fight so they keep viable, as shows the example of Agricultural Family School (in Portuguese Escola Família Agrícola – EFA), whose project, even approved, took long time to be implemented due to resistance and bureaucratic obstacles, inclusively from the own municipality.

At this stage, it also increases the complexity of the relationships, the conflicts and the demands of dedication and hard work, both for technicians and for family farmers. In addition to the production that also became more complex, there were courses, qualifications, experience exchange, political actions, meetings, trips, resource management, school, market, and others, as pointed by a farmer from Araponga, 2004: “But it is too much work for too few people. It is not only one thing: school, syndicate, CTA, CEBS, association and the staff do not have time for everything”.

This reflects the dilemma of growing without losing the connection to the bases, with the original identity of the agroecological movement, with the demands of family farmers who supported it. This is one of the controversial issues surrounding this movement that put in danger their achievements in recent decades. We argue that the appropriation of agroecology by other organizations representing capitalist interests can distort the original proposals of the movement, emptying it senses.

The link of agroecology to the market access or the promotion of individual health, released by the media and the link of the movement’s actions with public policy and government resources that restrict or create conflicting standards in relation to the agroecological proposals, make empty the transformer aspect initially proposed by organizations (Perez-Cassarino, 2012).

Moreover, the pressure for positive financial results for small-scale farmers increases as the movement progresses. Pressures arise from other farmers, technicians and
representatives of public organizations operating in the region, but also from media sources (radio and TV):

   It always persist doubts in the minds of producers, especially for those who are not closer to the syndicate work and can give up everything because they heard the voice and ideas of other neighbors who think differently. So, the syndicate has to do a constant work with these people to fix the ideas of agroecology. Even so, there is always waiver (...). The reason is financial. Farmers have been affected by financial problems for some time, and when we enter the agro-ecology work, we take a punch in the financial sector - everybody. The difference is going through it conscientiously. Because those who produce with much fertilizer will take a punch when change, but in the future, it will be recovered with the land itself that recovers, but they cannot wait. Hence, he ends up giving up looking at the other neighbors, especially when they hear the criticism that always come from those who are outside the system. Even with evidences and experiences that the proposal may work, if it is not working with me, I'm afraid to continue (interview with a syndicalist farmer, 2004).

   Until 2005, the staff of the environmental NGO, CTA-ZM, assessed that most farmers had achieved advances in basic living conditions (health, food, production, etc.) through agroecology practices, but few had better financial returns so far. The informal experience of collective reflection and self-organization is fundamental in overcoming the dependence and poverty. Dias dos Santos and Florisbelo (2004) state that families living in communities with small tradition on participation and cooperation face major difficulties to overcome poverty.

   According to technicians’ reports, there were also, within the movement itself, conflicts over the meaning and how to implement agroecology into a single specific experience. For example, making drastic the pursuit of ecological balance can endanger the survival of families. To address this dilemma, CTA-ZM and STR – rural workers union - opted for a more “humanistic” perspective more. That was described by the own technicians that the emphasis is not only on technical and environmental aspects, but also and mainly, on the needs and abilities of people who engage in work, returning the process that gave origin and identity to the agroecological movement:

   In 1998, there was the project with fertility recovery with spreaders trees. (...) In two years, the storehouse was empty and we had to re-evaluate the process. It is time to eat, to survive and could not talk about chemical fertilizer, it was a sin. And in
function of this analysis, we use the Round-up [herbicide] to finish with the elephant-grass. We made the control, or we would sink João dos Santos. The commitment to the future was maintained. At the time of the conflict, it got difficult. The [executive coordinator from CTA-ZM] said: if I'm messing up, I pull out. Let's give a shower in the child without throwing the water out. We got to control erosion, reduce inputs and use of pesticides and, in this case, use the Round-up, which ensured continuity. The limestone was accepted. It was assumed a way to replenish nutrients. Today Round-up is not used, but at that time, it was necessary to review the principles, the agroecology laws: a myth at the time (interview with professor from UFV, an experience partner, 2004).

For us, the internal and external conflicts to the agroecological movement in Araponga, Brazil, reinforce the idea that even with important achievements, nothing is guaranteed. The field in which the movement acts, more complete and dynamic, draws attention to the dilemma faced in the current days (late 2010’s) by this movement that is to grow and work in new areas with agroecological practices and values, taking advantage of opportunities that arise, without losing its identity and original entailments with the defense of family agriculture.

Analysis and Final Reflections

In this article we aimed to study the historical emergence of the agroecological liberation process in the case of one specific rural setting in Minas Gerais in Brazil.

The historical review of changes in family farming in Araponga brings up the oppression as a historical process in which several generations of family farmers and rural workers had their identity defined externally by farmers, large landowners, that defined for this working group how to produce, how to behave, how to vote etc. The strong dependency on patronage relationships is a dehumanizing instrument, since it prevents the vocation of the oppressed to free labour and his statement as people (Freire, 1987).

The wide domination, on several instances, exerted by farmers on rural workers and family farmers, not only is given through the explicit violence but also through the supposed favours and benevolence, either by permission to produce at home offering in farm to the partners either for any transportation or assistance in case of illness etc. Freire (1987) deals
with this aspect as the ‘false generosity of the oppressors’ towards the dominated, in order to perpetuate the demand of injustice perpetuation.

The objective aspects of domination, set by the concentration of land in the hands of farmers and control of the means of production happened when the land ‘generously’ was granted to rural workers in a partnership process, and also subjectively by social relations and the construction of the ‘impossibility’ to live off the land. It was effectively felt and internalized by the oppressed. These aspects became a constituent element of these individuals, even when they seek alternatives outside of rural areas they could not exceed the limits of life that has been taught to them. Thus, the oppressed experience in this case, is perpetuated beyond the field. As if they try to look for other forms of life in the urban environment they cannot meet, hold up or survive.

Overcoming the oppressive relations involves the identification of the oppressed themselves as such, identifying themselves as a problem, as proposed by the pedagogy of the oppressed and from there look for the vocation of this oppressed man and try to be more. In the case of Araponga, this identification took the initiative to build authentic and autonomous mechanisms, based on family relationships and consolidated friendship to access the land.

When these farmers approach the CTA-ZM (technicians of the Centre of Alternative Technologies of Zona da Mata) and STR (Union of Rural Workers) they have started a process of overcoming the oppressive relations, demystifying the power and control exercised by the oppressors and are in search of building tools and processes that consolidate their initiative. The identity of the agroecological movement in Araponga, will be built from the humanized identity of farmers and farm workers. This reflects a process of learning from the perspective of the pedagogy of the oppressed, which involves not only a change in the individual farmers, but also in organizations that they approach. The narratives of CTA-ZM technicians reveal that the initial prospect of work was an “alternative technology package” to be distributed to farmers. The narratives of the STR’s members show that the proposals geared exclusively for mediation of labour disputes was denied by farmers, whose identities were rebuilt. The rural workers, who were afraid to leave the subaltern position and challenge the established order, deconstructed that identity and built new relationships, new activities, knowledge, practices and values.

So this intertwines the agroecological movement identity with the identity of family farmers, built not individually but together, as well as advocates Freire (1987).
As agroecological movement in Araponga consolidates itself, the challenges turned to be magnified, which also reveals that the roots or branches of oppression are not only on site. They manifest themselves in relations with the market, one of the most difficult issues faced by the movement since its beginning, in relations with the government, the education system (banking education). And all these fronts stand as challenges to be faced in the development process of critical awareness.

It is important to remember that the pedagogy of the oppressed highlights two key moments: the first in which the oppressed will unveiling the oppression world and getting more committed to the ‘praxis’ and to its transformation, and the second moment, in which the transformed oppressed reality turns to be the pedagogy of men in permanent process of liberation (Freire, 1987).

Likewise, it is central to consider that all the progress of the oppressed are experienced as loss of control by the oppressors that are linked to resume it. This implies a dynamic that not ended in any conquest. The complexity of the oppression scenario legitimized by a history of colonization and the strong presence of traces of colonialism tends to erase such struggles and achievements and to maintain the naturalized injustice structure. In this sense, the movement still faces many challenges and sees questioned internally and externally.

References


