

# Critical consciousness and resistance: Freirean reflections on the agroecology movement formation in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil

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## Abstract

The agroecology movement has become the most relevant resistance to agribusiness in Brazil in recent decades. Grounded on Paulo Freire's liberating education and critical consciousness theories, we aimed to contribute to Organization Studies (OS) on rural social movements by unveiling the case of the agroecology movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil, in its formation phase. We asked: How does the beginning of the trajectory of the agroecology movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, help us reflect on the construction of the protagonism of the oppressed? Through this case, we highlight that to overcome oppressive relationships, small-scale family farming and peasants/rural workers had to first identify themselves under an oppressive system to which they have been historically submitted. Acknowledging their authenticity and autonomous mechanisms of land access were central to developing new forms of production and redefining their identities. Thus, the second important moment is the pedagogy of women and men in a continuous and permanent process of liberation. Hence, the collective identity and resistance building in the agroecology movement in Araponga arose through farmers and rural workers' struggle and through their self-recognition as a humanized, critical, free, and autonomous people. This reflects the 'action-reflection-action' process of collective and horizontal learning where everyone is both educator and learner simultaneously. From this paper, we encourage more reflections in OS on rural movements through the Freirean approach.

**Keywords:** Agroecology movement. Resistance. Liberating education. Critical consciousness. Paulo Freire.

## *Consciência crítica e resistência: reflexões Freirianas sobre a formação do movimento agroecológico em Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brasil*

### Resumo

O movimento agroecológico tornou-se a resistência mais relevante ao agronegócio no Brasil nas últimas décadas. Alicerçados nas teorias da educação libertadora e da consciência crítica de Paulo Freire pretendemos contribuir para os Estudos Organizacionais dos movimentos sociais rurais, desvelando o caso do movimento agroecológico de Araponga, em Minas Gerais, Brasil em fase de formação. Nós, portanto, questionamos: como o início da trajetória do movimento agroecológico em Araponga, Minas Gerais, nos ajuda a refletir sobre a construção do protagonismo do oprimido? Por meio desse caso, destacamos que para a superação das relações de opressão, a pequena agricultura familiar e os camponeses/trabalhadores rurais tiveram primeiro que se identificar sob um sistema opressor a que historicamente foram submetidos. Além disso, reconhecer sua autenticidade e mecanismos autônomos de acesso à terra foram fundamentais para o desenvolvimento de novas formas de produção e redefinição de suas identidades. Desse modo, o segundo momento importante passa a ser a pedagogia de mulheres e homens em um processo contínuo e permanente de libertação. Assim, a construção da identidade coletiva e da resistência no movimento agroecológico de Araponga surge a partir da luta dos agricultores e trabalhadores rurais e de seu autorreconhecimento como um povo humanizado, crítico, livre e autônomo. Isso reflete o processo de 'ação-reflexão-ação' de aprendizagem coletiva e horizontal, onde todos são educadores e alunos ao mesmo tempo. A partir deste artigo, encorajamos mais reflexões nos Estudos Organizacionais em movimentos rurais por meio do uso da abordagem Freiriana'.

**Palavras-chave:** Movimento agroecológico. Resistência. Educação libertadora. Consciência crítica. Paulo Freire.

## *Conciencia crítica y resistencia: reflexiones freirianas sobre la formación del movimiento agroecológico en Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brasil*

### Resumen

El movimiento agroecológico se ha convertido en la resistencia más relevante al agronegocio en Brasil en las últimas décadas. Fundamentados en las teorías de Paulo Freire de educación liberadora y conciencia crítica, pretendemos contribuir a los estudios organizacionales de los movimientos sociales rurales, develando el caso del movimiento agroecológico de Araponga, en Minas Gerais, Brasil, en su etapa de formación. Para ello, nos preguntamos: ¿Cómo el inicio de la trayectoria del movimiento agroecológico en Araponga, Minas Gerais, nos ayuda a reflexionar sobre la construcción del protagonismo de los oprimidos? A través de este caso, destacamos que, para superar las relaciones de opresión, la pequeña agricultura familiar y los campesinos/trabajadores rurales tuvieron que identificarse primero bajo un sistema opresor al que históricamente fueron sometidos. Además, el reconocimiento de su autenticidad y mecanismos autónomos de acceso a la tierra fueron fundamentales para el desarrollo de nuevas formas de producción y redefinición de sus identidades. Así, el segundo momento importante fue la pedagogía de mujeres y hombres en un proceso continuo y permanente de liberación. Así, la construcción de la identidad colectiva y la resistencia en el movimiento agroecológico de Araponga surge de la lucha de los agricultores y trabajadores rurales y de su autorreconocimiento como pueblo humanizado, crítico, libre y autónomo. Esto refleja el proceso de 'acción-reflexión-acción' de aprendizaje colectivo y horizontal, donde todos son educadores y alumnos al mismo tiempo. A partir de este artículo, fomentamos una mayor reflexión en los estudios organizacionales en movimientos rurales mediante el uso del enfoque freiriano.

**Palabras clave:** Movimiento agroecológico. Resistencia. Educación liberadora. Conciencia crítica. Paulo Freire.

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## INTRODUCTION

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In the organizational field of agriculture, globally, agroecology has been described as a science, agricultural practice and as a movement (Wezel et al., 2020). Some researchers defend agroecology as a science that seeks to understand the internal operation of agricultural systems, which includes the central role of human beings (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020; Wezel et al., 2020). On the other hand, some approaches in agroecology have focused on global food system of production, distribution, and consumption (Wezel et al., 2020). For some agroecology practitioners (such as farmers, peasants, co-ops, NGOs, and others), it relates to a method of cultivation based on agro-ecosystem management and non-use of external inputs (Holt-Giménez, Shattuck, & Van Lammeren, 2021).

In Brazil, agroecology has been consolidated as a social movement and as the most effective opposition against agribusiness, dominant in Brazil since the adoption of the Green Revolution practices (Hernandez, 2020; Schwendler & Thompson, 2017). Going explicitly against the capital-intensive practices introduced by this model, it turns to intensive knowledge, directed at small-scale farmers, highly diversified areas and grassroots innovation through ‘from farmer to farmer’ (Holt-Giménez et al., 2021). This promotion of the engagement of farmers and other people involved in farming goes beyond the understanding of the agricultural knowledge for a specific land, ecosystem and type of production and culture. That is, agroecology also refers to a political proposition as it transcends the operational aspects and questions that lie in the current productivist logic of hegemonic of power in rural areas (Guzmán, Molina, & Sevilla, 2000). In other words, it changes the balance of power among technicians, farmers, nature, public institutions and market. All these different positions around agroecology stress the relevance of unveiling the movement’s ways of crafting collective identity and resistance in Brazil and in global agri-food system (Holt-Giménez et al., 2021).

In the past decades, scholars in Organization Studies (OS) from different theoretical approaches have stressed the multiplicity of social movements’ political contestations in order to achieve their goal (Banerjee, Maher, & Krämer, 2021; Corry & Reiner 2021; Sutherland, Land, & Böhm, 2014). These multiple ways of actions include practices, strategies, institutions, actors, discourses and material articulations (Haug, 2013). However, there is still little attention to rural social movements identity and to resistance building - so important in the context of Latin America and Brazil (Banerjee et al., 2021; Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017; Naves & Fontoura, 2021).

Considering the agroecology movement towards more inclusive and sustainable agriculture (Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2021; Holt-Giménez et al., 2021), we aim to contribute to the understanding of rural social movement organizations from the South through the investigation of the agroecology movement in Brazil. In addition, we aim to understand how agroecology movement learned to build alternatives to agribusiness by strengthening its practices in rural settings. Therefore, we ask: How does the beginning of trajectory of the agroecology movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, help us reflect on the construction of the protagonism of the oppressed ones? To investigate this question, in the paper we offer a range of reflections on the formation phase of the movement (the processes of identity, awareness and resistance building) in the city of Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil, based on Paulo Freire’s principles of liberation pedagogy.

The Freirean proposal of liberating education as a political act provides theoretical reflections on the trajectory of several social movements, including the agroecology one, as a form of resistance to agribusiness, to face oppression and build alternatives. In order to build change, the oppresseds organize themselves. However, the organization survives because there is a process of making these subjects aware of the oppression and of themselves; and it happens through a conscious and collective practice (P. Freire, 1981, 1992; Stenico & Paes, 2017). To understand how this collective organization takes place and the processes of identity building and autonomy, we draw our analysis of the agroecology movement’s formation phase in Araponga based on the studies of Paulo Freire, especially in the reflections contained in his classic book *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 reflections on the movement from Freire’s liberating education theoretical lenses 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 (Andrade, Alcântara, & Pereira, 2019; P. Freire, 1970, 1981; Misoczky, Moraes, & Flores, 2009; Motta, 2017; Stenico & Paes, 2017).

After this introduction section, we reflect upon the Paulo Freire's approach to liberating education. Then, we present the methodology path and the research results based on the detailed case description and analysis of the movement in Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil. In the end, we finish the paper with some final Freirian reflections about education, agroecology, and grassroots resistance movements.

## FREIRE'S LIBERATING EDUCATION AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was one of the most important and influential Brazilian philosophers and pedagogues and was a major critic of forms of education and pedagogy that reproduce domination, oppression, and cultural exploitation (P. Freire, 1992, 2001; Gadotti, P. Freire, & Guimarães, 1995).

Paulo Freire's life is, in different contexts, marked by a deep sensitivity to the concrete realities experienced by the popular classes, vividly present in his writings. We do not intend to detail the author's life and work, which has been competently done by several authors (see, for example, Brandão, 2017; A. M. A. Freire, 2017; Gadotti, 1996).

The author's experience with the literacy of young people and adults, working in rural communities and from poor populations, led to the construction, together with his partner then – educator Elza Freire – of a teaching methodology rooted in questioning the concrete reality in that the subjects live, allowing awareness of oppression and the transformation of the world in which they live. In his work 'Pedagogy of Freedom – Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage', P. Freire (1967) already defended education for freedom, but his pedagogical and epistemological proposal take on a more complex dimension in the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (P. Freire, 1968).

For several researchers, Paulo Freire developed a critical pedagogy as an onto-epistemic project of the Global South world affirmation. He evoked knowledge in movement, in struggle and/or in resistance, in a search for the (re)existence and humanization of people historically relegated to subordination (Loureiro, 2021; Mota, 2018). This aspect was already present in the author's work since his first writings, but it intensifies in a more consolidated way with the publication of the 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. The results from his experience as consultant to the Department of Education of the World Council of Churches (CMI) in African countries in the 1970s, when he wrote the book 'Cartas a Guiné-Bissau' (P. Freire, 1978), in which he deepened his criticism of colonialist imposition (Loureiro, 2021).

In Freire's conception, educating is a loving political act and those who do not believe in it lacks critical consciousness. With this proposal, the educator opposed to dominant, often Eurocentric, educational regimes that produce, in his eyes (P. Freire, 1970), a dehumanized '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" (P. Freire, 1970, p. 19).

Just as the struggle has a pedagogical meaning, so is education an important path to liberation (P. Freire, 1970). In opposition to a "banking education" – which only deposits a programmatic content on the student – Freire defends a problematizing and dialogical education in which content is not deposited, but an education that is organized and constituted from the subjects' worldview (P. Freire, 1970).

The pedagogy for liberation is a necessary tool to face the oppression of the ruling classes. The violence of the oppressors is so profound that it generates in the oppressed groups "a kind of existential fatigue associated with historical anesthesia, in which the idea of tomorrow as a project is lost" (P. Freire, 2001, p. 27). A sense of identity is lost: "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom" (P. Freire, 1970, p. 47).

The identity of the subjects of the popular classes is thought by Freire as constituted of an individual and a class dimension, directly related to "the under formation being" (P. Freire, 1996). The respect for identity and dignity is essential in the pedagogy for liberation, which seeks to help the oppressed develop a critical consciousness of their relationship with reality (P. Freire, 1967, 1981).

Human beings, aware of the world, of themselves and of their inclusions into the world are part of a searching movement (P. Freire, 1996). Critical consciousness plays a central role in Freire's pedagogy. The author analyzes the changes in Brazilian society based on the process of consciousness. One of the types of awareness identified by the author is the intransitive one, which limits the possibilities of apprehending problems and issues beyond the vital biological sphere of the human being. From this moment, one can evolve to a naive transitive conscience, which refers to a phase marked by simplicity in the interpretation of problems, by underestimating the common man, by an extreme appreciation of the past, fragility of argumentation and by the avoidance of dialogue, often replaced by controversy. This is, according to Freire, a condition of availability for manipulation by the elites (P. Freire, 1967). Finally, it is possible to develop a critical transitive awareness, based on capturing problems, suggestions from the context in which they live and the growing capacity for dialogue with others and with their world in such a way that their interests and concerns expand beyond the vital sphere. Thus, critical transitivity is characterized by the depth in the interpretation of problems, by the replacement of magical explanations by causal principles, by focusing on analysis and problems, refusing silence, using argumentation and dialogue (P. Freire, 1967). The development of critical consciousness occurs as human beings are led to debate. They participate, share and discuss their worldviews and experiences.

Paulo Freire defended the need to start from prior knowledge and expertise. That's why the concept of generating theme is important in his work, as a starting point for transitivity and criticism. Pillars of Freirean pedagogy, the generative themes are not just literacy strategies. They are action-reflection-action generators insofar as they are permeated with social and political content. Thus, the generating themes implement the effort to understand the reality experienced in order to reach a more critical knowledge of this reality, through the experience of collective reflection on real social practice.

Oftentimes, the generative themes are not perceived as such, because they are covered up by 'limit-situations' that present themselves to people as if they were historical, overwhelming determinants, in the face of which they have no choice but to adapt (P. Freire, 1970). This prevents people from developing authentic and critical responses to concrete problems.

At the moment people perceive 'limit situations' "no longer as a 'border between being and nothingness, but as a border between being and more being', they become increasingly critical in their action, linked to that perception" (P. Freire, 1970, p. 60). Hence, P. Freire (1970) 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 about what to think, know and feel. This is a process he (P. Freire, 1970) called 'critical consciousness', which is an act of self-learning and self-organizing amongst communities of the oppressed. Most important, 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 is highlighted by the author: "The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity" (P. Freire, 1970, p. 60).

Critical consciousness plays a central role in understanding the relationships of domination and in building new forms of resistance. Next, we will explore how a hegemonic culture generates a discriminatory culture as well and how a discriminated culture generates an ideology of resistance that can be expressed through more peaceful or rebellious behavior, depending on the moment.

## **COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE IN FREIRE'S PEDAGOGY**

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According to the Freirean pedagogy, the different possible forms of resistance of the popular classes, at different moments, involve a certain degree of organization. But the resistance is not limited to an explicit mobilization of the working classes. Struggle and resistance also occur latently, sometimes hiddenly.

P. Freire (2001) called this form of resistance as "tricks" of the oppressed. That is, "immunizations" that the popular classes create in their bodies, language, and culture. Thus, when a person cannot or does not want to face a difficult situation, it uses such "tricks" in order to camouflage this fact. That strategy allows him/her to neither assume a change nor give up on it. It is a necessary form of defense - central to the cultural and political resistance of the oppressed (P. Freire, 1992, 2001).

Freire's rich and contextualized interpretation of the dynamics of oppression, resistance and popular class organization presents itself as a challenge to those who want to understand and intervene in such processes. In this sense, the intervention agent (i.e., educator, researcher) runs the risk of not understanding such dynamics, without a critical understanding of History, in which these cultural relations are dialectically articulated (P. Freire, 2001). The educator may refuse specific cultural contexts or intensify the fear of popular groups (P. Freire, 2001).

Regarding the organizing aspect, the liberating education is oriented and guided by an organization process that "will never be the fair position of individuals who, as a group, relate mechanically" (P. Freire, 1970, p. 110), but rather a space of non-authoritarian relationships, of learning, of freedom.

In order to face oppression, we need a critical understanding of history, the political-pedagogical projects that aimed to transform and reinvent the world, as well as the contradictions within them (P. Freire, 1970, 2001). The conception of Freire's History - which comes close to Liberation Theology - is a time of possibility and not of determinations, which involves freedom. "Fighting for it (freedom) is a possible way to get inserted in a possible history, which makes us equally possible" (P. Freire, 2001, p. 19). In this conception of History, in the process of making History, as subjects and objects, women and men are transformed into beings of insertion in the world, and not of pure adaptation to the world. Thus, their dream can also be an engine of history (P. Freire, 1992). Therefore, it's important to have a kind of communication that allows us to listen to the other person who always carries the memory of many plots.

Paulo Freire built the pedagogy for liberation in a very close experience with the popular classes, in urban and rural areas. In the book *Cultural Action for Freedom*, P. Freire (1972) discusses educational experiences with peasants in Chile and the oppressions they faced in this context.

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 (Fontoura & Naves, 2016). This capital-intensive agriculture has erased peasants' rights, work, culture, and history in Latin American, as the author claimed:

In different rural areas in Latin America, agribusiness assumes a distinct form for a farmer, often a local politician, who runs his power over groups of peasants. Thus, the peasants find themselves in a 'closed' reality, where the decision-making center of oppression is 'solely' and compact, in such a way that they are overpowered by a ruling figure who encompasses, in his person, the oppressing system itself (P. Freire, 1970, p. 109).

This proximity, between peasants and oppressors, also guarantees a certain "invisibility" of the oppressive power. Paulo Freire's work with the peasants revealed how struggling is also an important feature for consciousness developing process. For the author, the way peasants and rural workers see the world and think is conditioned by the ideology of the dominant groups. Such ways of thinking remain but are more intense and crystallized in areas where those people have not experienced conflicts in defense of their rights (P. Freire, 1981).

A Freirean approach to peasant agriculture is about developing strategies of mobilization, education, and self-organization that allow the development of critical consciousness of oppressed subjects, often landless, to reflect upon their own rural reality, empowering and self-organizing themselves to transform that very reality (P. Freire, 1970).

Popular social movements play a central role in social change in Freirean pedagogy (Streck, Loureiro, & Rosa, 2021). This explains why Paulo Freire's work has always dialogued with them.

Paulo Freire's theological position coincides with the Liberation Theology developed in Latin America from the 1960s on, characterized by the commitment of Christians to overcoming socially produced injustices in Latin America, evidenced mainly in the series of lectures and dialogues with educators from Australia, where Freire was invited by the National Council of Christian Churches of Australia, in 1974 (Streck et al., 2021). The meeting of Freirean Pedagogy and Liberation Theology is seeded through the Basic Ecclesiastical Communities (CEBs)<sup>1</sup> that played an essential role in the organization of rural workers

<sup>1</sup>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).

and family farmers in Brazil and in Latin America. Thus, the Freirean pedagogy permeated the organizational practices of various popular movements in the countryside.

In different opportunities Freire expressed the dream of the emergence and expansion of popular social movements of the wronged ones, such as the unemployed, the rural workers, the homeless and the landless (P. Freire, 2000). As mentioned before, if social movements inspired Freire, Freire's work closely dialogues with urban and rural social movements. The Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) structures its pedagogy of human emancipation inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (Baldo & Garcia, 2021). Likewise, peasant social movements developed their own constructivist agroecology pedagogy, inspired by Paulo Freire (Rosset, Val, Barbosa, & McCune, 2019).

Before we present the case of a liberation education process in rural settings, let us introduce our methodological approach.

## METHODOLOGY

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This study relies on primary and secondary qualitative data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). From the stories and experiences of different actors in the municipality of Araponga, Minas Gerais, Brazil, we seek to understand the agroecology movement's identity built in its formation phase. This collective identity process allowed the movement to define their organizing strategy, values, and hegemonic struggles in order to enlarge their practices as an alternative possibility for family farmers. The field research was carried out by one of the authors during her Doctorate. The data were collected in two different periods: 1) from March to April 2004, and 2) from April to May 2005, a period of many conquests for the agroecology movement in the region and in Brazil, with the creation of an organization supporting agroecology such as the Brazilian Association of Agroecology (ABA).

The justification of primary data collected in 2004 and 2005 used in this study lies on the fact that we focused on the formation phase of the agroecology movement in Araponga and that this was core for establishing an alternative and radical critical agenda for resisting capital-intensive agriculture in the region.

The primary information was obtained during fieldwork in which ten oral history interviews were conducted, guided by semi-structured scripts. The interviewees were: five male farmers (named here I1 to I5) and a female family farmer (named here I6); the coordinator and a technician at the Zona da Mata Alternative Technologies Centre (CTA - ZM) (named here I7 and I8); the president of the Rural Workers Union - STR (a former female farmer) (named here I9); and a coordinator of the Advisory and Services to Projects in Alternative Agriculture (AS-PTA) (named here I10).

Having Paulo Freire's conception of History (1970, 2001) as their main background, the interviews were conducted to enable knowledge from different "versions" about identity construction in the agroecology movement. This way, the interviews aimed to rescue individuals and their experiences as subjects in the historical process, which implies to highlight the conflict between freedom and determinism or between social structure and human action (Gomes & Santana, 2010).

The interviews were transcribed in full, and the analysis of the information obtained followed the guidelines of Queiroz (1991, p. 92), making a "clipping of a totality in the parts that form it, which are apprehended in the sequence presented in their naturalness to re-establish a new coordination". As mentioned in the first section, we drew our data analysis inspired by the educational – political praxis of the Freirean legacy (P. Freire, 1970, 1981). Therefore, from Freirean's pedagogy for liberation theory, we focused on unveiling the aspects of self-organizing and (un)learning hegemonic practices by small – scale family farmers and peasants/rural workers in order to resist and confront oppression throughout the common identity and critical consciousness building (P. Freire, 1970, 1981).

Hence, although the organizing process of liberating education for the agroecology movement in Araponga does not take place only and because of Freire's ideas, it is important to highlight that it happens under strong influence of Liberation Theology values and Freirean pedagogical proposals of oppression identification for popular critical consciousness. This is better explored and described in the analysis. To make it clear, a historical narrative was developed from the perspective of the subjects who experienced and interpreted it as part of their process of apprehending the world.

The use of secondary data also contributed to unveiling this story. They included articles and 'grey' literatures on agroecology in Araponga and in Brazil. Having multiple sources of evidence was important to allow us to better understand the way the movement was organized in the beginning. In addition, these sources were important in the triangulation with the interviews in the composition of the oral history narrative, contextualizing events in a more precise temporal perspective.

## **FROM RESISTANCE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION TO LIBERATION: THE HISTORY OF THE AGROECOLOGY SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN ARAPONGA, MINAS GERAIS, BRAZIL**

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The municipality of Araponga is located in the Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais, Brazil. It was once a region covered by the Atlantic Forest, peopled by indigenous tribes that were wiped out during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the region received slaves to work in goldmining and, with the decline of this activity, they started to work in large coffee plantation farms. 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 workers partial access to land exploitation through settlement, sharecropping and, more recently, through partnership<sup>2</sup>. Thus, large landowners established, thus, another form of social domination over family farmers, partners and rural workers, which allowed them to define the contours of production, and the social and political organization of the region (Alves, 2006; Campos & Ferrari, 2008; Santos & Florisbelo, 2004).

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 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 1996) – the production was diversified and ensures part of the household needs. They represented 85% of total establishments but only 37% of the area in the region. Medium and large properties represented about 15% of the establishments, occupying 63% of the area and were 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 is 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, flatlands, with higher fertility. Small farmers are in hillside regions that are transition areas with the State Forest Preserve which have fragile soils with lower fertility.

As P. Freire (1981) identifies, the access to land provided, historically, unequal power between large landowners, family farmers and rural workers. In the region, the access to land represents a central control tool and oppression mechanism that establishes hegemony at the local level by large landowner farmers and agribusiness representatives (Alves, 2006; Campos & Ferrari, 2008).

*“A major cause of poverty is the presence of large farms. Where people depend on farmers, there is poverty. You cannot plant a vegetable garden or fruit and you don't invest in the farmer's property. If you get sick on the farm, you depend on the owner of the land” (19).*

Here, the farmer is not using a metaphor: when a partner falls ill on the farm, without access to public transportation, far from health services, he needs the farmer to seek for help. It is observed that the “generosity of the oppressor” (P. Freire, 1970) which, in the partnership system would share the land with rural workers, proves to be a form of profound domination. However, the understanding of this deep and ingrained relationship of dependence is part of the process of resistance and identity construction between farmers, rural workers in the region and also the organizations that support the agroecology movement. But how did this process take place?

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<sup>2</sup> Even though there are specificities to each case, 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 (Santos & Florisbelo, 2004).

The interviews reveal that, although until the 1970s there was no manifestation of dissatisfaction and opposition to large landowners, family farmers developed actions to face oppression, such as collective work (joint work), exchange of workdays, exchanges of food produced by them, among others. This did not represent a complete break from the structure, but a strategy of latent resistance (P. Freire, 2001) possible in the context of the great limitations in which they lived.

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. Instead of a lonely process of anger building, they opted for a love seeking way in a collective process, mediated by the dialogue that begins between members of a family and expands into the community (P. Freire, 1970).

*“Our people have a lot of potential that has yet to be discovered. They already had the potentiality, but to expand the work, they needed a little push. Not using pesticides, for example, and the chemicals, which we didn’t like to use, but as we had no alternative, we had to use them [...]” (E9).*

The interviewee is referring to the work of CEBs and other organizations that came later. Although some interviewees claim that the change began with the action of the CEBs in the region, the narratives indicate that this organization mobilized and catalyzed the desires, ideas, and experiences (such as those described above) that were already part of the repertoire of family farmers in the region.

The perception of life that was extremely dependent on large landowners brought family farmers closer together, creating bonds of solidarity and sowing a process of shared and active analysis of the problems experienced. These processes allowed them to articulate explicit actions to confront the system of domination.

It was necessary to produce quality food to support the family. However, landowners did not allow diversification of properties. It was necessary to conquer land to have freedom and take care of the family. Land access was a central axis, a generative theme, which allowed action-reflection-action and a more critical level of knowledge of reality. Thus, the identification of oppression opens space for the subjects to see reality differently, a process that is also a liberation one (P. Freire, 1970).

So, in 1977 and 1978, three small scale-farmers 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 so they began to experiment alternative forms of production. This action/strategy would not have been possible without a critical consciousness of reality.

However, it was still a change restricted to a small group. From 1980s on, 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. The hegemonic model of agribusiness, when applied by family farmers who had land, made it impossible for them to live from the land. This was experienced by one of the family farmers:

*“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” (I6).*

In addition to that:

*“The conventional has no prospect of the future. There are people who are in the conventional model, like the partner that cannot develop the conventional model and does not see an option to have a better quality of life” (I9).*

These situations show the power of oppression in transforming the mentality of the oppressed to replicate a model that does not make sense in their reality and makes them more dependent and weakened (P. Freire, 1970; Motta, 2017). Even understanding the limits imposed by agribusiness that made life and survival in the countryside impossible, revealing transitivity of consciousness, in the quote above, I6 seeks in an urban center a new perspective on life that, in a deeply unequal society, does not offer working and living conditions to the oppressed. However, the dialogue with other family farmers, who had similar experiences, allows advancing towards a critical consciousness.



After understanding what oppressed them, farmers began to discuss possibilities of mutual support that involved food, nutritional guidelines, use of medicinal plants, collective work in production that contributed to the families' quality of life. Moreover, they started discussions on alternatives to reduce dependence on large landowners.

In 1987, they created a non-governmental organization (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 the early 1980s, 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 agroecology movement in Brazil. This resistance derived from CTA-ZM's imposing, generalist and even authoritarian posture that family farmers did not accept even because it did not meet their needs.

The initial performance of the CTA-ZM reproduced an ideology of domination and was guided by a naive conscience that claims itself superior to the facts, approaching them from the outside and understanding them from its own repertoire and interests (P. Freire, 1981).

*"Well, in the beginning, in the beginning, the focus was much more on alternative technologies. Thus, we managed to work almost with the propagation of a package; an alternative package, which was contour, composite, covering, grouting. [...] So, we needed to understand more about agroecosystems. That was the first step. That's when we came out of this alternative technology approach to agroecology" (17).*

*"CTA supported what we already thought. We already planted Creole corn before CTA; when they came to explain, we found what we were looking for" (13).*

The previous narratives reveal that there was a change in the organization's performance due to the interaction with the social context. The development of a more critical consciousness is observed, overcoming the "bank" perspective of knowledge transfer to a perspective dialogic (P. Freire, 1970). Organizations such as CEBs and CTA-ZM did not start their actions out of nothing, just as the subjects are not waiting to be filled with a worldview and a set of hegemonic practices. The humanization of the processes of action of these organizations – the result of the positioning of the farmers themselves – indicates a change in the identity of these organizations.

Organizations that propose to support oppressed groups can also repeat the oppression, since they are also immersed in structures of domination that, although well-meaning, erase the history of the actors they intend to support. This position, criticized by P. Freire (2001), gives rise to a dialogical attitude.

This change, experienced in Araponga, was also incorporated as the basis of the agroecology movement in Brazil:

*"So, this effort to build identity from experience is an essential one. Without it you won't build identities. If you talk abstractly, people don't team up because they are very different people, and it's good they are like that" (110).*

The activities and strategies of the Rural Workers Union (STR) of Araponga, created in 1989, also underwent changes due to pressure from family farmers and rural workers in the region, who did not want to join an organization that effectively did not represent their interests and projects. Rural workers, even without land access, identified themselves as family farmers and wanted an organization to support them. Thus, the STR of Araponga differed from the other workers' unions in supporting the change projects that were of interest to its members. The organization's identity adapted to the farmers identity, mediated by a communication process, which implies empathy and recognition of the farmers' humanity (P. Freire, 1970).

The power of the land access generating theme is reaffirmed as part of the farmers, workers and organizations identities that advise and represent them. By rejecting the STR's conventional operating format, men and women are not giving up the resistance that formally should pass through a union. They resist the pattern of domination, of categorization that this organization imposes. By doing so, they establish new dialogues about relationships, desires, problems that unions ignore because they replicate a model that silences and makes invisible the diversity of life and the demands of oppressed groups in the countryside.

The experience of the agroecology movement in Araponga shows that there is no single possible interpretation of resistance. Resistance is synonymous with life for the oppressed. Farmers and rural workers were already developing resistance strategies when no organization supported them: planting food without the permission of the landowners, working in a collective effort, pretending to agree with everything that was imposed on them by the landowners, and participating in CEB meetings. When they began to organize themselves publicly, they rejected any form of invasion of their cultural space by ideologies and proposals that did not dialogue with the dreams and strategies they had generated for so many years. Therefore, aware of the world and of themselves, they established deep dialogues to build a broader, rooted organizational process, led by family farmers and rural workers.

The changes in strategy and the recognition of the identity and role of family farmers in the region of Araponga, led the farmers, STR and CTA-ZM, to develop a proposal for collective land purchase, inspired by the initiative of the three brothers in 1977, called “land conquest”. The process involves a group of landless farmers or rural workers organized by ties of solidarity (family, neighborhood, etc.). In the group, everyone would supply agricultural products and financial resources that are used in the collective purchase of land. The lands are divided. Some spaces can be defined for collective use and debt. The lands were paid equally in agricultural products produced and traded by the families that are part of the land purchase. The proposal advanced and until 2007, 174 families conquered 620 hectares of land (Campos & Ferrari, 2008).

The trajectory of the Araponga agroecology movement shows a reflective, awareness-raising process, built collectively, and mediated by farmers’ relations with the world and with organizations. In this process, family farmers strengthened their identity, which led to adaptations and changes in the strategies of the organizations that support them, as well as the development of a strategy that represented a break with the oppression of large landowners. Above all, participation, projects, and decisions in which they became protagonists, revealed the possibility of building common identities with autonomy.

The guidelines for farmers who participated in the “land conquest” involved: caring for the environment, valuing collective work, and developing forms of production that were very different from those imposed by agribusiness. According to reports, many farmers were frightened at first with the lack of pre-established norms and rules since they were used to the Green Revolution’s ‘closed package’ for the agricultural production in all agriculture scales, reproduced in local relations with large landowners.

These actors developed their way of thinking and visualizing the world from which they are marked by the ideology of dominant groups, in a process of crystallization over many generations. Therefore, such ways of thinking and acting persisted even in areas where peasants manifested themselves in defense of their rights, but mainly in those that did not have such experiences (P. Freire, 1981).

*“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” (18).*

*“CTA and STR work giving their opinion and people can take it if they want. [...] Do it the way you think you should. In other times I would be afraid, because without having a support, an accompaniment from some institution. This is what strengthens people” (14).*

Farmers start to experience new experiences, leaving aside the social habits imposed by the inequality of power and starting to create new meanings from their experiences.

*“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” (15).*

The farmer points out the opposition between the one who only works – the human being transformed into an object – and the one who is a student – who sees other things and other possibilities, who ventures himself (P. Freire, 1970). This becomes possible as soon as he gains access to land.

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). The oppressors, who have an important set of apparatus in their favor, insist on the task of convincing the oppressed that there is no other way than the one they were told is possible. They argue the need to include family farmers in society, a strong but unreal appeal. The oppressed were never outside of society, but within the structure that transforms them into “beings for another”. For this reason, there is no room for integration or inclusion within an unfair model, but transformation (P. Freire, 1970).

This trajectory of the agroecology movement in Araponga begins with dialogue, a communication that humanizes the experiences of family farmers and rural workers. In this space and later in CEBs, transitivity in consciousness is observed. Since then, they have been resisting through different positions. Such dialogical critical consciousness allows them to identify oppression and its roots. There, in the movement, they discover themselves as human beings, capable of dreaming and building relationships, different from those imposed on them. Consciousness occurs in an action-reflection-action process (P. Freire, 1970, 1981). It allows the construction of the farmers identities, and these identities leads to actions that will influence the strategies and identities of organizations that support them as well (such as STR and CTA-ZM). Hence, around the humanist perspective, of action-reflection-action, the identity of the agroecology movement itself was built in Araponga.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

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On this article we aimed to contribute to OS theories on rural social movements by unveiling the collective identity building and emergence of the agroecology liberating process in the beginning of the movement in case of Araponga, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. To do so, we grounded on Paulo Freire’s theoretical lenses on liberating education and critical consciousness (P. Freire, 1970, 1981).

The changes in small-scale family farming and peasants/rural workers in Araponga brings up the oppression as a historical process in which several generations had their identity defined externally by farmers, large landowners, that defined what and how to produce, how to behave, how to vote etc. The strong dependency on patronage relationships is a dehumanizing instrument, since it prevents the oppressed vocation to free labour and autonomy statement as a person (P. Freire, 1981).

On this study, we argue that overcoming oppressive relationships involves, first of all, identifying oppression and allowing the oppressed to believe in themselves. In the case of Araponga, this can be seen in the identification of oppression that was anchored in the critical consciousness of the large landowners’ role on ruling and controlling life. This was central for acknowledging authenticity and autonomous mechanisms of land access, as well as to develop new forms of production and redefining their identities. It is also relevant to point out that this identification took strategies of support organizations that carried Freire’s and Liberation Theology values such as CTA-ZM and STR, as well as active participation in public policies.

Hence, the identity of the agroecology movement in Araponga was built from the humanized identity of farmers and rural workers as critical, free, and autonomous people. This reflects the action-reflection-action process of collective and horizontal learning where everyone is both educator and learner.

Therefore, we argue that in the agroecology formation phase in Araponga, we could see the two key moments posed by P. Freire (1981) as fundamental in the liberating process: the first in which the oppressed unveils the oppressive world and gets more committed to the transformation, and the second moment, in which the transformed reality of the oppressed turns to be the pedagogy of women and men in continuous and permanent process of liberation.

Through the Araponga’s case, we argue the importance of Freire’s pedagogy as theoretical and empirical lens for better understanding resistance organizing and collective identity building in rural setting strongly marked by oppression and dependency such as those in Latin America. Freire’s pedagogy for liberation through dialogical process and the “generative theme” developed by the group is a political act per se for individuals’ emancipation and empowerment. On this paper we encourage more reflections in OS and rural movements through the use of Freirean approach.

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