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Ruptures in the agroecological transitions: institutional change and policy dismantling in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Brazil is one of the few countries that has implemented policies aimed at supporting agroecological transition processes on a national scale. While its experience has caught the attention of the international community interested in building sustainable and healthy food systems, recent literature points to the dismantling of these policies. This article identifies the variety of dismantling strategies to analyze how they are linked to the modification of the policy paradigm. Results suggest that the formation of a 'clientelist-corporocratic' paradigm legitimized active and visible dismantling strategies, such as the extinction of policy instruments and the delegitimization of agroecology through discursive mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

Agroecology; public policy; institutional change; Brazil

1. Introduction

The growing attention to agroecology in the international debate on healthy and sustainable food systems (HLPE 2019; FAO 2018) has also increased interest in the Brazilian policymaking experience to support agroecological transitions (Place 2021; Levidow, Sansolo, and Schiavinatto 2021; Lamine 2020). Several studies have already been conducted on the institutionalization of these policies in Brazil (Borsatto, Souza-Esquerdo, and Duval 2022; Niederle et al. 2021; Guéneau et al. 2020; Sabourin et al. 2017; Schmitt et al. 2017; Caporal and Petersen 2010). More recently, however, attention has turned to what is referred to in the literature as processes of 'policy dismantling' (Bauer and Becker 2020; Bauer and Knill 2012). Although some studies have already mentioned the potential impacts of these processes on the dynamics of agroecological transition

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(Sabourin, Craviotti, and Milhorance 2020; Sabourin et al. 2020; Grisa et al. 2021), more robust interpretations of how different dismantling strategies operate are still required. One of the gaps is to understand how they are linked to the recent changes in terms of ‘policy paradigm’ (Béland and Cox 2013; Carson, Burns, and Calvo 2010).

According to Hall (1993), the ‘policy paradigm’ is the prism through which actors operate and legitimize their choices, thus defining the parameters of what is imaginable, possible, acceptable, and achievable in terms of public policies. In turn, public policies can be defined as action programs that involve norms, instruments, governance structures, bureaucracies, and resources, which are put into action with the participation of state actors, both nationally and subnationally (Meny and Thoenig 1989). This definition does not intend to hide the importance of private actors and civil society organizations in the different phases of the policy cycle but emphasizes the central role of state power in policy making, recognizing, at the same time, that the boundaries between state and non-state action are always dynamic and contested. The forms taken by this ‘state in action’ (Muller and Jobert 1987) can be variable, ranging from programs in which a state company plans and executes the program, to situations where a state agency merely regulates actions that are planned, executed, monitored, and even evaluated by social organizations or private companies.

To define the policies for analysis, we initially identified those within the scope of the two editions (2013–15; 2016–19) of the Brazilian National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Production (PLANAPO), the policies which promoted the most expressive results in support of agroecological transitions (Schmitt et al. 2020; Sambuichi, Moura, and Mattos 2017). Our own experiences in a set of studies that analyzed how these policies operated in different territories also contributed to this selection. Finally, from March to May 2021, we conducted interviews and focus groups involving policymakers and street-level bureaucrats who participated in the construction and implementation of these policies. While the first two methodological steps allowed us to reconstruct the trajectory of policies, the last was fundamental to understand the recent dismantling strategies and their effects.

The results highlight the institutional rupture caused by the change in the dominant paradigm, which gained momentum with the rise of a conservative political coalition after the end of the cycle of governments led by the Workers’ Party (PT) (2003–2016). This coalition promoted forms of policy dismantling that echo the force of a ‘clientelist–corporocratic paradigm’ (Niederle, Santos, and Monteiro 2021) that excludes civil society and fully transfers state control to patrimonialist and corporate groups. This new paradigm recognizes instruments supporting organic production, but in contrast to what happens in international arenas, where agroecology has been redefined as being more palatable to corporate interests (Giraldo and Rosset 2018; Gonzalez, Thomas, and Chang 2018), it has not only questioned but actively excluded the term from the Brazilian government agenda. Resisting this change, civil society counter-movements reaffirmed the concept of ‘political agroecology’ (González de Molina et al. 2020; Van der Ploeg 2021) that has supporters among social and academic movements, and finds some space in subnational governments, but has difficulties imposing itself as an alternative policy paradigm.

This article is organized into three sections, in addition to this introduction. Initially, we situate the policymaking process historically. Then, we discuss five strategies (extinction, layering, ineffectiveness, reframing, and symbolic) handled by the conservative coalition

to dismantle four different categories of policies that directly or indirectly supported agroecological transitions: (a) policies for family farmers, (b) policies nominally oriented towards agroecology, (c) organic production regulations, and (d) policies for food and nutrition security. Our final remarks interpret these processes vis-à-vis institutional changes in terms of the policy paradigm.

2. Institutionalization of policies supporting agroecology (2003–2016)

Studies on the impacts of Brazilian policies supporting agroecological transitions highlight, on the food supply side, the importance of programs articulating rural extension, credit, research and knowledge production, the dissemination of social technologies, as well as participatory certification and public procurement (Figure 1) and, on the demand side, employment and salary policies, cash transfer programs (*Bolsa Família*) and direct food access initiatives (Borsatto, Souza-Esquerdo, and Duval 2022; Guéneau et al. 2020; Schmitt et al. 2020; Niederle et al. 2019; Ferreira de Moura et al. 207). These studies also refer to: (a) convergences between the different actors and public forums that produced many of these policies, with special emphasis on the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA), the National Council for Sustainable Rural Development (CONDRAF), and the National Commission on Agroecology and Organic Production (CNAPO) (Schmitt et al. 2017); (b) the construction of agreements between rural and agroecological social movements (Lamine, Niederle, and Ollivier 2019; Picolotto and Brandenburg 2015); and (c) the permeability of the state not only to the demands of these movements, but to the ‘institutional transit’ of actors who kept one foot in the social struggles and the other in the government bureaucracy or the parliament (Oderich, Grisa, and Barth 2019; Altieri and Toledo 2011).

This ‘successful’ trajectory should be interpreted considering the paradigm guiding the political coalitions controlling the governments led by the PT from 2003 to 2016. Although disagreements prevail when it comes to the precise characterization of this paradigm – mainly due to the heterodoxy of some policies in a broader arrangement that did not promote significant ruptures with the neoliberal paradigm prevailing in the 1990s (Saad-Filho 2020; Balestro and Monteiro 2019; Niederle and Grisa 2019) – it is generally accepted that these governments established a new kind of social pact between capital and labor. This pact was made possible by economic expansion and,

| Brasiliian Presidents | 2003-2006 Lula da Silva | 2007-2010 Lula da Silva | 2011-2014 Dilma Rousseff | 2015-2016 Dilma Rousseff | 2016-2018 Michel Temer | 2019-2022 Jair Bolsonaro |
|---|---|----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2000 2010 2020 | | | | | | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2002 National Agroecology Articulation (ANA) 2003 Food Acquisition Program (PAA) One Million Tanks Program (P1MC) Law of Organics (10.831) Territorial Development Program (PRONAT) 2004 Brazilian Agroecology Association (ABA) National Policy of Rural Extension (PNATER) Pró-Organic Program 2005 PRONAF Agroecology (credit) 2007 Decree 6.323 (regulates the Law of Organics) 2009 Family Farming in the School Meal Program (PNAE) | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2010 First call for projects of Centers of Study in Agroecologia (NEA) 2011 First Unified Meeting of Rural and Agroecological Social Movements 2012 Rio+20 UN Conference National Policy for Agroecology and Organic Production (PNAPO) National Commission of Agroecology and Organic Production (CNAPO) Inter-ministry Chamber of Agroecology and Organic Production (CIAPO) MAPA's Low-carbon Agriculture Plan (ABC) 2013 National Program for Agroecology and Organic Production (PLANAPO I) MPA presents its "Peasant Plan" for the government 2014 First call for projects of the Ecoforte Program 2017 National Program for Agroecology and Organic Production (PLANAPO II) | | | |

Figure 1. Institutional trajectory of agroecologically-conducive policies in Brazil from 2003 to 2016.

above all, by the commodities boom. Not only in Brazil, but in several Latin American countries, the governments of the so-called 'pink tide' took advantage of the dividends of this growth to promote the image of a great political concertation in favor of economic development. In agriculture, this was evident in the coexistence between, on the one hand, state incentives for export-oriented agribusiness and, on the other, social policies and food and nutrition security programs for the myriad of groups that were sheltered under the normative umbrella of 'family farming' (Andrade 2020; Sauer 2019).

The construction of these policies might be understood both as part of and in reaction to this political pact. Initially, these programs were created as a state response to the criticism that agroecological movements directed toward policies targeting agribusiness, but also directed to family farming. Although aimed at a specific social segment, many policy instruments supporting family farming maintained a rationality similar to the one found in agricultural policies inherited from the period of the compulsory modernization of Brazilian agriculture (1960–70). In response to this criticism, in 2005, the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) incorporated a specific line of credit to finance agroecological production within the National Program for Strengthening Family Farming (PRONAF). In the same sense, to serve the organic corporate sector, in 2004, the Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA) created the Organic Agriculture Development Program (Pró-Orgânico).

Another example can be found in debates on the regulation of organic production. When the Brazilian government began to address the issue in the mid-1990s, reacting to the pressure from European importers, many organizations linked to the agroecological movement opposed the requirement for certification, given that its costs would imply the exclusion of smallholders. In 2003, however, the Law of Organic Agriculture (no. 10,831) was enacted, which made certification mandatory. In a new effort of political concertation, the government was forced to mediate the conflicts between the 'technocratic' approach (which considers that certification is an exclusively technical process) supported by certifiers, technicians and producers interested in the external market for organic products, and the 'sociocratic' view (active social participation) defended by social movements and some policymakers related to family farming. Due to the conflicts between these conceptions, the National Organic Production Commission (CNPOrg) took four years to regulate the law. Decree 6,323/2007 reduced tensions by recognizing the three systems currently in force. In addition to the globally accepted third-party technocratic certification, participatory guarantee (PGS) and social control systems in direct sales (OCS) incorporated the sociocratic discourse (Loconto and Hatanaka 2018; Niederle et al. 2021).

One of the policies for family farming that demonstrated remarkable results in adapting the instruments to promote agroecological transitions was the Technical Assistance and Rural Extension Policy (PNATER). Enacted in 2004, the construction of this policy benefited from the experience inherited from state-level PT governments that exercised mandates in the late 1990s, in particular from the experience of Rio Grande do Sul. With the electoral victory of President Lula, in 2002, reference actors related to the agroecological movement that circulated between academia, state agencies and the political world, and who had worked to promote important changes in the rural extension institutions (EMATER) and programs in that state, were raised to key positions in the national government administration. Incorporated in to the MDA, they coordinated the construction of the PNATER (Caporal 2020). These actors shared the idea that agroecology should

guide public action in this area (see below). However, this was not a consensual view even in the MDA (Petersen, Mussoi, and Dal Soglio 2013).

This strategy of adapting existing policies has sharpened much criticism. The main focus of disapproval was on the PRONAF. In addition to the specific line for agroecology maintaining a poor performance over time (Aquino, Gazolla, and Schneider 2020), and being practically disabled in 2012, this criticism focused on the fact that the program concentrated its resources on the production of agricultural commodities (soybeans, maize, and coffee) by most capitalized family farmers in southern Brazil. As a result, important rural movement leaders started to attribute to the main policy supporting family farming a great burden of responsibility for increasing social vulnerability and farmers' indebtedness, deepening economic concentration and social differentiation in rural areas, causing environmental degradation and the disarticulation of rural livelihoods (Niederle et al. 2021).

This criticism generated internal tensions in the coalition structured in the support of family farm policies. While the National Confederation of Rural Workers and Family Farmers (CONTAG), the main union representing this social group, insisted on the need to 'adjust' PRONAF to address alternative agricultural systems more adequately, agroecological movements began to talk about the 'exhaustion' of the rural development policy package (Favareto 2017). Tensions increased as agrarian movements linked to *Via Campesina* such as the Small Farmers Movement (MPA) and rural women's movements (including those linked to CONTAG) took on agroecology as a political platform and swelled the chorus to the narrative of exhaustion. From that moment on, organizations, networks, and social movements mobilized by the National Articulation of Agroecology (ANA), including the Brazilian Association of Agroecology (ABA-Agroecology), began to increasingly criticize productivist conceptions that continued to guide policy designs (Petersen 2017).

Rural and agroecological movements' political pressure coincided with the growing importance that the environmental agenda was assuming in Brazil at that time, given, for example, the discussions related to the Rio+20 conference that, in 2012, celebrated the twenty years of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (ECO92). Indeed, not only agroecology began to benefit from greater state attention, but other competing approaches also gained ground. This is the case, for example, of the 'Sector Plan for Mitigation and Adaptation to Climate Change for the Consolidation of a Low-Carbon Economy in Agriculture' (ABC Plan). Launched by MAPA in 2012, this plan was presented as a substitute route of transition to sustainability. This new environmental agenda was significantly different from the agroecology framework due to, among other things, its technocratic governance model (Chechi and Grisa 2020; Brazil 2012).

In 2012, President Dilma Rousseff enacted the National Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production (Presidential Decree no. 7,794). For its coordination, two governance arenas were created: the Interministerial Chamber of Agroecology and Organic Production (CIAPO), composed of representatives of the ministries and other public bodies involved with the policy design, and the 'offer' of actions that would structure the National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Production (PLANAPO); and the National Commission on Agroecology and Organic Production (CNAPO), composed equally of representatives of civil society and government agencies. In addition to enabling the active participation of agroecological movements in the construction and monitoring of the policy, CNAPO joined CONSEA and CONDRAF as another important space for interactions

between state and non-state actors. Discussions began that were, in various aspects, linked to those that took place at National Organic Production Commission (CNPorg). Although the attributions of the two institutional arenas were different, the agroecological movements found, in CNAPO and CIAPO, two ways to institutionally reinforce their normative conceptions of organic production and agroecology (by defending participatory certification, for instance).

As the policy instrument of the PNAPO, the first phase of the PLANAPO (2013–2015) consisted of a ‘menu’ of 125 actions, the vast majority of which already existed as specific policies in the agenda of the 12 ministries that were incorporated into the plan. Coherence between these heterogeneous set of programs and actions was sought (but never implemented) through a broad definition of agroecology, which would encompass a set of practices that could be applied in different agricultural systems and with the support of different public policies. In addition to organic production, the plan also contemplated almost every type of ‘unconventional practice,’ such as reducing the use of pesticides, green fertilization techniques, production and conservation of native seeds, herbal treatments, etc. (Niederle et al. 2021; Sambuichi, Moura, and Mattos 2017). This institutional architecture presupposed the possibility of coordination, both by state and non-state actors, of a progressive movement to incorporate ‘agroecological principles’ (HLPE 2019; FAO 2018) into public policies, articulating different areas. It was not, therefore, about creating a program based on a specific ministry or department, but proposing changes and, ultimately, redesigning policies based on the principles of agroecology. In other words, the goal was ‘to embed agroecology in all policies’ (Parsons and Hawkes 2019).

This logic of action was justified through a generic definition of ‘agroecological transition’ as a ‘gradual process of changing practices and management of agroecosystems, traditional or conventional, through the transformation of the productive and social bases of land use and of natural resources, leading to agricultural systems that incorporate ecologically based principles and technologies’ (Brazil, Decree 7,794/2012). Although adequate for the government’s concertation strategy, this definition is far from the perspective defended by ANA, for whom the focus of PNAPO should have been to strengthen the peasant mode of farming and traditional communities, aiming to promote food sovereignty and democracy, sociobiodiversity, cultural heritage, and social justice in its multiple dimensions (ANA 2012). This conceptual difference exemplifies the internal tensions the debate on agroecology produced among different rural social movements and policymakers.

Among the numerous criticisms that marked the assessments of the first PLANAPO, one of the most highlighted aspects was the absence of policies considered by social movements as essential to the agroecological transitions, such as those related to the agrarian structure: improving peasant access to land and, at the same time, protecting them against land grabbing (Petersen and Silveira 2017). Thus, when the second plan was launched (2016–2019), social movements conditioned their participation to the introduction of these issues, which contributed to make PLANAPO II even more comprehensive, encompassing 194 actions. However, there is no way to evaluate the results of the second phase. First, reports on the financial execution of these actions have not been published until now. Second, the impact of the institutional rupture that followed the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in May 2016 practically put an end to the idea of an

intersectoral plan. In other words, at best, it would only be possible to individually assess some actions that were initially listed as part of the Plan.

During the formulation of the two plans, ANA was particularly critical of the idea of supporting agroecology with policies that responded to different (if not contradictory) interests and institutional logics. In line with academic discussions on political agroecology and peasantry (Van der Ploeg 2021; Van den Berg, Goris, and Behagel 2021; Holt-Giménez, Shattuck, and Van Lammeren 2021; González de Molina et al. 2020; Altieri and Nicholls 2020), this organization insisted on the need to build innovative policies that would respond more effectively to the urgent need for profound changes in the dynamics of food systems. However, this implied the intensification of conflicts that challenged the government's concertation strategy. Over time, these conflicts became unavoidable due to the way the agroecological transitions became limited by policies that encouraged land grabbing practices in the territories of traditional communities (Sauer and Mézsáros 2017) and substantial increases in pesticide uses (Almeida et al. 2017).

As a result of these unsettled tensions, agrarian and agroecological movements began to push the government to build specific programs that support their demands. In November 2013, in the first year of PLANAPO's implementation, the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), linked to Via Campesina, delivered its own Peasant Plan to President Dilma Rousseff. The focus of this plan was to support, through credit and rural extension, the construction of strategies for 'production of healthy food and quality of life in the countryside.' One of the central proposals included the structuring of new circuits that would increase food access to socially vulnerable urban families, through popular restaurants and government acquisition programs. From a political point of view, the objective was to use food as a mediation between 'the countryside and the city,' between 'peasants and workers.' Although the plan has not been implemented at the national level, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, a similar proposal was supported by Governor Tarso Genro (PT) and, more importantly, its logic began to guide Via Campesina's political strategy (Oderich, Grisa, and Barth 2019).

Even before the enactment of PLANAPO, ANA had already been designing innovative programs, and articulating technical advising, knowledge production, investments and networking of grassroots organizations in support of territorialized dynamics of agroecological transition. These ideas converged to the construction of the Program for Strengthening and Expansion of Agroecology, Extractivism and Organic Production Networks (Ecoforte). Later added to PLANAPO, this program became the closest to the idea of a 'policy guided by the principles of agroecology' for several reasons. First, it contained a perspective of territorial development that, at that time, had already become the privileged 'scale' for planning and analyzing agroecological transition processes (Van den Berg, Goris, and Behagel 2021; Levidow, Sansolo, and Schiavinatto 2021; Petersen et al. 2020; Lamine, Niederle, and Ollivier 2012). Second, it was flexible enough to support the different actions that agroecology movements identified as critical problems in each territory (Schmitt et al. 2020), creating what political scientists call a public policy with a high level of 'discretionary' control for 'street-level bureaucrats.' Third, the program reinforced the role of social movements as active participants in the design and implementation of public actions.

In addition to pressing for the construction of policies truly oriented by agroecological principles, agroecological movements also invested in building closer relations with

organizations working on food and public health issues, such as the Brazilian Forum on Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security, the Brazilian Association of Collective Health, and the Brazilian Association of Nutrition. This dialogue took place through two processes. The first was the ‘Dialogues and Convergences between Agroecology, Collective Health and Environmental Justice, Food Sovereignty, Solidarity Economy, and Feminism’ initiative, articulated by civil society organizations from the ‘National Encounter Dialogues and Convergences’ (Encontro 2013). The second was based on CONSEA, articulating the agroecological agenda with that of food and nutrition security. From the point of view of the formulation and design of public policies, this articulation contributed, for example, to debates about the incorporation of organic and socio-biodiversity products in the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) and the National School Feeding Program (PNAE). More importantly, these public procurement programs have stimulated the adoption of practices consistent with the principles of agroecology (Borsatto et al. 2020). They demonstrated that agroecological transitions could be enhanced not only by adapting agricultural policies, but also through a new generation of instruments focused on stimulating the demand for healthy and sustainable food, and on regulating the production and consumption of ultra-processed foods or foods with high levels of contamination by pesticides. Since 2016, this agenda has been carried out by the Alliance for Adequate and Healthy Eating.¹

Along this trajectory, the dialogue between the agroecological movement and the organizations of the ‘environmental field’ was also particularly important, including the Ministry of the Environment (MMA), which was initially designated by the government to coordinate PNAPO – when CIAPO was formed, it was transferred to the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (Schmitt et al. 2017). From this dialogue, several environmental policies were managed so that they both promoted agroecological transitions and limited the advancement of practices that put (agro)ecological systems at risk, such as deforestation and the use of pesticides. However, considering that the spectrum of interactions between environmental policies and agroecology is very broad, we chose not to develop this topic here. In addition, it is worth noting that, as it is one of the most targeted areas by dismantling strategies, with major national and international media repercussions, there is already an important body of literature that can be consulted (see Barbosa, Alves, and Grelle 2021; Pereira et al. 2020; Sabourin, Craviotti, and Milhorance 2020, 2019; Carvalho 2019, among others).

3. Policy-dismantling strategies (2016–2021)

Over time, the pact that supported the governments led by the Workers’ Party proved to be a fragile alliance, based on political exchanges and on the reproduction of a paradigm that, due to its contradictions and weaknesses, was attacked from all sides. As stated above, this pact survived during the period when the dividends generated by economic growth made it possible to satisfy all political coalitions. This situation changed radically in the years following the 2008 financial crisis. Although the crisis impacts were delayed due

¹The Alliance for Adequate and Healthy Eating is a Brazilian coalition composed by more than 70 civil society organizations working together to the advancement of public policies to guarantee Food and Nutritional Security (SAN) and Food Sovereignty in Brazil. See: <https://alimentacaosaudavel.org.br/>

to the adoption of counter-cyclical policies to stimulate the economy and control inflation, the adoption of these policies became the object of strong opposition. In 2013, popular demonstrations supported by the media discourse on corruption contributed to overthrow what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) call 'guardrails of democracy.' When Dilma Rousseff was re-elected in 2015, it was no longer the former political pact alone that had broken down, but the very normative bases that ensured Brazilian democratic stability since the end of the military regime in the 1980s (Avritzer 2020). Along with the rise of new forms of 'authoritarian populism' (Scoones et al. 2021) came the shift in the political paradigm and the processes of policy dismantling.

Several authors have already argued that the institutional foundations of the neoliberal paradigm continued to be present in state action during PT-led governments, especially in macroeconomic policies (Saad-Filho 2020), as well as in the agricultural sector (Niederle and Grisa 2019). However, the paradigm that gained strength from 2016 onwards represented a marked divider, no longer embracing the same 'free market' discourse of the 1990s, open to social participation, and in defense of consumer freedom of choice. Crouch (2013) argues that neoliberalism has become a 'corporocracy,' that is, a regime of control of the state and market by corporations, which considers the free market and democracy, as well as social participation, to be inefficient. However, this is not the only face of a new paradigm in Brazil. The election of Jair Bolsonaro also strengthened a model of a 'predatory state' (Evans 1995) that is based on clientelist, patrimonial, and authoritarian relationships that legitimize neoextractivist forms of accumulation (Veltmeyer 2019).

The agricultural sector has been the domain where this new paradigm most clearly expresses its strengths, but also its contradictions, which are revealed when predatory logic puts corporate gains at risk, for example. In this sense, it is worth noting the discursive efforts that the corporate face of Brazilian agribusiness— represented mainly by the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (ABAG) and a segment of the National Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA)— has continuously enacted in order to disassociate itself from the image of environmental predation of Bolsonaro's environmental policy. This does not mean that corporations do not profit from these policies, but they know that the exacerbation and, above all, the publicity of environmental predation has adverse effects in terms of attracting investors and international boycotts. Otherwise, the most conservative segments of the agrarian oligarchy, present in the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB) and also in the CNA, have not reacted against the use of violent practices of land and natural resource dispossession.

This 'clientelist–corporocratic' paradigm, as defined by Niederle, Santos, and Monteiro (2021), has become the new reference of what is imaginable, possible, acceptable, and feasible in terms of public policies. It also guides the dismantling of previously existing policies. This process can be interpreted in several ways. Bauer and Knill (2012, 35) define policy dismantling as 'a change of a direct, indirect, hidden, or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or reduces their intensity.' In other words, dismantling can imply both a loss of 'density' (reduction in the number of policies) and of 'intensity' (reduction in the scope and level of intervention). According to the authors, this phenomenon is driven by three factors that, since 2016, have become clearly identifiable in Brazil: (a) changes in 'policymakers' preferences,' understood as the interests that guide their

actions, the costs and benefits of their decisions, and the anticipation of other actors' behavior; (b) the existence of external shocks resulting from abrupt changes in economic, technological, or ecological conditions; and (c) changes in institutional and political opportunities and constraints.

In concert with this literature, Grisa et al. (2021) identified five strategies for dismantling family farming policies in Mercosur, which we renamed as: (1) **Extinction (E)**: Taking advantage of the low discretion of public policy and the absence of institutional vetoes and political constraints, the dominant coalition extinguishes or replaces the policy with another one, with different institutional arrangements and purposes; (2) **Layering (L)**: Unable to use the previous strategy, the coalition increases the institutional density (new rules, norms, procedures) to such an extent that it becomes difficult to implement the policy, thus reducing its intensity; (3) **Ineffectiveness (I)**: This is a strategy of 'omission' (Bauer and Knill 2012) through which actors maintain the density of the policy, but significantly reduce its intensity, making the policy ineffective; (4) **Reframing (R)**: Actors take advantage of the low political resistance and high discretion of the policy to reduce its density and intensity through changes in its institutional loci (relocating to another ministry, for example) and/or converting its objectives to new purposes; and (5) **Symbolic (S)**: Faced with strong institutional constraints, actors work to delegitimize politics, which usually occurs through the construction of narratives about its inefficiency. Taking this model as a starting point, we will now interpret the dismantling of policies that boosted agroecological transitions in Brazil.

3.1. Policies for family farmers

As highlighted above, the predominant logic guiding the production of agroecologically conducive policies was based on the adaptation of instruments created to support family farming. Therefore, the starting point of the dismantling was the extinction (E) of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA), which was one of the first political measures of the Temer government in 2016. Adopted even before the final decision to remove President Dilma Rousseff, this strategy sealed the end of the coexistence pact between family farming and agribusiness that had prevailed since the mid-1990s. However, this type of active dismantling was facilitated by a previous process of discursive delegitimization (S), to which the aforementioned criticism about the PRONAF 'productivist logic' contributed. This criticism resulted in the low engagement of social movements in the political defense of this ministry and, strictly speaking, even before the impeachment, its maintenance has already been questioned (Medeiros 2020).

Following this extinction, several policies were also suppressed or paralyzed, and many others were transferred to different institutional spaces (Grisa 2018). In general terms, the extinction strategy (E) prevailed in the case of policies that more clearly opposed the new paradigm and the interests of the conservative political coalition, such as the institutions and instruments supporting agrarian reform linked to the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), or which had a high degree of discretion, being managed in a decentralized manner by state and non-state local actors, such as territorial development policies (PRONAT). In turn, ineffectiveness (I) predominated for policies in which, due to its broad social support and public visibility, extinction would incur excessive political costs, as was the case with Technical Assistance and Rural Extension

(PNATER), which had its budget drastically reduced (Sabourin, Craviotti, and Milhorance 2020).² Finally, reframing (R) was the main strategy adopted for PRONAF, which was transferred to a new Secretariat for Family Agriculture in the Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA). This measure reinforced the narrative that this program does not question agricultural modernization logic. Indeed, in addition to being one of the few programs that had its budget expanded since 2016, PRONAF also became an object of interest for agribusiness organizations such as the CNA and the SRB.

These institutional changes were accompanied by two other strategies. The first refers to a symbolic (S) delegitimization of the ‘family farming’ definition itself. Initially, this strategy focused on a narrative that this ‘social segment’ would be part of agribusiness (Niederle et al. 2019), but more recently it has become a more sophisticated narrative about the ‘agro’ as a unique identity in the which both small and large ‘producers’ would be represented (Pompeia 2021). Therefore, a sector that can be served with policies of a single ministry and whose union representation is disputed by the ‘agro’ entities (CNA and SRB). The second strategy was the attempt to extinguish (E) 30 councils of participatory governance of public policies (including the National Council for Sustainable Rural Development – CONDRAF) by means of Decree 9,759/2019, signed at the ceremony that marked the first 100 days of the Bolsonaro government. In this case, at the request of the PT, the Federal Supreme Court granted an injunction preventing the extinction and, in February 2020, through Decree 10,253, CONDRAF was ‘reactivated.’ Following this, the government’s reply was a strategy of ineffectiveness (I), which resulted in the refusal both to call council meetings and to include the council in the MAPA’s organization chart.

3.2. Policies nominally oriented toward agroecology

Symbolic (S) delegitimization strategies attacking ideas and institutions also mark the government’s action in relation to agroecology. As described above, until 2016, the conflicts between the ‘technocratic’ view of organics and the ‘sociocratic’ view of agroecology were mediated by the same political strategy that ensured the coexistence between family farming and agribusiness, with the most evident face being the two ministries (MDA and MAPA). Before that, however, among the critics of family farming definition, many had distilled their most acid arguments against agroecology, which is not surprising insofar as it was from the agroecological movements that the most radical criticisms of agribusiness originated. Thus, the paradigm shift and the political coalition at the head of the state was accompanied by the gradual suppression of the term ‘agroecology’ from policymakers’ discourse in favor of ‘organic agriculture’ and its technocratic vision.

This technocratic approach also had repercussions with regard to the interruption of the state dialogue with social movements. The same Decree 9,784/2019 that tried to extinguish CONDRAF did in fact put an end to CNAPO and CIAPO (E), the two bodies responsible for PLANAPO’s governance. The plan, in turn, was not formally finished, but became ineffective (I) due to the extinction or paralysis of the actions that made it up and their institutional apparatuses. In addition, the few policymakers involved with the implementation of PLANAPO who remained in government, usually because they were

²However, in the case of technical and social assistance for rural settlements (ATES Program), the option was for extinction (E), which is consistent with the prevailing position against agrarian reform.

career public servants, were relocated to different sectors or were no longer authorized to continue their actions. Although some of them are still trying to articulate a third phase of the plan, in 2020 PLANAPO II ended and nothing was created to continue it, which defines a typical strategy of 'dismantling by omission' (Bauer and Knill 2012).

In addition to the direct dismissal of many policymakers, as is common in government changes, the repositioning and replacement of those who have stability in the public service proved to be a recurrent and relevant strategy – and not only for the set of public policies analyzed in this article (Sa e Silva 2020). This procedure also has the effect of dismantling the former policy networks, with strong impacts on 'state capacities.' Indeed, the 'sabotage' of the bureaucracy itself (Bauer and Becker 2020) – that is, the dismantling of the networks that provided opportunities for the construction and implementation of policies – constitutes a strategy that contributes to dismantling by (I) or by (E).

The ineffectiveness (I) strategy prevailed in the case of the Ecoforte program. The program's first call for projects, published in 2014, supported 21 organizations. The second and final call was published in 2017, but the results of the selection of the 28 beneficiary organizations were published only in 2019. Since then, these actions have been implemented, but there are no signs of new calls. It is important to note that this program, which is considered the most innovative of PLANAPO's menu of actions, was precisely the one that did not have direct support from the public treasury. Its resources came from the Banco do Brasil Foundation (FBB), the Amazon Fund, and the Social Fund of the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES). These financial sources guarantee operational flexibility for the use of resources, and make a more active dismantling strategy unfeasible, since MAPA does not have direct administrative or financial control over the program. Even if the Banco do Brasil Foundation continues to promote an agenda to promote agroecology networks, it is possible to identify an important reflux in terms of BNDES support, organization where the federal government has a greater capacity to interfere in the decisions.³

3.3. Organic Production regulations

Regarding the normative instruments regulating organic food production, certification, and markets, the first evidence of dismantling can be found in changes in national (CNPOrg) and state-level (CPOrg) governance structures. The result of the 2018 election directly impacted the configuration of these commissions due to the entry of new representatives from government bodies. The new balance of political forces also encouraged non-state actors linked to the interests of companies, private certifiers, and importers of organic products to demand a seat in these instances. The way this reconfiguration took place in each subnational government has been different depending on the locally established political coalitions, with some CPOrgs putting up barriers to the entry of 'outsiders,' requiring, for example, that they follow the discussions for a certain period before becoming entitled to vote.

At the national level, however, the changes in the CNPOrg have already been accompanied by layering (L) strategies, which, by introducing new norms, are gradually

³(I) was also the main strategy in the case of the Centers for Study in Agroecology (NEA), which, since 2016, have not had new call for projects from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

changing the system built over the last few years. The most recent example was the publication for public debate of Ordinance 52/2021, which presents new technical regulations and updates the list of 'substances' allowed in organic production. This institutional change has been interpreted by agroecological movements as a broad flexibilization in favor of large-scale and industrial production, which requires the use of products whose suitability for organic farming and food processing is the subject of strong controversy. Thus, as the link between organic regulation and agroecological principles is becoming less effective, the introduction of these new rules expands the market for newcomers, mainly agricultural companies selling inputs for organic production.

Another example of (L) refers to the regulation of certification through the production of new infra-legal orders, a process that became more accentuated as of 2016. The introduction of extensive manuals and forms has hampered the transition processes for farmers, which, as mentioned before, no longer have the support provided by the rural extension services (PNATER). As a result, social organizations that worked for the recognition and improvement of PGS are beginning to question the effectiveness of this certification system, which, even being participatory, has resulted in an excessive concentration in assessment routines, to the detriment of technical and educational practices that support agroecological transitions. As a result, even though the number of certified farmers is increasing, the proportion of those who go beyond the legally established minimum requirements to design more complex ecological farming systems is decreasing.

So far, there has been no evidence of political movements that put PGS at risk. In addition to its high visibility and potentially strong social reaction, the dismantling of these systems could destabilize the organic market itself, given that many cooperatives, retailers, and processing companies depend on participatory certification to meet the growing demand. However, if the flexibility of technical specifications favors the expansion of organic food corporations while institutional restrictions on the operation of alternative guarantee systems become more restrictive, this scenario may change in the near future, opening a window of opportunity for private certifiers and technicians to resume the technocratic discourse of the 1990s.

3.4. Policies for food and nutrition security

The main public arena for the production of food and nutrition security policies was CONSEA. Considered one of the most plural and participative councils in the entire cycle of PT-led governments, it also became one of the main targets of dismantling strategies, having been extinguished (E) through the same decree mentioned above (9,784/2019). Furthermore, when extinction was not achieved, the conservative coalition pushed subnational governments to make state councils ineffective (I) and/or to reframe (R) its institutional logic. Most illustrative of this, after keeping São Paulo's Food and Nutrition Security Council at a standstill for over a year, Governor João Doria appointed the president of the Brazilian Food Industry Association (Abia) and the executive director of the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB) to be president and vice president of the council, respectively. The alliance between these two organizations clearly exemplifies the rise of the new clientelist-corporocratic paradigm.

In terms of public policies, CONSEA was primarily responsible for creating the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), which aimed to purchase food from family farmers and

distribute it to socially vulnerable people (Borsatto et al. 2020). Considered one of the most innovative food policy instruments of the Lula government's Zero Hunger Strategy (Milhorance 2020), PAA had already been dismantled since 2013. In that year, the police operation *Agrofantasma*, led by Judge Sérgio Moro, who would later be the main party responsible for the arrest of President Lula da Silva and, in 2019, Moro would become Minister of Justice for the Bolsonaro government, ordering an operation to investigate alleged irregularities in the execution of the program. From that moment on, dismantling began through discursive attacks and institutional layering. At the symbolic (S) level, representatives of the liberal agribusiness coalition used the media coverage of the police operation to delegitimize not only the program, but, above all, what it represented in terms of direct state intervention in food markets. Cornered by political pressures, the government increased institutional density (L) under the argument of improving control, making the program's implementation extremely difficult. In addition, the criminalization strategy made farmers and cooperatives afraid of operating the program.

After the impeachment, ineffectiveness (I) prevailed as the main strategy. The program was not terminated due to strong reactions from social organizations, but initially its budget was drastically reduced (Sabourin, Craviotti, and Milhorance 2020). In 2020, however, the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, associated with pressure from rural and agroecological movements, forced the government to partially restore the PAA budget, as it was the most effective mechanism the state had for the distribution of food to people in situations of social vulnerability. This does not mean, however, a process of legitimizing such policies. On the contrary, at no time has the government highlighted the policy instrument through which food was being purchased and distributed. Finally, in 2021, Bolsonaro government adopted a strategy of dismantling by replacement. The same Provisional Measure (No. 1,061/2021) that extinguished *Bolsa Família* Program to make room for the new *Aid Brazil (Auxílio Brasil)* Program, replaced the PAA with the *Feed Brazil (Alimenta Brasil)* Program. The effort to break the symbolic connection the former programs had with PT administrations was very clear here. However, the practical effects these changes will produce for agroecological transitions are not completely clear yet, since these new programs still need to be regulated by more specific institutional acts.

Although it has a logic and impact similar to that of PAA, the National School Feeding Program (PNAE) is different. In 2009, by means of the Law 11.947, the government created a market niche for family farmers by ensuring that 30% of PNAE resources should be used to purchase food from them. Since then, organizations linked to agribusiness, in particular the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB), have pressured the government to allow them as well to operate in this market reserve (even though they already compete for the other 70%!). The biggest conflict, however, lies in the fact that the PNAE adopts the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population as a reference in the definition of items to be purchased, which implies restrictions on ultra-processed foods and giving priority to local, healthy, and sustainable foods. Thus, at the same time that agro-industrial corporations try to symbolically (S) delegitimize the guide through a discourse in favor of ultra-processed foods, political conservative groups such as the 'Mothers of Agro' (*Mães do Agro*), linked to the SRB, monitor and execrate school directors adopting didactic books and eating practices that contradict the 'science of agro'. In addition to the government's

Table 1. Examples of policies according to the main dismantling strategy.

| | Extinction (E) | Layering (L) | Ineffectiveness (I) | Reframing (R) | Symbolic (S) |
|---|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------|--|
| Policies for family farmers | MDA, PRONAT, ATEs | | CONDRAF, PNATER | PRONAF | Discursive delegitimizing of 'family farming' definition |
| Policies nominally oriented towards agroecology | CNAPO, CIAPO | | PLANAPO, Ecoforte Program, NEA | | Discursive delegitimizing of agroecology as a policy referential |
| Organic production regulations | | Technical specifications, certification rules | | CNPOrg | |
| Policies for food and nutrition security | CONSEA PAA | PNAE, PAA | PAA | | Brazilian Food Guide |

support, these groups are linked to the Agricultural Parliamentary Front (FPA), one of the strongest and most conservative coalitions in the National Congress.⁴

Table 1 brings examples of policies that were the subject of different dismantling strategies. Despite their public visibility and potentially high political costs, active extinction strategies have been very recurrent. Furthermore, cases such as the one of PAA show that some programs have been pressured by various concomitant or sequential strategies. In this sense, it is also important to highlight the use of discursive and symbolic dismantling mechanisms as a means to delegitimize policies (their effectiveness, objectives and the public problem itself) before adopting active extinction strategies.

4. Final considerations

Understanding the intensity of the dismantling processes or how it affects agroecological transitions would require introducing many other policies that were not considered in this study. Among the most important, it would be worth highlighting the environmental policy instruments included in PLANAPO (legislation on pesticides, the demarcation of conservation and sustainable use territorial units, programs for the preservation of genetic heritage and socio-biodiversity resources, education programs, the Environmental Rural Registry, among others). In turn, at the macroeconomic level, it is important to understand how the end of the wage appreciation policy and the strong fiscal adjustment programs have impacted organic food demand. At the same time, it would also be essential to address the institutional strengthening of policies that encourage unsustainable agricultural and food practices, mainly the 'neoextractive' mode of accumulation in agriculture.⁵

However, considering the cases presented above, we are mainly interested in interpreting the different dismantling strategies in light of changes in the policy paradigm. We

⁴In 2020, FPA presented two bills aiming at making the supply of pork meat mandatory and creating a market reserve for fluid milk in PNAE. These bills also withdraw from nutritionists the prerogative of preparing menus and exclude the priority given to agrarian reform settlers, traditional and indigenous communities in food supply.

⁵Closing of rural elementary schools, precariousness of public health services in rural areas and systematic attempts to dismantle the rules for the retirement of rural workers are other emblematic examples of the deprivation of rights enshrined in the 1988 Constitution.

highlight that extinction (E) has become a recurrent strategy. In general, new governments avoid this type of strategy because of their high visibility, opposition from established actors, and potentially high political costs. Instead of extinguishing, they opt to replace one policy with another, change its objectives, or make it ineffective. When extinction is the path pursued, there is usually a prior delegitimization process. Indeed, in some cases analyzed here, this was exactly what happened. In 2016, the Temer government took advantage of previous processes of delegitimization to suppress policies that were already at risk (MDA, PRONAT). However, in the case of Bolsonaro's government, there is a clear option not only by using this active strategy, but by making it as visible as possible, signing in public, for example, the decree that extinguished several councils.

The option for extinction was favored by the low veto power of the former dominant political coalition, which resulted not only from the political effects of the electoral defeat in 2018, but also from its previous fragmentation. In this sense, it should be noted that many conflicts were exacerbated in 2016, when some actors that had been in the same political bloc in defense of family farming, supported or were silent on Dilma Rousseff's impeachment process.⁶ Trusting on a gradual political transition, these actors hoped to have more space in the new government that would be formed. However, most of them were engulfed by the conservative wave that flooded the country shortly thereafter. Not only did they not achieve the desired institutional spaces, but their position only served to increase the divide that was menacing the effort that had been undertaken to unify agendas and repertoires of action of different social movements (Encontro 2013; Centelhas 2018).

In this same sense, it is worth emphasizing the effect that dismantling has, not only in relation to the operation of policy instruments, which is its most visible face, but also in the very policy networks that connect state actors with non-state actors. The main example is the dissolution of the councils. However, it is also important to note the weakening of the territorial multi-actor networks previously used for policy implementation, as well as the impact of the replacement or removal of several policymakers. These strategies have strongly affected state capacities, including the so-called 'relational and coordinating capacities' (Evans 1995). As highlighted above, identifying the actors' circulation between social movements and government bodies is fundamental to understand the policymaking process. However, the debate on policy dismantling (Bauer and Knill 2012) has paid little attention to the various strategies that can be used to stop this circulation, such as the replacement of key state-actors with positions in which they have a reduced agency. The criminalization (or threat) of social movement leaders involved in the implementation of public policies proved to be another strategy that deserves greater attention, mainly in countries like Brazil, where democracy is always at stake.

Evidence of this reduced state permeability to social movements ratifies Crouch's (2013) argument about how the new paradigm gives up social participation. Tolerated by the liberals in the 1990s (Dagnino 2010), civil society organizations gained political space in the 2000s, but have recently become not only expendable, but unwanted in the new policy governance. Although Bolsonaro explicitly despises social movements,

⁶A remarkable example is the socialist congressman Heitor Schuch, president of the Parliamentary Front of Family Farming in the National Congress and former leader of one of the CONTAG's strongest regional affiliate unions (in the state of Rio Grande do Sul), who voted in favor of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment.

formal public justification for reducing social participation involves an alleged need to reduce costs and increase the efficiency of process involved in the formulation and implementation of public policies. Obviously, the government has strong political reasons for acting like this, but in doing so, it contemptuously disregards the positive effects of social participation on the design and implementation of policies that are better adapted to different social realities (such as the Ecoforte Program) and, therefore, omits the fact that the cost of participation can be offset with significant efficiency gains (including economic). Even so, the inadequacy of the old models of participation and, therefore, the need for civil society to build other avenues of participatory democracy, should not be overlooked.

It is important not to confuse the state's permeability to social participation with the coordination of private interests. One could argue that the institutional rupture caused by the impeachment and the rise of a new dominant coalition only changed the position of actors in the political field. In other words, instead of rural social movements (MST, MPA, CONTAG) and organizations of the agroecological movement (ANA), now the government dialogues with the representatives of the 'agro' (ABAG, CNA, SRB, ABIA, OCB). The fundamental difference is that the access of these representatives to the policies does not occur mainly through the public channels of the participatory councils. Although they are now invading the remaining public arenas of governance, they do so with the aim of blocking its effectiveness and preventing other actors from producing rules that contradict their interests.

This leads us to the second point of Crouch's (2013) argument about the paradigm shift, which is the control of corporations. Certain dismantling processes are associated with this phenomenon. Most are related to layering strategies to improve corporations' control of the organic food market, given, for example, the changes in technical specifications, including the authorization of new pesticides. However, when it comes to the direct extinction of policy instruments, what prevails is the authoritarianism of 'insurrectionary actors' orientation toward predation' (Evans 1995). According to Mahoney and Thelen (2009, 23), these actors 'consciously seek to eliminate existing institutions or rules, and they do so by actively and visibly mobilizing against them.' They are not primarily concerned with consolidating a new neoliberal paradigm. Rather, they are driven by the desire to overthrow the institutional pillars of the democratic state (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Therefore, the extinction of various policies can be read much more as a demonstration of force and intolerance, which pleases political coalition supporters, rather than as a movement to assert corporate control of the state. This explains why extinction is the chosen strategy even for policies with wide visibility and high conflict, such as agrarian reform policies, something that we found in Brazil even though this strategy is not predicted by the analytical model (Bauer and Knill 2012).

So far, many corporate and predatory practices have been symbiotically articulated. However, the growing isolation of Brazil in the international scenario, added to the internal reactions against the government, has intensified tensions in the political coalition of 'agro' (Pompeia 2021). With regard to the topic of this article, one can highlight, for example, the concern of agrifood corporations with the sanctions and barriers that the country may encounter in global value chains due to the advancement of predatory deforestation in the Amazon and Cerrado biomes. Even so, this type of conflict,

which can be resolved by a new round of political exchanges, does not generate expectations of better days for rural and agroecological social movements. If authoritarian insurrectionists are intolerant regarding family farming, peasantry, indigenous peoples, traditional populations, and agroecology, the 'corporate sector' acts, through state policies, to colonize and reframe them.

It is important to explain the role of symbolic dismantling strategies. Driven by recent contributions from discursive neoinstitutionalism (Schmidt 2008), the literature on public policies has given increasing attention to this type of strategy. However, the focus is often on how public policy is discursively attacked because of its inefficiency or failure to meet the objectives for which it was designed. The discourse about alleged bureaucrats' misconduct and corruption, as we saw in the case of the PAA, is also recurrent in this type of strategy. However, Brazilian examples also draw attention to a deeper symbolic process of delegitimization, which is not only focused on policy instruments, but on the very ideas and social agents supporting them. Indeed, while attacking family farming and agroecology, and removing these words from the government dictionary, political entrepreneurs urging this dismantling are now questioning the pertinence of the 'public problem.'

The counter-movements to policy dismantling must be the subject of further studies and articles. For now, it seems clear that they involve the strengthening of subnational policy networks. These are 'everyday resistance' strategies that mainly involve the construction of policy innovations in dialogue with state actors operating at regional and local levels. At the same time, agroecological movements have tried to assess the last two decades of policymaking. At the center of the debate is now again the previously referred difference between agroecology as a set of practices and movements that can be supported by policies that may be pursuing very different logics, and agroecology as a set of principles guiding public action and deep transformations in agri-food systems. Social movements have demonstrated a strong adherence to the second perspective. However, to make it a reality, in addition to building new policies (this is no longer a question of adapting the old instruments), it would be necessary to build alliances in order to place agroecology at the center of deep institutional reforms, truly embedding agroecology in all policies, something none expect to happen in the near future since it would demand a radical change of policy paradigm.

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