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**Fighting against or Coexisting with Drought?  
Conviviality, Inequality and Peasant Mobility in  
Northeast Brazil**

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## **Fighting against or Coexisting with Drought?**

### **Conviviality, Inequality and Peasant Mobility in Northeast Brazil**

Maya Manzi

#### **Abstract**

Throughout Brazilian history, Northeastern droughts have been the context for massive rural flight and intra-national migrations. State policies and interventions have played a significant role in promoting or restraining the movements of those affected by such “natural” plights. In this paper, we examine the political ecology and moral economies that have underlined state intervention over drought and peasant migrations since the end of the 19th century. We compare two historical periods marked by contrasting regional perspectives on nature-society relations within the context of Brazilian semi-arid climate: the period known as the “fight against drought” (1915-1980) and the period of “coexistence with the semi-arid” (1990-now). This new vision of nature-society relations is examined within the context of agrodiesel development in Bahia. Our results show that these symbolic and material practices around nature and mobility have played a significant role in the making of specific regimes of conviviality and inequality in Brazil.

#### **Keywords:**

conviviality | inequality | drought

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## 1. Introduction

Discourses on internal migration in Brazil have been historically saturated with images of the poor Northeastern peasant fleeing from the drought. Within that imaginary, the drought is conceived as a powerful force which comes to haunt this region, every now and then, at the expense of those who live within its boundaries. Northeastern peasants have been represented either as the powerless victims of this natural plight, subordinated to the mighty powers of a hostile, indomitable Nature or as the embodiment of this unpredictable nature – a threatening “Other” that could disrupt the social and national order.

This naturalized relation between environmental plight and the poor is not particular to Brazilian geographical imaginations and discourses on the Northeastern peasantry. Nature has long been held responsible for human poverty, underdevelopment, and inequality. This kind of discourse has been sometimes referred to in geography as environmental or geographical determinism, a neo-Darwinian reasoning that understands societies, cultures and bodies as the result of the physical environment within which they develop (Gregory et al., 2011: 197). This kind of thinking gave ground to the development of a new form of scientific racism within the field of geography, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as in the work of Ellen C. Semple, who argued that: “When survivals of an inferior people, they are generally characterized by inaccessible or unfavourable geographic location...” (Semple 1911: 164). Within this vision, hierarchized cultural and racial differences could be “scientifically” explained as the result of environmental forces. Climate conditions gave authoritative explanation to why northern Europeans were “energetic, provident, serious, thoughtful rather than emotional, cautious rather than impulsive” (Semple 1911: 620). In Brazil, environmental determinism was also used around the concept of race, especially during colonization, with theories that highlighted the causal relations between tropical climates and racial degeneration (Machado 2000). This idea that “Nature” holds causal power over all aspects of human life has contributed to naturalize and depoliticize cultural differences and social inequalities. While this geographical perspective has been heavily criticized and mostly abandoned within academia, it has persisted as common sense and is still widely held in people’s imaginations about the Northeastern region (Ribeiro 1999).

Historians of science and political ecologists like García (1981), Blaikie et al. (1994), Peacock et al. (1997), and Davis (2001) have questioned the naturality and inevitability of climatic disasters by showing the human dimension and the social history of what may appear as natural events outside of our control. As Blaikie et al. contend:

Analysing disasters allows us to show why they should not be segregated from everyday living, and to show how the risks involved in disasters must be connected with the vulnerability created for many people through their normal existence. It seeks the connections between the risks people face and the reasons for their vulnerability to hazards (Blaikie 1994: 3).

In this paper, we analyse how different representations of the Northeastern drought and semi-arid region have played a role in configuring social and nature-society conviviality and inequality in Brazil. We draw attention towards two historical periods characterized by contrasting societal and state discourses, approaches and practices on drought. The first is the period marked by the “fight against drought” (*combate à seca*), which was based on a conception of Nature as the enemy that had to be “combated” in order to promote the modernization and development of a historically marginalized region of the country. This ideology underlined most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century government policies and interventions. The second period is marked by the idea of “coexistence with the semi-arid” (*convivência com o semiárido*), which conceives Nature as inextricable from human society, as an entangled, constitutive and complementary “Other”, with which humans must learn to coexist sustainably. It emerges at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the result of the actions of social movements and non-governmental agencies, and was adopted, appropriated and sometimes profoundly distorted by the State and the private sector, as was the case with the National Program for the Production and Use of Biodiesel (PNPB), launched in 2004.

As we will argue, these two forms of managing and representing Brazilian semi-arid environments are associated with specific patterns of state intervention in peasant mobility. We examine the political ecology and moral economies<sup>1</sup> of Brazilian Northeastern droughts and peasant mobility and their implications in (re)configuring regimes of conviviality and inequality. We understand conviviality as the everyday coexistence with difference, including with the non-humans. Different from the common-sense use of the term, which generally refers to human sociability in the positive sense of being outgoing, friendly and welcoming, conviviality here is defined by that which characterizes the relation between socially differentiated humans – and between humans and nonhumans – in their (physical, virtual, symbolic, material) everyday interactions. This definition is inspired by the work of Illich (1973) and Gilroy (2004) among others, who have both reconceptualized the term conviviality, although in very different ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Thompson's notion of moral economy (1971) and on subsequent reformulations like those of Scott (1977) and Wolford (2005), moral economies are understood here as the values or ideologies held and performed by individuals or social groups to define the optimal organization of society, especially in terms of productive relations and practices.

Illich (1973) brings a socialist, post-industrial and ethical perspective to the concept of conviviality, which he defines as the “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment” (Illich 1973: 11). For Gilroy (2004: xi) conviviality refers to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made cultural and racial differences an ordinary feature of social life in many postcolonial cities. For him, “the radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification.” While Illich gives us the tools to think about conviviality as an ethically-engaged critique of capitalist development and nature-society relations, Gilroy offers new horizons to think about difference in everyday interactions. We are particularly interested in better understanding how conviviality, difference and (in)equality are mutually constituted with-in Latin America (Mecila 2017).<sup>2</sup>

In order to better understand how conviviality, difference and inequality intersect, it is also important to define these two other terms. Difference refers to attributes which individuals or groups can contingently articulate to characterize themselves or others. It is not considered an ontological, pre-linguistic property of individuals or groups, but instead, something produced ad hoc within social interactions (Mecila 2017: 5). Inequality here will be defined based on four dimensions, three of which are taken from Costa's (2018) broader conceptualization of the term into three main aspects: socio-economic, power and socio-ecological inequalities (Costa 2018: 60-61). A fourth dimension – socio-spatial inequality – is added to this conceptual framework in order to account for the territorial aspects of inequality.

These four dimensions of inequality can be defined as follow: (1) *socio-economic inequality* refers to asymmetry in the access or appropriation of socially valuable goods (e.g., salary, wealth, etc.); (2) *power asymmetries* refers to differential ability to exert influence in decision-making and differential distribution of political and social rights and entitlements; (3) *socio-ecological inequality* refers to disparity in access to environmental goods and in the distribution of environmental risks and hazards (Costa 2018: 60-61); and, (4) *socio-spatial inequality* refers to differential access and appropriation of space by individuals or social groups leading to differential distribution of social groups in space (e.g., centre-periphery, urban-rural, North-South relations). All of these types of inequalities are also categorical, in that they affect specific social groups that are socially defined by gender, class, race, culture, sexuality, age, able-bodiedness, among others. All of these four dimensions of inequality overlap in various ways.

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<sup>2</sup> This definition of conviviality is the result of Mecila's collaborative work.

Based on this theoretical framework, we argue in this paper that Northeast droughts have been used as a dispositive for statecraft, especially in its efforts to maintain national order and stability by controlling peasant mobility. We show the importance of examining the role of moral economies and territories<sup>3</sup> (Manzi 2013) when studying the relationship between conviviality (in its human and non-human forms) and inequality (in its economic, political, ecological and spatial dimensions) in Latin America.

## 2. The Political Ecology of Drought in Northeastern Brazil

The concept of drought, understood as a primarily natural phenomenon, has been historically used in Brazil to explain Northeastern peasant behaviours, culture and living conditions. Drought in the semi-arid region has often been ascribed responsibility for poverty, hunger and social disorder. These kinds of discourses have been highly criticized by Brazilian scholars like the historian Durval M. Albuquerque Jr. who instead describes the drought as a social artefact and as part of a national industrial complex developed for capital accumulation and the maintenance of a regime characterized by profound inequalities. Drought as a discursive device has been intimately involved in the constitution of subaltern subjects, natures, cultures and territories, or what Albuquerque has called “the invention of the Northeast” (Albuquerque Jr. 2005).

According to the historian Joaquim Alves (1982), the first recorded drought in the semi-arid region (*Sertão*) of Northeastern Brazil dates back to 1587. It was recorded by Fernão Cardin who commented on the flight of Indians from the *Sertão* to the Northeastern coast in search of food (Silva 2006: 35). As Silva (2006: 36) explains, drought in the *Sertão* was seen by the colonizers as an element of disorder, as it disrupted the colonizer’s perspective of sedentary occupation and their efforts to fix the local population in order to facilitate resource exploitation. Native people’s nomadism was seen as a hindrance to civilization. Controlling Northeastern peasants’ movements has a long colonial history and these practices have been entangled with particular understandings and representations of drought and nature-society relations.

According to Albuquerque (2011), the great droughts of 1877-79 was the first moment when this “natural calamity” was used by the Northeastern regional elite as a discourse that could touch and mobilize at a national scale. An estimated five hundred thousand people died as a result of these droughts, and many other thousands fled to nearby cities or other regions in a desperate search of food. This created urban social tensions, particularly in the capitals of the region, like Fortaleza, which saw their oasis of civilization and modernity undermined by “chaos, misery, inconveniences and filth”

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3 I use the term “moral territorialities” to refer to the sets of moral values that allow individuals or social groups to negotiate control over territories. “Moral territories” are the product of these socio-spatial and morally-imbued negotiations.

as described in the state newsletters of the time (Sá 2005). Nation-wide reports and shocking images of the drought served as a powerful dispositive for the demand of financial resources and state intervention that would respond to the interests of the regional elite. This so-called “drought industry” (Albuquerque Jr. 2011) emerged in the face of a decadent colonial productive system based on slavery that had sustained the regional economy for more than two centuries. From then on, Northeastern social and economic problems became closely associated with the drought:

Demonstrations by the discontents of the subordinated population, thievery, messianic revolts, and even the region’s economic and social backwardness, are ascribed to the drought and the call for its “solution” becomes one of the main themes of regional discourses (Albuquerque Jr. 2011: 71-72, own translation).

The drought of 1877 became a turning point in the imaginary of the regional elite who remembered life before the droughts with melancholy; a period when nature was bountiful and fertile and when social relations were stable and harmonious. In contrast, drought acted as the main definer of the present, one characterized by scarcity, conflict and hostility, a present without future:

Drought provoked a conflict between nature and society, present and past: nature was perverse and destroyed the perfect Northeast society; drought, more than the original sin, would have driven the Northeastern Eden into an unbearable limbo (Matos 2012:16, own translation).

In the subsequent droughts of 1915 and 1932, the state violently intervened by creating concentration camps to prevent drought-afflicted peasants (*flagelados*) from reaching the cities and causing social mayhem. Thousands of peasants were brought to these camps and kept in confinement under inhuman conditions. During the drought of 1915, reports estimated an average of 150 daily deaths in the concentration camps (Sá 2005). These places of confinement symbolized the violent ways by which poor peasants (the majority of which were former slaves) represented a threat to civilization and order and therefore needed to be contained, or even exterminated. Drought became the ideal mercenary to take charge of this ethnic cleansing.

### **3. The “Fight against Drought”**

The idea of a “fight against drought” (*combate à seca*) germinated based on a concept of drought (and those most afflicted by it) as threats to national security and stability, and as obstacles to national integration and development. Within that perspective, semi-arid natures and subjects were seen as things that needed to be controlled and civilized through state-led scientific and technological modernization. As reported in the

newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* in 1923, the description of Brazilian semi-arid region as a hostile, barren, harsh, and inhospitable environment “only became known with these designations after the last calamity that ravaged in 1915, determining a decisive phase of great projects against drought” (Albuquerque Jr. 2011: 55, own translation).

In the face of collapse, drought became a dispositif for the Northeastern elite to maintain their regional power by lobbying for state-led drought-fighting programs in the region.<sup>4</sup> It began with the creation of the IOCS (Inspectorate for Works to Combat Drought) in 1909, later known as DNOCS (National Department for Works Against Drought), which understood drought as a mere technical problem that needed engineering fixes (Silva 2006). Until the 1940s, state-led drought-fighting efforts mainly consisted in improving water supply through technical studies, the construction of dams, wells and other infrastructural projects:

[...] there were significant advances in the physical knowledge of the semi-arid Northeast, of its potentialities and soil limits, water, botanic, of its native flora and the possibility of adaptation of other species. There was no advance, however, in terms of the understanding and unveiling of its socioeconomic structure (Oliveira 1981: 51, own translation).

Most of these new hydrological and infrastructural facilities were constructed within the private holdings of large landowners and served to expand their cotton and cattle businesses. During droughts, unoccupied and starving peasants would be contracted by the State as construction workers and would be often paid in kind (with food like cassava flour, beans and sometimes meat) instead of money. This kind of slave-like exploitation and primitive accumulation helped strengthen the power of the agrarian regional elite and the misery of the peasant population (Oliveira 1981: 55).

Between 1950 and 1970, there was a shift in State intervention over Northeastern droughts from a focus on hydraulic solutions to a regional economic development approach. Centralized regional planning strategies were formulated and implemented, leading to the creation of various regional governmental agencies like Codevasf (Companhia de Desenvolvimento do Vale do São Francisco, Commission of the San Francisco Valley) founded in 1948, BNB (Banco do Nordeste do Brasil, Northeastern Bank of Brazil) founded in 1951, and SUDENE (Superintendência de Desenvolvimento do Nordeste, Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast) founded in 1959. A diversity of development programs and projects were created and financed by the BNB to promote the technological modernization of the agricultural sector, especially through the expansion of irrigated agriculture and the implantation of agroindustrial

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<sup>4</sup> For different periodizations of governmental politics on Northeastern droughts see Andrade 1970, Carvalho 1988, Magalhães and Glantz 1992 and Campos 2014.

facilities (Silva 2006). State financial incentives towards export-oriented agricultural commodities attracted new local and foreign investors, land values rose, and massive land dispossession occurred, mainly through *grilagem*.<sup>5</sup> During the 1970s, land conflicts exploded throughout the Northeast and peasants began to organize and create agrarian social movements, like the MST (Movimento Sem Terra, Landless Workers' Movement), to struggle for land justice.

While old regimes of conviviality between landlords and peasants were unsettled, nature-society relations were also profoundly affected. The agricultural modernization that accompanied the “fight against drought” strategies had devastating socio-ecological impacts. The expansion of cattle ranching and other large-scale agricultural activities led to the deforestation of large areas of *caatinga*, a fragile biome of the semiarid region. Many of the underground water reserves were significantly reduced, when not depleted and the region’s fertile soils were eroded, salinized and compacted by the overuse of machinery, pesticides, and faulty irrigation systems. This resulted in a process of desertification which has intensified the frequency and magnitude of droughts in the region.

During the “fight against drought” period, which spans roughly from 1915 to the end of the 1970s,<sup>6</sup> the main vision was that state-led modernization and regional development would resolve the problem of drought in the Northeast. However, while some advances were made in terms of infrastructural and technological development which had positive economic repercussions on the region as a whole, the institutionalization of drought mainly served to open new spaces in the State apparatus for the regional elite to pursue their own interests while the demands and necessities of the poorest and most affected by droughts remained largely unattended. Over the years, repeated land evictions triggered by government incentives towards large-scale agricultural projects pushed peasants towards the most degraded areas of the region, making them increasingly susceptible to drought.

### **3.1 Controlling Peasant Mobility**

During the “fight against drought” period, state control over peasant mobility took a different approach. The aim was not anymore to contain peasant mobility but rather to stimulate Northeast peasant out-migrations towards the areas of the country with

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5 “*Grilagem de terra*” is the practice of falsifying title deeds to illegally appropriate large areas of public land. This practice, mainly used by the agrarian elite, led to massive evictions of peasants. The term comes from the name of the insect “*grilo*” (cricket), which were used to stain the falsified documents and make them appear as real antique deeds.

6 In the 1980s, most of the drought-fighting development projects and programs in the Northeast were abandoned or interrupted because of the national economic crisis.

high labour demands. Droughts helped release a labour force at a very low cost and became a pretext for mobilizing cheap labour towards the growing industrial urban centres of the South like São Paulo, the expanding agricultural frontier of the North, and other mega-urban, infrastructural, and development projects like the construction of Brasília, and the Belém-Brasilia and Trans-Amazonian highways. As Becker (1988) argues when analysing the geopolitics that defined the capitalist advance on the Brazilian Amazonian Frontier of that period:

State strategy for the socio-spatial mobility of the population is contained implicitly or explicitly in all of its policies. It promotes the massive attraction of migrants, conditions migratory fluxes, and the politics of land and selective credits result in appropriation/expropriation and in the process of proletarianization/differentiation of the peasantry (Becker 1988: 72, own translation).

Within that context, social organizations like families and communities as well as patronal land and labour relations were severed or broken by peasants' frequent or permanent migrations. At the end of the colonial period, slaves were often abandoned by their owners during drought-driven food and water shortages, as feeding them during these periods became more expensive than purchasing another slave (Campos 2014). The same strategy would be used after the abolition of slavery by landowners towards their wageworkers. As Duarte (2001: 427) explains: "these labour relations are significant during periods of drought since they can easily be broken, liberating rural landowners from the maintenance of labour force within such adverse economic context". The breaking of labour relations during droughts produced highly mobile subjects,<sup>7</sup> a much-needed available labour force in a country undergoing economic and territorial expansion. The rapid mechanization and modernization of the agriculture that the "fight against drought" program helped to unleash also contributed to the release of large contingents of landless peasants who were made available to work anywhere and at any price.

In each of these historical contexts, nature was the scapegoat for these broken convivialities and a precious ally for the reproduction of the elite and the making of a centralized and authoritarian State. Drought was the ideal pretext for state migration policies, which served two main functions: to reduce the peasant population – which was seen as a burden and a threat to the regional establishment – and to foster national

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7 While Northeastern peasants' high mobility may be partly reminiscent of the indigenous nomadic culture, it is also the result of a long and violent history of land dispossession since colonization. These colonial qua capitalist practices -which continue to characterize contemporary agrarian land and labor relations- have produced large contingents of landless peasants whose only way to access land has been by selling their labor to large landowners. Their high level of mobility, which increase during droughts and economic crisis, is a testament of how Northeastern peasants have historically been constituted as a highly disposable labor force.

economic development by channelling this “idle” and “hungry” cheap labour towards new Brazilian economic frontiers.

The discourses produced by the State and the regional elite have represented drought as a natural event with totalizing effects irrespective of social class or pre-existent conditions, as if drought affected everyone equally: “as a curse that could descend from the sky or ascend from hell, drought was represented as a point of intersection between the poor and the rich” (Vieira Jr. 2003 in Matos 2012: 12). This would justify inequality-blind interventions that were not aimed at trying to address the most vulnerable sectors of the population but instead enabled the regional elite to profit from state emergency and assistance programs.

While discourses on drought tended to obscure social inequalities between the Northeastern elite and the peasantry, drought-driven peasant migrations produced well-defined cultural differences between the Brazilian North and South. As Albuquerque Jr. (2011: 81, own translation) argues, the drought is “without any doubt, the first defining line of the North and what differentiates it from the South, notably, in a moment in which the environment, along with race, are considered as determining factors of social organization”. The production of a hierarchized social difference between the culture of the Northeast and that of the South is well performed by this journalist of the *Estado de São Paulo* who, in 1923, describes the long drought of 1919, as a period “when groups of squalid migrants came to enjoy endless longings in the *industriousness* of the *generous* Southern centre, who knows if still doubtful between the *misery* of there or the *abundance* of here” (in Albuquerque 2011: 55).

It is thus through drought that the Northeast and its people come into existence within the national context, however mainly as the victimized “Other”. Fundraising events for the Northeastern victims of the drought were organized in the South. Northeastern peasants became nationally known and were made visible through their misery, as a people subjected to a violent Nature. Expressions like “the Northeast is punished (*castigado*) by the drought” have been commonly used to describe these natural events. In these discourses, Nature is reified as a powerful entity with strong agency while the poor peasant is objectified as a passive, and sometimes deserving, victim. These conceptions of nature-society relations are commonplace in traditional and highly religious communities where “Man [sic] ascribes natural happenings to the plans or whims of the Gods” and natural calamities like droughts, floods, hurricanes, etc., are interpreted as God’s punishment of human sins (García 1981: 5).

Thievery and peasant violence were other themes associated with the drought. Stealing food (*sauques*) from village stores during long periods of droughts, were a common practice especially for slaves or landless peasants who were abandoned by their

masters or employers due to water and food scarcity. The regional elite would represent these practices as violent in their discourses to reproduce an image of social chaos and immoral peasant behaviours and to (re)emphasize the need for state intervention in the region. Thievery and violence became also attached to the Northeastern migrants who would arrive in the Southern cities in a state of destitution and for whom such acts often became the only possible way to survive. Since many of them were former slaves, these immoral behaviours quickly acquired a racial connotation. Albuquerque (2011) illustrates how the racialization of violence and thievery was constituted in Brazil, and how it became associated with the figure of the Northeast migrant:

Thievery or the Cangaço,<sup>8</sup> another theme that was selected by the Northern discourse to testify the dangerous consequences of droughts and the lack of state investments in the region and of its non-modernization, acquires a pejorative connotation with the stigma of violence and savagery. Indeed, this fear of the Northeastern and, especially, of the black man emerges with the constant insubordination of the slaves, imported from the North to the South. Submitted to more intense labour rhythms and more depersonalized social relations, these slaves would often resort to violence, especially in a period in which the conscience of the eminent end of slavery was growing [...] The fame of “the bad black” coming from the North present in the abolitionist and anti-abolitionist discourses of São Paulo Provincial Assembly marks the image of the “Northern Man” since the previous century (Albuquerque Jr. 2011: 74, own translation).

As Albuquerque Jr. continues:

These narratives serve to mark a difference in relation to the South and to mobilize a civilizing, moralizing and rationalist discourse in which social questions are relegated to the realm of nature or morality. The North becomes the example of what the South should not be. It is the model against which is elaborated the “civilized” image of the South (Albuquerque Jr. 2011: 75, own translation).

Within that context, peasant migrations became seen again as a threat to national stability and security and the Brazilian state, once again, developed mechanisms to contain and control their movements. The drought-fighting interventions included programs like the “Drought Resources” (*Recursos da Seca*), which were intended to provide emergency resources to peasants not only to mitigate the effects of droughts

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<sup>8</sup> *Cangaço* was a type of banditry in Northeastern Brazil at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Cangaceiro* became a pejorative word to describe poor landless armed peasants who roamed around the hinterlands and survived by robbing money and food. Since they were generally allied with the poor peasants and against the government and the police, the *Cangaço* is sometimes represented as a resistance movement. Its main representative was Lampião (1898-1938), who became a sort of historic hero of the Brazilian Northeast.

but also to help reduce Northeastern peasant migrations towards Southern urban centres like São Paulo, where migrants were seen as the main responsible for the increase in urban poverty, criminality and violence (Manzi 2013: 293).

### 3.2 The Moral Economies of Drought and Peasant Migrations

Since colonization, Brazilian agrarian society has been characterized by profound inequalities and power asymmetries, mainly because of land concentration among a small elite minority<sup>9</sup> and a culture of *coronelismo*<sup>10</sup> that has allowed for the institutionalization of highly hierarchized, oppressive and exploitative labour relations. These inequalities have been largely defined by a moral economy sustained by the unquestioned primacy of private property.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally, landowners would grant (dispossessed) peasants a piece of land to live on in exchange for their (free) labour. These exploitative arrangements were considered as “favours” to the peasants, who in retribution, had to show obedience, respect and loyalty towards their “generous” masters. Within that context, peasants who migrated during droughts and left their masters on their own accord would be portrayed as disloyal and as a cause of social disorder:

In this sense, the figure of the migrant represents a great threat to the lordship order: the migrant, by becoming absent also produces the absence of the lord, as he unbinds and disengages himself from the moral order that establishes the mode of relation within Northeastern productive systems (Matos 2012: 13, own translation).

As Albuquerque (2007) argues, migrants were not leaving only because of the drought, they were leaving also because of the inhuman conditions that characterized their everyday lives and that drought only came to accentuate. Fleeing from their land in that context was a way to subvert unequal power relations: “in this way, the migrant rejects all and every jurisdiction and jurisprudence of the Lord, he leaves, and, at least this time, it is the Lord that must resign itself to the decision of the serf” (Matos 2012: 13, own translation).

9 The system of Hereditary Captaincies installed by the Portuguese Crown in the 16<sup>th</sup> century divided the country into 17 stretches of land awarded to 15 wealthy Europeans colonists. This colonial structure of extreme land concentration has been maintained over the centuries and despite some efforts towards land redistribution, the agrarian reform has never been fully implemented.

10 *Coronelismo* refers to the political practice by the agrarian elite in Brazil to use their power to maintain control over the politics, often through illegal means, by placing themselves in a state of exception (above the law).

11 Wolford (2005) refers to the moral economy of the Brazilian agrarian elite as “land for those who own it” and contrasts it from the peasant moral economy of the MST: “land for those who work it”.

Droughts and drought-driven migrations thus became seen as the main responsible for breaking Northeastern convivial regimes, a process which carried strong undertones of immorality:

This lordship control was founded on the fundamental assumption that the Northeastern society was harmonious and collaborative. White owners naturally held social power, the bedrock that provided cohesion and strength to societal relations. Drought, by contrast, would be a danger for this society, as it bore the capacity to undo the social ties that united lords and peasants, by the destruction of production and by the generalized migration; it would fragment the *sertaneja* society and morality... (Matos 2012: 13, own translation).

Drought in the semi-arid Northeast affected men and women differently. Women were generally the most affected by the effects of water and food shortages. Since they were responsible for preparing and distributing food to all family members, they often had to sacrifice themselves in order for everyone else to be fed. Men, on the other side, had to suffer from the humiliation that not being able to come back home with some money or food represented in a highly patriarchal society. Most would be forced to leave their family and migrate alone in search of employment. These migrations were often conceived as a great defeat for men, a defeat that compromised their very own masculinity, since being a man in the Northeast was highly related to being able to provide for food and security to their family. Many of these male migrants would never come back home, leaving their wives awaiting for their never-to-return husbands. These women were known in the Northeast as the “widows of living men” (*viúvas de homens vivos*) (Albuquerque Jr. 2011, Matos 2012).

Male migrants were therefore considered disloyal not only towards their landlords but also towards their wives, their family and even towards their own native land. Northeast peasants have often been characterized as a people with strong emotional connection and allegiance to their homeland. As Silva explains, Northeast peasant morality is represented through the importance attached to loyalty, not only towards his people but also towards his region:

In the judging of a person, particularly of a *brejeiro* towards a *sertanejo*, appears the charge of loyalty and solidarity as fundamental characteristics of the *sertanejos*... To be loyal and have solidarity implies to be identified with a place, in this case, with the *Sertão*<sup>12</sup> (Silva 2007: 43).

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12 *Sertão* refers to the Northeast semi-arid region. *Sertanejo* are the people of that region. *Brejeiro* are the people from Breijo, a municipality located within the state of Maranhão.

In addition to the moral judgements that peasant migrants suffered at home, they also suffered from discrimination when arriving in the Southern cities, where their culture clashed with that of Southerners:

The major part of these migrants come from the rural area, a majority do not have the minimum codes that govern life within a big city; its habits, costumes, forms of thinking, walking, speaking, are marked by its experience in the countryside and by its social condition of poor men, illiterate, subjected to a hard working routine and much privation, which will reinforce this image, constructed by the Northeastern elite, in its political discourse, that we are a region stuck in the past, a region, that reacted, inclusive, to the modern models of western society (Albuquerque Jr., 2007 in Matos 2012, 14).

The discrimination that Northeastern peasant migrants suffered by being labelled as disloyal or reduced to powerless victims in their encounters with the urban Southerner represented a profound assault on their masculinity. Some authors have argued that this feminization of Northeastern migrants was often compensated by a self-over-emphasized masculinity:

Inferior and deprived, the figure of the migrant is accompanied by the “*cabra-macho*” (male goat), the migrant’s own invention to flee from the unbearable humiliation of his condition and subordination, which in fact, materializes into numerous episodes of violence (Matos 2012: 14, own translation).

This can be conceived as a reaction against social discrimination, a form of self-identification through which the peasant takes agency in reconstructing his own identity in an attempt to overcome his subaltern position, however, through a process that reproduces gender differentiation, domination and inequality.<sup>13</sup>

Northeastern peasant migrations have played a fundamental role in the urbanization of Brazil, especially in the formation of the megalopolis like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Peasant mobility contributed to destabilize Northeastern regimes of conviviality, which were highly mediated by patronal and patriarchal land and labour relations. Meanwhile, new forms of urban conviviality were created as a result of these transregional movements, which were characterized by racialized and gendered multicultural relations and by increasing socio-spatial inequalities.

During the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, when most of these massive waves of migration occurred, conviviality in the rural Northeast was still highly defined by colonial structures

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<sup>13</sup> Gonzalez (2008) argues for something similar when she describes the more accentuated character of black machismo, as it articulates with compensatory mechanisms that are direct effects of racial oppression.

and relations with productive arrangements that allowed for large landowners and land workers to live side by side within the same circumscribed territory since peasants usually worked and lived on their landlords' properties. In the city, these forms of cohabitation based on domination and exploitation were replicated mainly in the form of domestic work, a function mainly occupied by black/Northeastern women. However, male migrants in the city, in general, would not live within the same spatial environment as their employers. With rapidly-growing cities, they were increasingly pushed onto the city's urban fringe where infrastructure and services were lacking or completely nonexistent. Urban convivial relations between differentiated social groups was thus mainly restricted to work places while living spaces were increasingly segregated into rich gentrified neighbourhoods on one side and favelas on the other. Urban convivial regimes thus became defined not only by socio-economic, socio-ecological and power asymmetries but also, and increasingly so, by socio-spatial inequalities.

#### **4. “Coexistence with the Semi-Arid”**

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a fundamental change occurs in the conception of nature and the approach to drought in Northeastern semi-arid regions. “Drought-fighting” state policies and interventions were increasingly criticized, showing that they had failed to resolve the problem of drought by prioritizing technological and developmental practices that exacerbated social and environmental issues. In contraposition, agrarian social movements and NGOs mobilized towards a new perspective on nature-society relations based on the idea of “coexisting with the semi-arid” (*convivência com o semiárido*). Different from the idea of “fighting against drought”, which reasserted the separation between man and nature and the domination of the first over the second, the concept of “coexisting with the semi-arid” emphasizes the interdependence between human and nature and the need to address socio-environmental problems through an ethics of care and respect as opposed to one of violence and domination. As Silva (2006: 225) argues, “it is a new perspective that takes away the guilt attributed to natural conditions and envisions the semi-arid space based on its own characteristics, limits and potentialities.” As the author continues, the meaning of “coexistence”:

...does not merely consists in new techniques, new activities and productive practices, sociocultural actions, etc. Coexistence is a cultural proposal that aims to contextualize knowledges and practices (technological, economic and political) appropriated to the semi-arid-ness, recognizing the heterogeneity of its sub-regional manifestations, considering also the understandings of the

local population of this space, its issues and alternative solutions... (Silva 2006: 226).<sup>14</sup>

It was along this idea of conviviality between semi-arid nature and society that the Program for the Production and Use of Biodiesel (PNPB), launched by the Brazilian State in 2004, was discursively framed. The program aimed at developing Brazil's agrofuels sector through socially and ecologically "sustainable" practices that included: (1) targeting areas with low carbon stocks and low biodiversity to avoid the risk of actually adding to greenhouse gas emissions; (2) integrating poor family-farmers into the agrofuels industrial complex to reduce concentration of agrofuels income in the hands of a few corporations; (3) encouraging the use of non-food oil plants to avoid competition with the food industry for the same raw materials; and, (4) using crops that are not amenable to mechanized production, and promoting agroecological techniques to avoid the expansion of monocultures and the loss of biodiversity (Manzi 2013: 2-3).

Under these terms, the agrodiesel program appeared as an emblematic example of "coexistence with the semi-arid". However, the results of the author's research carried in Bahia between 2010 and 2012 showed otherwise (Manzi 2013: 2017). While social inclusion and environmental sustainability were part of the program's objectives, it understood it from the economic standpoint of integrating family farmers and the North and Northeastern regions of Brazil into the capitalist agrofuels industrial complex without changing the social and economic structures that have maintained these regions and their populations marginalized. The program thus reproduced the classic capitalist division of labour by locating peasants at the very bottom of the agrodiesel production chain to serve as cheap labour for the production of agricultural commodities with their low and unstable market values. In the case of Bahia, the oil plant that served as raw material and could best "coexist" with the peasant culture and semi-arid environment was castor bean (mamona), a drought-resilient plant strongly associated to the Northeastern poor peasant, who have historically depended upon it for their livelihoods, especially during periods of drought.<sup>15</sup>

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14 This idea of "coexisting with the semi-arid" goes beyond an understanding of coexistence as living "side-by-side". It proposes a new kind of relation between nature and society and between different forms and subjects of knowledge. For this reason, it relates more closely to our concept of conviviality, as it refers not merely to an idea of proximity but to a particular type of everyday interaction within difference - difference as representing that which has been historically constructed to create distinctions not only between humans but also between themselves and what they consider to be "nonhumans".

15 Castor bean is a non-food oleaginous plant well-adapted to arid climates. It was brought by the slaves from Africa and has been cultivated by Brazilian Northeastern peasants for more than a century.

## 4.1 Containing Peasant Mobility

“Coexisting with the semi-arid” also means living-together-with, as opposed to fleeing from, semi-arid natures, regions, and climate. This approach was well-aligned with government efforts to reduce rural exodus as a way to tackle urban socio-economic problems, even more now that climate change and environmental degradation was worsening the intensity and frequency of droughts in Northeastern Brazil, and that the perspective of drought refugees was reigniting urban anxieties towards the rural “Other”. As a result, state discourses and practices of agrodiesel were directed at maintaining Northeastern peasants within the semi-arid region and strengthening their relationship with their “natural environment”.

The agrodiesel program was presented as a means to develop agricultural practices that would allow family-farmers to better adapt and be more resilient to their increasingly arid environment. Agrodiesel would thus serve as a complementary income-generating activity that would improve farmers’ living conditions, especially during droughts.<sup>16</sup> It would thereby give incentives for Northeastern farmers to remain on their lands and continue to practice agriculture as a way of living, especially for the new generations, who have often been unwilling to follow their parents’ life paths.

## 4.2 Agrodiesel Moral Economies

The idea of “coexisting with the semi-arid” also appears to converge with peasants’ sense of loyalty towards their land, family and community. Loyalty also played a fundamental role in the new convivial relations established under the agrodiesel program, particularly those between family-farmers and agrodiesel cooperatives. It was a crucial moral device for the smooth functioning of the agrodiesel program, as it helped to guarantee that farmers would sell their castor bean production to the agrodiesel cooperatives, which served as intermediaries between farmers and agrodiesel companies like Petrobras (Manzi 2013).

Through programs like the PNPB, the Brazilian state was attempting to promote a culture of cooperativism in the Northeast that would resemble that which had been developed in the country’s South. The development of agrodiesel cooperativism and particularly the disciplining of farmers into loyal cooperative members also contributed to consolidate peasants’ long-term commitment to the semi-arid region. The moral

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16 The cultivation of castor bean has historically contributed to reduce peasant out-migrations during droughts. It was introduced as a cash crop during the 1970s and suffered from boom and bust cycles, as agricultural commodities usually do. When droughts coincided with a bust period for castor bean production, farmers would be more likely to migrate to other regions, as they would be left with no alternative to survive the drought.

valorization of loyalty within agrodiesel cooperativism strongly resonated to many Northeastern peasants who had been engaged, at least at some point in their lives, as long-term wage labour for large landowners or as members of agrarian social movements like the MST,<sup>17</sup> where loyalty was a highly praised value, the moral basis on which social movement's cohesion strongly depended.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, loyalty has been an ambiguous but seductive moral value that has appealed to these contradictory social meanings and collective memories (Manzi 2013).

"Coexisting with the semi-arid" through agrodiesel production therefore appeared as a way by which family-farmers and agrarian social movements could guaranty their survival on the land.<sup>19</sup> However, this option bore high social and environmental costs. Northeastern family-farmers were able to earn a salary through selling their castor bean production to agrodiesel companies but under unequal terms and often-unfair labour conditions. Those who resisted this new form of subjugation and preferred to sell their production to local merchants (*atravessadores*) were labelled as "disloyal" and excluded from the program. These mechanisms of control created new forms of social differences between those "moral" subjects who abided by the often-unfair labour and wage conditions set by the companies, and those considered immoral for not obeying to the rules. While this kind of disobedience was seen as immoral by the establishment, it was often used among farmers as a form of resistance against labour exploitation. For poorer farmers, "being disloyal" by selling to the first available buyer was at times the only way to make ends meet since these independent merchants could often pay them faster and at better prices than those set in advance by agrodiesel companies like Petrobras (Manzi 2013).

Peasant "disloyalty" was framed by state and agrodiesel companies' representatives as the main responsible for the program's failures and was portrayed as a "cultural problem". "Disloyal", "disorganized" and "individualist" Northeast peasants were compared and contrasted with their "loyal", "productive" and "cooperative" Southern counterparts. This had the effect of (re)producing social differences and hierarchies

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17 The PNPB targeted agrarian social movements like the MST (Landless Workers' Movement) and rural trade unions, as their leaders represented strategic allies to reach and convince family-farmers to participate in the program and then serve as intermediaries between them and the agrodiesel companies.

18 Loyalty is also a central Christian value and the strong presence of the Catholic Church has profoundly marked Northeastern history, culture and value system. Christian values have also been central within the MST, especially because the movement was created through strong alliance with the CPT (Pastoral Land Commission), a leftist Catholic institution influenced by the Liberation Theology.

19 While the PNPB had been criticized by many MST representatives, some leaders had agreed to participate in the program on the basis that this income-generating activity could contribute to sustain MST settlements and guaranty the survival of the movement. This concern was also part of the MST need to invest more efforts towards the struggle *on the land* through sustainable livelihood practices while continuing the struggle *for land* through occupation (Wolford 2010 in Manzi 2013: 295).

between the Brazilian North/South while creating a moral economy that combined old paternalist and colonial ideologies and structures with the new hegemonic neoliberal logic.

“Coexisting with the semi-arid” under the PNPB could have at least created new forms of nature-society conviviality under capitalist development if agroecological principles had been followed and applied. Unfortunately, while efforts towards that direction were made in the first years of implementation, agrodiesel companies and state agencies increasingly promoted and enforced monocultural practices and the use of sterile genetically modified seeds, with their associated packages of insecticides and fertilizers, undermining the food security and sovereignty of Northeastern peasants and agrarian social movements.

Thus, in the case of the PNPB in semi-arid Bahia, our results show that although it was discursively constructed in line with the promising approach of “coexisting with the semi-arid”, it did not materialize into more harmonious forms of conviviality with semi-arid nature. Instead, it reproduced same old profit-driven “green” development practices that have long proven to be ecologically and socially unsustainable. It also did not foster more equal and just land and labour practices. Rather, it re-enacted the same relations of domination and exploitation towards the Northeast peasants that have sustained Brazil’s highly unequal agrarian regime since colonization.

By promoting agrodiesel production on family farmers’ *own lands*, the PNPB appeared as a socially responsible alternative form of producing agrofuels, much against the contemporary land-grabbing abuses that this new agricultural practice has spurred around the world. Instead of using the traditional practice of contract farming that the process of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003) made possible, the agrodiesel program used the same “contract farming” modality, but instead of contracting family farmers to work on larger farmers’ properties, as it has often been the case historically, it enabled family farmers to work on their own land. For peasants and agrarian social movements, this modality held great promises for increased land and labour sovereignty and security, a promise that rapidly vanished as state agencies and agrodiesel companies’ control over peasant labour and land practices turned out again to be the rule.

However, broken promises and power abuses by the agrodiesel companies were not only resisted through “disloyal” commercial transactions but also through direct contestations by peasants and agrarian social movements involved in the agrodiesel program. For instance, agrodiesel companies’ unfair practices were vehemently denounced in public events subsidized by the state to promote the program. In addition,

many farmers and MST settlements withdraw from participating to the program and the word quickly spread out that the agrodiesel program, in many respects, was a scam.

Thus, agrodiesel production may have initially appeared to some as a new form of nature-society conviviality by promoting a livelihood that could strengthen peasants' connection to their own land and to the resources on which they have historically depended. It also meant creating new convivial relations between historically antagonistic actors; the state, powerful agrodiesel companies and agrarian social movements. However, these new agrodiesel territories with their particular forms of conviviality, instead of breaking with old patterns of oppression and inequality, continue to carry the legacy of patriarchy and colonialism, while being increasingly integrated within the neoliberal and globalized capitalist economy.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this paper, I have examined how specific understandings of nature-society relations have been mobilized by Brazilian national and regional discourses and state interventions on droughts and peasant mobility throughout different historical periods. During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, droughts in the Brazilian Northeast have been managed based on a dichotomic understanding of nature/society, in which nature represented rural backwardness, hostility, suffering, misery and unpredictability while society represented urban modernization, development, civilization, stability and order. These representations have been fundamental to justify and legitimize the domination, control and exploitation of man over nature. The same logic and fate has applied to other subaltern subjects who have been systematically associated with nature (like peasants, blacks, indigenous and women) and also turned into objects of intervention.

Within this perspective, the “fight against drought” ideology has mainly consisted in governing nature through the construction of large infrastructural projects and through an aggressive agricultural modernization approach. It also involved controlling drought-afflicted peasants either by containing or enhancing their migrations. Blaming drought and the resulting peasant migrations as the underlying causes of national social and economic problems has been an efficient way to obscure social inequalities and preserve hegemonic power.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a radically different approach to drought, based on a more horizontal and reciprocal perspective on nature-society relations, emerged out of Northeastern indigenous knowledges and agrarian social movement struggles and became known under the notion of “coexistence with the semi-arid”. However, its appropriation for the promotion of the agrodiesel program (PNPB) helped legitimize

the implementation of this controversial agricultural project but did not result in more equal, just and viable socio-ecological relations.

The moral economies of drought and agrodiesel have played a fundamental role in maintaining state and elite control over peasant labour, land and mobility. These moral practices have been highly involved in the making of agrarian territories as they help to consolidate the dominion of hegemonic agents (like the State, the elite or large multinationals) over the semi-arid region. These moral territories emerged as values such as loyalty, development, productivity, order and stability promote spatial practices that contain certain subjects into certain places or that redistribute them over space. This type of territorial management of the peasant population has accompanied the implementation of large infrastructural development projects during the “fight against drought” period and the inclusion of family-farmers into the national food-energy complex during the “coexistence with the semi-arid” period. These moral territorialities have also been implicated in the constitution of racialized and gendered subaltern subjectivities and in the reproduction of cultural differences and socio-spatial inequalities between the Brazilian North(east) and South and within the cities that have absorbed a massive influx of Northeastern peasant migrants during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, Northeastern peasants have persistently contested and subverted these forms of subjugation and inequality by refusing to abide by the rules set by dominant groups and by re-negotiating the terms and conditions of their labour, land and territorial relations through their “everyday practices of resistance” (Scott 1985), which have been often expressed by acts of disobedience like flight, robbery, and disloyalty, but also through collective and national struggles for land distribution and agrarian reform, led by large and far-reaching social movements like the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST).

Finally, this study has shown that a more entangled, territorialized and contextualized conception of nature-society relations, through the appropriation of the grassroots idea of “coexisting with the semi-arid”, as in the case of agrodiesel development in Northeast Brazil, does not necessarily lead to less oppressive and more equal forms of conviviality. Thus, co-existing with nature – or thinking about conviviality in more general terms – cannot only focus on the “co-” or the “with” of existence (Boisvert 2010), it must also delve into the “how” of the “with”, by drawing attention to the power relations that constitute the everyday living together within difference. As this study has shown, examining the moral economies and territorialities of nature-society conviviality may contribute towards that end.

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