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# Organic Intellectuals: Legitimizing Agribusiness Production in Brazil

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## **Abstract**

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The scope of this article is to analyze the implementation of forest policy and the role played by Blairo Borges Maggi, in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, during the period 2003-2010, namely the years coinciding, in the main, with both Lula's term of office as President and with Maggi's governorship of the Mato Grosso state. The approach and conditions of the policy were based on non-invasive technology – such as remote sensing imagery and a Geographic Information System (GIS) database regarding deforestation areas – and attempted to effectively control part of the deforestation in the State. An apparent contradiction was created, since the state governor is closely linked to the agribusiness sector. We draw on Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual in our analysis and explanation of this paradox in the Mato Grosso state, in order to understand the role played by Maggi in the process. Thus, we formulate the hypothesis that classifies the governor of the Mato Grosso state as not a revolutionary organic intellectual, as some might argue, but an organic intellectual whose reformist proposals are aimed at maintaining the hegemony of his particular group, which – in turn – sees the environmental theme as a threat to this hegemony.

## **Keywords**

Gramsci, Rural Licensing, Deforestation, Organic Intellectual, Market, Natural Capital

# *Organic Intellectuals: Legitimizing Agribusiness Production in Brazil*

Carlos Hiroo Saito and Andréa A. Azevedo

## *1. Introduction*

In the period under study (2003-2010), environmentalist and agribusiness representatives were in mutual opposition regarding the enforcement of the Forest Code: from the agribusiness point of view, application of this legal norm would possibly see a reduction of the productive area in the Mato Grosso (MT) state; from the environmentalists' point of view, enforcement of the law was the only one way to control deforestation, hence the necessity to monitor this enforcement.

The Mato Grosso state, in the Midwest region of Brazil, greatly expanded its Gross Domestic Product in the decade 1990-2000, based mainly on a horizontal growth of its areas of agricultural production. To put this growth in perspective, from 1992 to 2007, the state of Mato Grosso doubled the amount of deforestation as compared with what had happened up to 1992 (an increase of 105%), representing approximately an additional deforestation of 18 million hectares (180 thousand km<sup>2</sup>), an area corresponding to almost one and a half times that of England (Azevedo, 2009). According to the Mato Grosso Environment Minister, from 2003 to 2007 almost 7 million hectares were deforested. Moreover, in 2002, the state elected as governor Blairo Borges Maggi, popularly regarded as “the King of Soy”, one of the largest producers of this commodity in the world, “the hardest working man in the Brazilian soy business” according to Forbes Magazine, and a man who in 2014 joined the ranks of the world's billionaires.

Nevertheless, it was under this governor that the Mato Grosso state consolidated a supposed green policy. In 2000, Mato Grosso began implementing a monitoring system, with seemingly ideal technological support, to enforce the Brazilian Forest Code. This had been stipulated by a 1965 law governing environmental conservation in private areas in Brazil, and remained in force until its substitution in 2012 by subsequent legislation. This legal code, known as SLAPR (Sistema de Licenciamento Ambiental para

Propriedades Rurais” or “System for Environmental Licensing of Rural Properties”), in its conceptual design contained the integration of licensing (information), monitoring (satellite images) and an inspection conducted from the monitoring step (enforcement). The system reached its full development in 2003, and farmers entering the system had their deforestation areas monitored by satellite images, in order to obtain a certificate of legal conformity that their deforestation areas was maintaining the reservation areas determined by law. The certification itself is obtained through the Mato Grosso Legal Program, created by the governor in 2008.

Bieler and Morton (2003, p. 1) recommend trying to “find out, through an empirical analysis, which social forces attempt to formulate a hegemonic project around which ideas” and investigating how the “forces of capital become internalized in a particular form of state or how they are resisted”. Our study is based on an empirical case investigation of the production structure and, in attempting to characterize the social forces who are the key collective actors, thus fits well into Bieler and Morton’s framework and the methodological challenges that these authors address. We bring into play Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectual in order to seek theoretical support to explain the paradox of the Mato Grosso state and understand the role played by state governor Maggi (2003-2010) in the process, as well as the strategy employed by him at that moment in time, which resulted in the change of the Brazilian Forest Code. Thus the argument we adduce here is that, despite the declared profile of the Mato Grosso state governor as a politician putting forward reformist environmentalist proposals, he should be regarded as an organic intellectual of the agribusiness sector, dedicated to the maintenance of the hegemony of that group.

## *2. The reaction of agribusiness to environmental criticism: the System for Environmental Licensing of Rural Properties enters the scene*

In 1999/2000 the first public policy instrument was produced, and proclaimed to be being capable of licensing and monitoring and, thus, effectively overseeing the implementation of the Forest Code in the Amazon. The rationale for the policy makers was based on assumptions that the data on deforestation in the Mato Grosso



state could only be truly known if there was reliable information, and that this information, if used correctly, could generate control and ensure the implementation of the Forest Code. This, then, was the logic lying behind the new system, and the big news was that this would be done using remote sensing technology combined with a Geographic Information System (GIS), providing licensing which would be able to identify individually each farm where there is agricultural activity. This identification of property, including the demarcation of the Legal Reserve and Permanent Preservation Areas, would be a key instrument to facilitate the monitoring of deforestation, defining them as legal or illegal activities, and to name the possible offenders.

The political-economic justification for the implementation of instruments of control (SLAPR being an example of this) relies exactly on this possibility of distinguishing between legal and illegal deforestation. By this differentiation, it would be possible to respond to society and to international public opinion, which are demanding that the State should adopt a clear position in face of the increasing deforestation. This would legalize at least part of the agriculture activities within the Mato Grosso state, since rural property could be licensed. The legalization would legitimize this form of production through alleged control by the State.

The technical secretary in the Federal Subprogram of Natural Resources of the Ministry of the Environment was interviewed regarding the implementation of SLAPR in the Mato Grosso state and explicitly defined the commercial and economic role SLAPR could have. The original idea, he stated, was that the use of technology involved in the system would make it possible to verify, in the near future, the environmental situation of a licensed property on any computer on the planet and so it would be possible to develop a certified market for products of the Mato Grosso state (Azevedo, 2009).

In fact, legalization of deforestation occurred within the system. Within licensed rural properties, comparing the 1995-1999 period (before implementation of the system) with the 2000-2007 period (after its implementation), there was an increase in deforestation of about 32%. The control sample, with rural properties outside the system, indicates that deforestation increased by only 1% from the first to the second period. However, in the second period (after

implementation), only the SLAPR sample was legal. This means that the implementation of SLAPR, instead of reducing deforestation, allowed its expansion, ensuring however a State-sanctioned status of legal deforestation. Except for some deforestation within the Legal Reserve (about 2.6% of the licensed area until 2006), all deforestation had a formal permission from the State (Azevedo 2009). In this institutional setting, the policy has enhanced a synergy between economic and the ecological logics (Rajão and Hayes 2009), with the numbers creating an illusion that Mato Grosso state was on the way to ending illegal logging.

### *3. The legitimacy of capitalism and hegemony over environmental concern*

To understand the apparent paradox between economic status and the implementation of environmental policies, it is important to refer to a theoretical support to explain the changes that capitalism has assimilated after the emergence of environmental concern.

The Mato Grosso state has entered the list of environmentalist criticisms as a major world grain producer, achieved at the expense of losing a large portion of natural areas, including those with high environmental fragility (i.e. large areas of the headwaters of the Amazon basin and the Pantanal). Boltanski and Chiapello (2002) argue that the criticism of capitalism undermines the pillars for its justifications. But, for the end of capitalism, this interpretation is too simple and deterministic.

During the increasing occupation of the Amazon over the last 50 years, several institutional logics have set the tone for environmental policies and the technologies used in these policies. These logics have formed over time and sometimes work in synergy, and sometimes in conflict, and are often present simultaneously: such is the case of ecological and economic logics (Rajão and Hayes 2009). This complex context reveals an apparent contradictory behavior especially in those stakeholders more bound to an economic logic, since, while they fear and condemn the increasing appreciation of the ecological discourse, they are also simultaneously becoming aware that they must somehow seek engagement in this discourse; at the same time, however, their practices do not represent full adherence to the green agenda. This may be interpreted as a parallel to Gramsci's analysis of any system

of crystallized ideas when faced with current practical needs: a “struggle between conservation and revolution, etc., between what was thought in the past and the new thinking; between the old that refuses to die and the new that wants to live, etc.” (Q6, § 139, Gramsci 1975, p. 311; Gramsci 2007, p. 110).

It is important to say that the resulting processes may be only an adaptive simulacrum of the expected changes, and do not imply a real greening revolution. Capitalism has appropriated the non-conflictive concept of Sustainable Development and also introduced it in the market system through various policies that have sought to overcome the conflicting sides in the dialectic of development: the environment and economic growth. (Leff 2006; Martinez-Alier and Jusmet 2001). Thus, a reformist market came to be established in order to meet worldwide environmental criticism after the 1980s. National environmental laws started to be demanded as a guarantee for international credits and access to foreign markets. In addition to national laws, the market begins to reward those business groups that did more than legally required or in some way proved that their so-called *best practices* constituted “*the green seal*” (Leff 2006).

In this way, from nature now converted into natural capital, capitalism has dictated a new geopolitics, drawing a new topological design of the international division of labor. Northern countries, with an intensive production of knowledge in industrial and agricultural sectors, are “colonizing” practices in the South, especially as regards multinationals selling ready-made technology packages. Thus, countries in the South are being increasingly seen as exporters of natural capital (Azevedo *et al.* 2007).

The Mato Grosso state is an emblematic case of the new international division of labor after the globalization of world markets. This state has specialized in the production of agricultural commodities with a high environmental cost in terms of loss of biodiversity and erosion of various other natural resources such as soil, water (by deforestation practice and the establishment of an industrial agriculture), and the consequent contribution of these practices to global warming (Nepstad 2006; Santilli *et al.* 2005; Fearnside 2005).

This process of a great increase in agricultural production, seen particularly since 1998, has been not only a process spurred on by

local forces and the entrepreneurship of migrants. All the infrastructure provided by public and private investments, such as the location of large buyers of grain crushers, funding for storage structures, and the logistics for transportation, have been important vectors as part of this dynamic (Becker 2007). Furthermore, this process has a direct interface with international demands as regards specialized commodities producers (Nepstad 2005), the regional history of land owning and land concentration, and also national government desires to gain more foreign currency by commodity exportation, thereby contributing to obtaining a balance of payments surplus (Rajão 2008). In short, the Mato Grosso state has assembled a number of conditions to play the desired role in the new international division of labor, including technological, economic, political and even ideological aspects.

However, in the late 1990s, despite the stimulus of a globalized economy, the environmental critique had struck at the agribusiness sector very strongly, arguing against its consequences. The Mato Grosso state was pictured as one with very high rates of deforestation (as had occurred in 1995) and with alarming levels of burnings (as was seen in 1998). Something needed to be done so that these criticisms of the environmental aspect of production could be softened, and the agribusiness enterprises could be legitimized as environmentally responsible. This legitimization is part of the continued accumulation of capitalism in an exercise of hegemony “without force predominating excessively over consent”, as Gramsci explains (Q 13, §37, Gramsci 1975, p. 1638; summarized in Gramsci 1971, p. 80n; cf. also the first draft, Q 1, §48; Gramsci 1975, p. 59; Gramsci 1994, p. 156). The US scholar Michael Goldberg explains that hegemony “means the success of the dominant classes in presenting their definition of reality, their view of the world, in such a way that it is accepted by other classes as ‘common sense’. The general ‘consensus’ is that it is the only sensible way of seeing the world” (<https://faculty.washington.edu/mlg/courses/definitions/hegemony.html>). In the words of another commentator, “Belief, faith, dogmatism may be understood as embryonic forms of hegemony, but a fully developed hegemony is a form of intellectual and moral leadership in which the mass of the population understands its own interests as being fundamentally compatible with the dominant social group” (Riley 2011, p. 12).

Thus, legitimacy in this case represents the construction and maintenance of the hegemony of the agribusiness sector to dictate the way in which the land surface in the state is occupied and used, integrating urban and rural areas beyond the economic practice of agribusiness. This legitimacy also means the acceptance and rational justification of this land occupation and use by society in general, which means not only the agribusiness sector but also small producers, policy makers and even some environmentalists. It is opportune to remember that Gramsci believed that hegemony was ultimately rooted in economic power, as one of the expressions of class struggle through a combination of force and consent (Brosio 1994, p. 50). Gramsci in fact noted that “for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of the economy” (Q 13, §18, Gramsci 1975; p. 1591; Gramsci, 1971, p. 161).

Hall (1996, p. 417) follows this reasoning, and while arguing that once hegemony is not exclusively an ideological phenomenon but must have a base in “the decisive nucleus of the economy”, combats a mechanistic viewpoint that tends “to see all other dimensions of the social formation as simply mirroring ‘the economic’ [...], as having no other determining or structuring force in their own right”. Buckel and Fischer-Lescano (2009) also reinforce this idea. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is related to his view of power as a social construction related to economic, political, moral, intellectual, cultural and ideological questions and also articulated to the concept of the historical bloc and their agents. The historical bloc is seen as a result of the structure and superstructure in which “the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructure is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production” (Q 8, §182; Gramsci 1975, p. 1051; Gramsci 1971, p. 366), creating an organic cohesion between intellectuals and people-nation (Q 11, §67; Gramsci 1975, p. 1505-6; Gramsci 1971, p. 418) responsible for promoting a political initiative able to “liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies” (Q 13, §23; Gramsci 1975, p. 1612; Gramsci 1971, p. 168). The question hinges around how this organic cohesion can be created, and who the agent of this process may be, i.e. whether it can be forged by representatives of the economic

hegemonic group or class. That is why Smith (2010) argues in favor of proximity of the hegemony concept to the leadership notion rather than the dominance one.

Therefore, in addition to these macro-structural aspects, there is a need to analyze the role played by specific social agents, which may be decisive for a possible strengthening of the tendency of a line of discourse and public policies, which are able both to spread illusions and build new hegemonies in the public sphere.

Fischman and McLaren (2005) remind us that the features of consent and coercion that underlie Gramsci's model of hegemonic domination are dynamic categories, both forming part of the process to achieve supremacy:

A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to 'liquidate', or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power (...); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercise power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well (Q 19, §24; Gramsci 1975, p. 2010; Gramsci 1971, pp. 57-58).

Because of this leadership component, which means that "hegemonic relationships not only play an ethical role but also a pedagogical one" (Fischman and McLaren, 2005, p. 3), when we integrate this pedagogical role with economic interest, we need to recognize that "hegemony requires the transcendence of narrow factional interests. Economic interests reflect into ideological consciousness" (Gündogan 2008, p. 52). That is why a profound look into the supposed agribusiness greening of the Mato Grosso state is important, as a first step to admitting the possibility of re-articulation into an alternative hegemonic practice. Or, in the present case study, it can describe its reinforcing practice.

How then is it possible to create an illusion that agribusiness in the Mato Grosso state could be on the path of conversion to an environmentally friendly practice? How could the state government, headed by the largest producer of soybeans (thus the expression of the presence of agribusiness at the helm of regional political power), be recognized as an environmentally-friendly government without creating an internal conflict around the person of the governor and his productive roots? What role could he (governor Maggi) have to serve the interests of the economic sector he still

represents? These are the central questions to be posed to this study.

In this sense, it seems worthwhile examining the concept of organic intellectual in the light of that context.

#### 4. *The concept of organic intellectual in hegemonic meanings*

In Gramsci (Q 12, §1; Gramsci 1975, p. 1513; Gramsci 1971, p. 5), we read that

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organisers of a new culture, of a new legal system etc. It should be noted that the entrepreneur himself represents a higher level of social elaboration, already characterised by a certain directive and technical (i.e. intellectual) capacity: he must have a certain technical capacity not only in the limited sphere of his activity and initiative but in other spheres as well, at least in those which are closest to economic production. He must be an organiser of masses of men; he must be an organiser of the 'confidence' of investors in his business, of the customers for his product, etc.

Thus, a first hypothesis is that governor Maggi could be embodying the role of Gramscian concept of an organic intellectual linked this time to agribusiness. However, several objections have been raised about this hypothesis.

A first objection arose from non-Gramscian researchers, who demonstrated the attachment to the concept of traditional intellectual. In this context, an intellectual means someone whose intellectual status would be recognized by Academia as a result of accumulated titles and/or the activity of theoretical elaboration. These intellectuals always come from a group of experts of practical knowledge, such as lawyers, mathematicians, doctors, teachers, whose quantitative presence in a given society depends on its economic development and thus to the growing possibility of the social division of labor, as argued by Sartre in his *A Plea for Intellectuals* (Sartre 1994). Thus, based on the vision of Sartre's classical intellectual, governor Maggi would be excluded from this

group. However, this discourse was criticized by Gramsci, described by him as a methodological error in the distinction of intellectuals and their role in society.

The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for this criterion of distinction in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place within the general complex of social relations (Q12 §1; Gramsci 1975, p. 1516; Gramsci, 1971, p. 8).

If we accept this argument of Gramsci's, we could overcome this first objection, and look for the understanding of the intellectuals' role and origin within social relations and their corresponding historical context. They are not pure in themselves, but are products of history, with their consequent commitment to their social class or group. The supposed neutrality of the intellectuals usually serves to reinforce the hegemony of the ruling class. Additionally, Gramsci says that all men are intellectual, and 'although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals' (Q12 §3, p. 1550; Gramsci 1971, p. 9). Thus, we may conclude that there are different types or profiles of intellectuals, some of them politically engaged to forge an alternative hegemony, and others committed to the maintenance of the ruling class hegemony. For Gramsci, both groups include his category of organic intellectuals.

We should now face a second category of objection to our central hypothesis: Do organic intellectuals necessarily mean left-wing politically engaged intellectuals? We have had to face objections to our analysis based on the mistaken belief that the term organic intellectual would refer only to the intellectual that is bound and committed to the working class.

Paolo Nosella (2005), a well-known researcher in Brazil who has focused on issues of "Work and Education" and the "History of Education", and is one of the great contributors in the spread of the Antonio Gramsci's ideas, stated that just such a view was quite common in the 1980s, when many people erroneously felt that all organic intellectuals would necessarily be progressive, left-wing militants. Challenging this, Lino Resende (2006), in an article representing part of his master's degree dissertation in Social



History, observes that Gramsci expands the concept of intellectual, giving a connotation of formulator to organic intellectual, who could either be of the hegemonic classes or of those who act in the context of the production of an alternative hegemony in favor of the subaltern groups and classes. According to the same author “organic, in short, is the intellectual who participates, who acts, who helps in the formulation of a new hegemony or engages in the maintenance of hegemony. On the one hand and the other, the organicity comes from commitment, from participation, from the formulation of ideas to help in political action, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic” (Resende 2006, p. 6), where “counter-hegemonic” is to be understood as the action of the subaltern groups involved.

In the passage quoted about the formation of the intellectuals Gramsci said that “the capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organisers of a new culture” (Q12 §1, p. 1513; Gramsci 1971, p. 5).

When the general hypothesis of this work was put under debate at a round-table discussion among academics in 2009, part of the discussion hinged around just how “organic intellectuals” were to be understood, and here we saw the emergence of this second type of objection, as transcribed below:

What disturbs him [about another critic in the discussion group] – and that is the tone of the thinker whom I support “in spirit” – is exactly to question why we should give more power to someone who is a usurper of power, who bitterly and perversely promotes social inequality and environmental injustice [said of governor Maggi]. For my ideological choice, I refuse to offer Blairo Maggi this profile [the status of organic intellectual of the agribusiness sector] because I want to preserve my Gramscian interpretation [of the organic intellectual – editorial note] as a revolutionary and essentially left-wing militant. And [I want to] continue to believe that the organic intellectual is one who fights in favor of the subaltern masses, the excluded, the marginalized, the shoeless and shirtless, and not just [a title that can be appended] to any specific group, whatever they are (discussant 1).

As it stands this participant does not seem to take into account that organic intellectuals may belong to a non-subaltern class, such as those representing the agribusiness sector. It is important to remember that although this participant defines himself as a

follower of Gramsci, he prefers give his own interpretation of Gramsci's ideas than read carefully Gramsci words. As quoted above, in Gramsci's view (Q 12 §1; Gramsci 1975, p. 1513; Gramsci 1971, p. 5) every social group creates together with itself those intellectuals who are, because of that fact, considered organic ones.

Another representative participant in the discussion also used the same argumentative logic, again denying the status of organic intellectual of the agribusiness sector to governor Maggi:

However, the idea of the intellectual that I also passionately advocate for the popular sectors, as Gramsci also did, is that these sectors develop for themselves and others sufficient legitimacy of a [new] rationality, true or not, but developed so as to resist in sharp debate, which has connective threads allowing them to find points of reference, because [this rationality] will sustain a more or less coherent and consistent political position. In this sense, there is an idea of 'ideology', of a certain *corpus*, a certain consistency, that is independent of 'the truth'. However I refuse to recognize that the opportunists whose theoretical framework is only that which provides accumulation, and whose support points are unassailable because they keep changing their underlying principles whenever the situation is convenient, and who live by the chance collection of capital gain, wherever they can find it, without ethical rules, who opportunistically change the legal and political apparatus, and many, many times, announce it in public and then undo it in private, I refuse to recognize that this killer cell [referring to Maggi] can be called a rational [human being] (discussant 2).

The analysis of these words shows that these people in the discussion group did not want to allow Maggi the title of "organic intellectual" since they considered him the representative of the agribusiness sector, and thus, a conservative stakeholder. Since their objection is based on their belief that "organic intellectuals" should be left-wing, this recognition leads us to conjecture that the basis for their argumentation is more than just a methodological error, as foreseen by Gramsci: it also seems closer to what Lenin (1940) had observed and criticized harshly as ultra-leftism. Lenin observed that "left-wing communism" corresponded to "an infantile disorder of Leftism" (1940, p. 24) or "left childishness" (1940, p. 26) which, in commenting on the debate regarding the participation of communist movements in parliamentary life, he also classified as a theoretical error. Can we conjecture that the refusal to see what Gramsci's theory can offer us (just because of the possibility of

applying the concept of organic intellectual to the governor they oppose) is a kind of ultraleftism and a theoretical error?

From an academic point of view, before people makes personal and private interpretations of Gramsci influenced by their own ideology, it is first necessary that we return to the Gramsci's original formulation of the organic intellectual. In this original theoretical framework, Gramsci just tries to get away from the traditional image of the intellectual to understand the dynamics and dialectics of social movements in the world and thus to rethink their practices. On many occasions it is possible to have in the progressive front those traditional intellectuals who adhere to a project of political transformation. But then there are those who are forged in the historical process, emerging from the factory floor, or from the social struggles of life (including those who were born in and remain linked to the agribusiness sector). These are organic intellectuals. Nevertheless, because of the privileged attention to those forged from social struggles, there is a misperception of recognizing as organic only those intellectuals committed to social change, as was commented on by Nosella (2005). The problem in the debate is whether we recognize this same process inside the dominant social class, and this will be discussed below. In particular, here we are talking about an agriculture sector, which is, in our times, strongly linked to processes of accumulation in the form of agribusiness.

This sector includes individuals who have social origins distant from those situated among the traditional intellectuals, but they have a historical role in capital accumulation. The strategies and justifications in the light of globalized capitalism, and of a world in constant transformation, often require of this sector a highly dynamic behavior, sometimes having several intellectuals allied to their political project, while at other times their own members are required to think and act in favor of themselves. At the present time, one of the most important things for members of the agribusiness sector is how to cope with the increasing importance of environmental issues and how to find strategies for forwarding their interests of capital accumulation. These preoccupations should of course consider an evaluation of the correlation of forces, which may provide decisive elements to strategically opt for an open confrontation or a veiled face – a matter of hegemony. This can

resemble the strategy of legitimation of neoliberalism, as demonstrated by Crocetti (2004).

What Gramsci tried to draw attention to is precisely the fact that there is a movement of theoretical formulation that is seeking greater social cohesion and practical actions not only on the revolutionary side, but also on the side of those who desire the maintenance of the *status quo* (the ruling class), in different hues. He also addressed the question that, behind such movements, there is a quest for greater technical skills (instrumentation), where there is an obviously selectivity to serve their interests. We have to look at the whole historical process and the general class interests. Acknowledging this historical movement does not take away the character of our left-wing position and commitment to social justice. It only makes us more cautious regarding what is going on in terms of social struggles.

One should not therefore rush to assign the term organic intellectual only to those committed to transformative ideas, either by denying governor Maggi the profile of organic intellectual, or by giving him another name as does Semeraro (2006) with the use of the term 'functional intellectual'. It should be noted that, contrary to this trend, Ferreira Jr. and Bittar (2006) attributed to Jarbas Passarinho the status of organic intellectual in the service of the then military dictatorship in Brazil. Riley, basing himself on Gramsci's *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, recalled that Moderates won against Party of Action because, in his view, 'they were the organic intellectuals of the Piedmontese bourgeois aristocracy' in the Italian Risorgimento of the XIX century (2011, p. 17).

It is important to emphasize here that we are not discussing personal preferences. One may wish organic intellectuals always to be left-wing, but we need to understand that we are borrowing a theoretical framework from someone and we must take over its originality, preserving what was actually said, and not our own preference and interpretation. We are free to disagree with the thought of Gramsci, as others have done, but right now we are attempting to do him justice.

This does not detract from the value or merits the opposition presented here by the excerpts quoted from members of the discussion group. We insist only that we must distinguish what are

Gramsci's ideas, based on his writings, and what we think individually about his ideas.

Thus, regarding Gramsci's ideas, we should address the fact that a ruling class relies not only on coercive power and authority but on consent deriving from hegemony – what Gramsci calls the “intellectual and moral leadership” exercised by the ruling class. And it is in this context of (continuously) building and consolidating hegemony, that he highlights the role and the concept of the organic intellectual.

##### *5. Maggi as an agribusiness organic intellectual*

Governor Maggi tried to announce the forestry policy of the Mato Grosso state as a great environmentalist achievement and, therefore, a major advance in line with ecological principles. With this enhanced status the new Mato Grosso policy came to join a list of environmentally friendly initiatives, without contradicting the class interests of the agribusiness sector, a move made possible because environmental liability was not solved, and costs for producers are still located in the future. During Maggi's governorship there was an exhaustive attempt to ease legislation, so that, in the light of environmental protections laws, big farmers – linked to agribusiness – as much as medium farmers and small peasant farmers could adapt to this new context.

Researchers from the Federal University of Minas Gerais Environmental Issues Research Group (GESTA / FAFICH / UFMG), basing themselves on studies on hydroelectric licensing in the Minas Gerais state found a result that can be compared to the case of the Mato Grosso state (Zhourri *et al.* 2005). According to the group, laws and regulations are often ‘appropriated’ by capitalism so they are not an obstacle to private economic projects. In general, these enterprises obtain a connotation of ‘public interest’ in official discourse. The character of the organic intellectual can be seen in the Mato Grosso case because the governor was able to visualize the situation outlined and submit a practical action guided by (non-emancipatory) class interest, justified by an instrumental rhetoric, associated with technical interest (Habermas 1994). Thus, the governor utilized the illusion that technology alone is sufficient to obtain correct results,

fetishizing technology as Saito (1995) warned. It is also important to note that many farmers were expressing opinions based on the perception at a local and individual scale that indicated some worry or dissatisfaction with the advancement of SLAPR, since they believed it could result in a penalty and the surrender of the agribusiness sector to environmental dictates. This, then, is a demonstration that these producers did not have the strategic vision that may be possessed by the organic intellectual, but only an immediate and dull vision of an anonymous member of the social class to which they belong. In this context, it was said by many agribusiness representatives that the governor had forgotten his origins as a member of the agribusiness sector and was working against their interests. These criticisms were made without realizing the advantage that the legalization of deforestation was giving to the agribusiness sector, legitimizing the occupation of territory and attracting the most rigorous and exigent markets to the illusion they had of the end of deforestation. But even this inconvenience and lack of perception of individual members of the agribusiness sector also constitute evidence of the nature of “organic intellectual” represented by Maggi. The organic nature of this type of intellectual lies precisely in its ability to gather and articulate class interests in a broad perspective. Organic intellectuals also can be misunderstood by some individual members of the class that they seek to represent, but in terms of the final result, they turn out to be successful because they are able to strengthen and defend class interests in the medium and long term on a broader scale. Moreover, by actively seeking to underline the success of SLAPR, Maggi is trying to establish in Brazilian society a new hegemonic conception that SLAPR should be copied, as an exemplary model, by all states within the country and once this status is achieved, very few would dare to question the successful outcome: SLAPR would become unassailable and iconic. There would therefore be confirmation of what Eagleton said of Gramsci’s contribution:

It is with Gramsci that the crucial transition is effected from ideology as a “system of ideas” to ideology as lived, habitual, social practice – which must then presumably encompass the unconscious, inarticulate dimensions of social experience as well as the working of formal institutions.

In this way, Eagleton addressed the fact that ideology and hegemony are connected, “the concept of hegemony extends and enriches the notion of ideology”, considering “hegemony is never a once-and-for-all achievement, but has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” (1991, p. 115). In concluding this chain of ideas, we recall that Gramsci’s analysis links ideology to the historical bloc: such analyses “reinforce the conception of historical bloc in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value” (Q 7, §21; Gramsci 1975, p. 869; Gramsci 1971, p. 377; Gramsci 2007, p. 172).

In the Mato Grosso state, as well as the figure of the ex-governor being closely linked to the agribusiness sector, a fact thus empowering his policies, there is also the ethos of the hero, which valorizes someone who challenges difficulties, explores the vast potential of the country and somehow becomes a solitary pioneer in his context (Ames and Keck 1997-1998, p. 29). However, this ethos makes one believe that it is possible to transfer a person’s private ability to achieve economic growth to the economy of the community or the whole State. In this case, it is a transposition of the trajectory of life to politics, when the “primacy of the private” becomes the power in the “primacy of the public” (Bobbio 1997). The combination of all these elements contribute to legitimize Maggi as an organic leader of his class and also as an intellectual who “makes” new proposals to sustain the hegemony of the agribusiness sector.

An element that appears as essential to sustain hegemony is the propagation of an ideology that produces “spontaneous consent” (again using a phrase of Gramsci’s) for the ruling class. “Ideology provides hegemony with the possibility of remaining invisible, disseminated throughout the texture of social life” (Resende 2006, p. 14). In the case of the Mato Grosso state, the agribusiness sector, now led by its organic intellectuals, appears to be taking the stance publicly that it did wrong in the way it promoted land occupation, although it had reasons for so doing. So, it is showing apparent regret, and asking for a relaxation of the rules to agree to a new beginning, a renewed and sustainable one in view of a new socio-environmental scenario (Layrargues 1998).

Further, the economic rationale behind the form of land occupation is not clearly understood by society in general, including environmentalists. The high profitability generated in only a few years by agricultural commodities (soybeans and cotton), as happened in 2003 for example, is also absent from the agribusiness discourse. It is therefore clear that these justifications are being used as a legitimizing ideology in favor of this form of production and occupation of the territory. Marilena Chauí, one of Latin America's foremost philosophers and one of Brazil's most renowned public and politically engaged intellectuals, outlines how this process occurs, explaining that

The ideological production of social illusion aims to make all social classes accept the conditions in which they live, judging them as natural, normal, correct, fair, without attempting to transform them or really know it [social illusion], without taking into account the fact there is a profound contradiction between the actual conditions under which we live and ideas (Chauí, 1997, p. 174).

To accomplish this, effects are taken for causes: there is an inversion. For example, people used to say that 'environmental degradation was caused because there was a need to grow food' – and not because the landowners wanted to exploit more areas to get more profits'; or even 'environmental degradation has occurred because farmers were not charged by the government agencies' – and not because there was a convenience and connivance, through an informal institutional logic, such as a practice of corruption inside the environmental agencies. These are repertoires that are feeding ideology on agriculture in the Mato Grosso state, considered as being of 'vital importance to the state, for Brazil and the world'. In this search for legitimacy, the environmental issue has become an arena of contention for the exercise of hegemony by agribusiness.

This shifting scenario of conflicts, political achievements and setbacks around the environmental issue has a 'backstage' action which is often not clearly perceived: The agribusiness sector needs the state government for relaxation of the law. The state government, in turn, seeks the formulation of agreements and creation of consensus both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, it tries to establish commitments in favor of the agribusiness sector



with other levels of the Brazilian government system (i.e. the upper Federal level and the lower municipal level). Horizontally, the state government tries to obtain the adherence of other regional stakeholders, such as industries, financiers and environmental NGOs. Maggi acted in favor of the agribusiness sector, but tried to be seen as neutral. The agribusiness claim is considered one of the many external pressures to which the state government needs to respond. An article on Maggi's attendance at the 13th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* portrays this new position: an awakened vocation to green issues:

The governor of the Mato Grosso state and soybean king, Blairo Borges Maggi, came to Bali to outline his newly awakened vocation to the green (and not green) soy plants. He sat next to Marina Silva, his former archrival, and signed an agreement yesterday with the Nature Conservancy NGO to raise US\$ 15 million and put all the farms in his state into the SLAPR, the system for licensing rural properties which allows the mapping of illegal deforestation by satellite (Angelo 2007).

This process of consultation and agreements between these seemingly opposing sides allowed the governor to consolidate his position, i.e. put himself forward as a legitimate representative in seeking solutions for the productive class, externally as regards non-local spheres (such as the Federal Government), and internally as the provider of environmental solutions for the state. Within this process of dialogue, the state government, and the figure of the governor in particular, used the discourse of 'sustainable development' as an ideology. Their hope, along with civil society organizations, was to build a new 'agri-environmental' image, as can be seen in a statement by Maggi during the Katoomba Meeting, held in Cuiabá-MT, in April 2009: "here in the Mato Grosso state, we are not in conflict with the environmental area, we are walking [together]".

Thus, it would appear that Maggi, as political representative of the regional state, but also as political representative of the agribusiness interests inside the state, is seeking to convince public opinion that he is forging consensus with other sectors of civil society.

Accordingly, the above arguments support the hypothesis formulated in this paper that Maggi is fulfilling more the role of organic intellectual for the agribusiness class, once we insert him into contemporary economic production; he is preparing an ethico-political concept, and enabling himself to pursue the organizational function of establishing social, political and economic hegemony. He is aware of his class representation and serves not only to build a consensus around the political project of his class, but also to ensure the legal and administrative functions necessary for it, as well as the maintenance of political power in society. He is aware of the type of production required by the global project of his class and has acted materially and culturally (working in the sphere of infrastructure and superstructure) for this purpose, mainly to strengthen the process of capital accumulation by agribusiness in a legitimated way when faced with environmental rhetoric.

Moreover, Maggi is also connected to the most advanced sectors of the agribusiness social group, in the sense that these sectors possess a historical view with long-term strategies, aiming at strengthening their positions regarding social struggles. Many members of his own class, because they are more conservative and attached to traditional forms of struggle and accumulation, do not understand his strategy of expansion and the consolidation of hegemony.

A new detail, to which it is worthwhile paying attention, should be noted in this scenario: after the initial analysis was done in accordance with the guidelines of this article, focusing primarily on the legitimacy of deforestation via SLAPR, ex-governor Maggi was subsequently elected as a new senator of the Republic from the Mato Grosso state. His arrival in the National Congress, just when a draft revision of the Brazilian Forest Code was formulated – the changes effectively eased a number of environmental protective rules – shows a multiple-fronted strategic action, in great synchrony with a broader national movement of the agribusiness sector. It is now clearer to see that these fronts include the removal of legal barriers, so as to legitimize the mode of land use by agribusiness, not to mention the change in legislation supported by the legislature in a representative democracy. This new scenario only reinforces the framework of analysis here presented, based on the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual.

All these events are in accordance with the arguments put forward by Mayo (2011) that the State regulates economic agencies by working in tandem with them, and although appearing to be neutral, it effectively engages in structured partnerships with industry (in this case, agribusiness) to secure the right basis for the accumulation of global capital.

### *6. Conclusion*

The analysis of socioenvironmental conflicts, the apparent contradictions in State policies, and their implementations in the Mato Grosso state of Brazil, allow us to reflect more carefully on the paradox of a state that has records for deforestation and was governed by a significant representative of agribusiness, which is also at the same time implementing a modern and apparently efficient System for Environmental Licensing of Rural Properties (SLAPR) in order to control deforestation within the state. The key for understanding this paradox comes from the theoretical elaboration in Gramsci, mainly through his concept of the organic intellectual. The insight provided by this concept helps to reveal the hidden contradictions designed to curb the jingoism around SLAPR and allows us to carefully evaluate their potentialities and limitations. Despite some resistance from left-wing intellectuals in applying this concept to the proposed situation, we have here shown that such an unfounded resistance is caused by a misreading of the original concept of organic intellectual. Moreover, we argue that the Gramscian concept of organic intellectual is still valuable in its original form in present-day conditions and contributes to understanding complex situations involving policy makers and social processes, especially when these situations are marked by a contradiction that formal logic classifies as a paradox.

This experience of Maggi's mediation and leadership, even in the environmental arena, shows that the organic intellectual is not necessarily revolutionary, nor does s/he have to be left-wing: indeed, as Gramsci notes: the 'political party, for all groups [...] is responsible for welding together the organic intellectuals of a given group – the dominant one – and the traditional intellectuals' (Q 12, §1; Gramsci 1975, p. 1522; Gramsci 1971, p. 15). Maggi is an organic intellectual of the agribusiness sector and, because of that,

was able to achieve the position of governor through a political party, and then in addition, the position of senator of the Republic at a crucial moment of the struggles between environmentalist and agribusiness sectors around the law for the protection of native vegetation. Maggi – in his role as governor – acted as a formulator of the ethico-politico-cultural propositions of the agribusiness sector for the whole of society, making alliances with environmental groups that were former opponents in the public sphere.

At this point, let us refer back to the guiding questions posed in this work: how, in the Mato Grosso state, could the representatives of agribusiness create the illusion that this economic sector is on the way to conversion to an environmentally friendly practice? How could the state government, headed by the largest soybean producer, be recognized as a government that implements environmentally-friendly policies? How is it that this same state government, in contradiction to its new image, simultaneously honors and boosts the production of commodities and their way of land occupation by intense deforestation and opening new areas of planting? In this sense, the set of findings that was commented on as answers to these questions indicate that a way was conceived to legitimize the capitalist production of commodities in the state, headed by an organic intellectual representative of the productive sector, namely the agribusiness one.

At the current time, all who seek a role in favor of sustainable practices in the private and the public spheres, guided by critical thinking, still have much to learn. More than that, intellectual vigilance is required to correctly perceive the movements of concealment, accommodation and coupling to an environmental discourse without the corresponding practical results. The Mato Grosso state is one example of these situations that require an open-minded posture, so to evaluate more carefully the potential of SLAPR and recognize the historical limits to which this system is conditioned. In this way, we can break the illusion and fetishization around technology on which this system is based, recognizing that a deforestation control system cannot, *a priori*, be considered successful only because it is being supported by remote sensing technology and GIS.

Finally, this case study has been an attempt, based on Gramscian concepts applied to the present, to describe how agribusiness as a social force intends to formulate a hegemonic project around the idea of sustainability, and to investigate how these forces of capital become internalized in a particular form of state or how they are resisted.

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