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Shifting frontiers

Spatial adaptations of agribusiness to political contestations and the making of Matopiba

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Shifting frontiers: spatial adaptations of agribusiness to political contestations and the making of Matopiba

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Abstract

Since 2015, when the Brazilian government announced Matopiba - a northeastern portion of the Brazilian Cerrado, encompassing four states - as the country's "last agricultural frontier", the region has increasingly gained national and international attention, both from potential investors, as well as from social movements, organizations and researchers concerned with land grabbing and socio-environmental violations. Although the expansion of agribusiness, and especially of soy monocultures, has been happening in Matopiba since the 1980s and had already accelerated in the early 2000s – implicating drastic changes in land use and land control across millions of hectares – the region had until recently been largely outside of the international and national spotlight. My paper attempts to situate the making of Matopiba as what initially appeared to be a politically viable alternative to other frontiers that were more openly contested at the global scale in the 2000s, including the north of Mozambique and the Brazilian Amazon region, and how different capacities of scaling up political contestations implicated different trajectories within Matopiba. By exploring which factors made the scaling up of resistance within Matopiba more difficult previously compared to other places, I consider whether this case also reveals the risks of processes of political contestation to land grabbing that focus on certain places, phenomena or sectors inadvertently playing into indirect land use changes or "shifting frontiers" in an age of hyper-flexible agri-food system and financial capital investing in land and commodities, highlighting the importance of re-centering politics in analyses of frontier-making.

Keywords

Keywords; Matopiba, land grabbing, frontier-making

Acronyms

CPT	Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission)
Embrapa	Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation
GITE	Strategic Territorial Intelligence Group of EMBRAPA
INCRA	National Institute of Colonization and Land Reform
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MST	Landless Rural Workers' Movement
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party)
SMDH	Sociedade Maranhense de Direitos Humanos

1. Introduction: Matopiba as the latest "last agricultural frontier"

In the last years, the Matopiba agricultural frontier – the acronym most often used to describe mainly the Cerrado portion of four states (Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia) in northeast Brazil – has galvanized attention, both in the form of transnational and national social movement campaigns and in academic literature, including within the network of researchers congregated around the BRICS Initiative in Critical Agrarian Studies. Matopiba was the topic of three papers in the previous BICAS Conference and will probably be the object of multiple discussions in this year's conference. While there are clear reasons for this – as the attention wave follows the 2015 announcement by the Brazilian government of Matopiba as the country's "last agricultural frontier" and the discovery by researchers of large-scale foreign investments in land in Matopiba through shadow companies (Pitta, Vega 2017) – it is also relevant to inquire why debate on and political contestations to Matopiba had trouble scaling up previously, considering the rate at which transformations were already happening. While this paper focuses on discovering how Matopiba emerged as what was considered a "viable" political option by many actors in opposition to other contested frontiers (and how different regions within Matopiba had distinct trajectories also according to scaled-up contestations or lack thereof), it is part of a larger effort to apprehend how the current forms of flexible financialized agri-food system can shift across places, sectors and strategies of accumulation in response to political contestations. This paper ultimately argues that it can be helpful to take the case of this frontier as a starting point of critical self-reflection on the 'land grab literature rush' that follows actual land rushes (Sauer, Borras 2016), and on the possibilities and limitations of the transnationally-linked political contestations from the last decade, by taking a relational perspective.

Around the 2007-8 financial crisis, signals emerged of a new global scramble for land and for new sites of production of commodity crops. The announcement of huge international land deals and agricultural cooperation projects propelled organizations and researchers around the world to try to monitor and understand what was happening (GRAIN 2008; White et al. 2012). The initial perception of the African continent as a main target of many of these deals played into different narratives of the current directions of capitalism. First, the announced scramble for African land raised questions on the reintensification of imperialism towards peripheral countries, with the appearance of potentially new imperialist players in the game, such as the BRICS, and a story emerged on capitalist agriculture finally reaching the *last continent*, where, in general, mass dispossession and formation of immense land estates had not occurred as much as in other continents (Moyo 2011, Cotula 2013).

In the following years, however, a much more nuanced picture emerged. Many of the announced deals in Africa did not come to fruition, often due to disparities between the expected conditions for projected deals and the actual local scenarios (Cotula 2013:46). It also became clearer that territorial expansion of industrial agriculture was occurring heavily in other parts of the world as well, including Southeast Asia (Borras, Franco 2011), Eastern Europe (Visser et al. 2012) and Latin America (Borras et al. 2012).

Looking at these other cases, it became more apparent that many processes of transformation had in reality been

triggered before the 2008 crisis (Borras et al. 2012) and that some of the alarming measurements of land deals following the crisis had lacked methodological rigor (Edelman 2013). Finally, while foreign land acquisitions were indeed an important phenomenon after the crisis, more researchers have also called attention to the importance of national land deals and to the active participation of domestic states in deals with foreign companies and governments (Wolford et al 2013).

In 2015, the Brazilian Government seemingly subverted some of the global narratives focused on Africa by claiming that Brazil had not only gone through previous waves of agricultural expansion, but that it still held the "the last agricultural frontier in expansion in the world*[1]" (Portal Planalto 2015a), abbreviated as Matopiba. Until then, Matopiba, which totals 73 million hectares of land in the official government delimitation, had been largely outside of international and even national debates on land use and land control change, despite having already undergone massive transformations. In 2015, soy plantations had already covered three million hectares in the four states (PAM/IBGE 2017).

Map 1 - Official delimination of Matopiba, approximately corresponding to the Cerrado area of the four states (Source: Embrapa 2015)

Certainly, it is important to understand the general push for converting more land around the globe to industrial agriculture and to other forms of resource extraction. Various conjunctural explanations behind the most recent wave of expansion have also emerged, often agreeing on immediate triggers but with different points of emphasis. These explanations have frequently included the changing habits of consumption in East Asia – especially the meatification of diets –, the new forms of behavior of financial capital post-crisis and growing concentration of power within the agri-food sector (White et al. 2012:627-631).

While these are all vital questions, it is equally important to *de-naturalize* the concrete directions the expansion has taken in the last decade. First, it is important to recognize that what have been called "frontiers" are not new frontiers

[1] Citations translated from Portuguese are marked with an asterisk.

for capital per se, but rather areas that frequently have had previous waves of commodification and of dispossession. These places have often suffered multiple previous economic “booms” and “busts” and/or are now undergoing the appropriation and valuation of labor and resources in novel and more intensive forms. This applies to Matopiba as well, which has undergone cycles of livestock production and has had both waves of dispossession of indigenous and traditional peoples and of repossession of peasants through migration and through state settlements. While it is essential to recognize that the current spread of industrial agriculture provokes much faster and more intense transformation of landscapes (Oliveira, Hecht 2016), rescuing history also keeps us alert to the multiple potentialities of politics. This is a second key point: specific spaces, sectors and strategies become attractive or repulsive to capital, at the conjuncture of multiple processes, at multiple levels. These processes can involve both dynamic collusions between economic and political actors tied to agribusiness and explosive collisions with multiple forms of resistance.

The flexibility of forms of value capture, the high-speed mobility and the level of coordination of international capital – particularly of financial capital – under globalization are without precedent. This means that, once obstacles are encountered in one place, sector or strategy, leaps can be taken relatively easily to more profitable or less cumbersome possibilities in other parts of the globe. It is true, also, that these leaps are taken not only in relation to outside contentions, but also to disputes among fractions of capital. This caveat notwithstanding, the growing concentration of economic and political power by multinationals in agri-food sectors and the domination by a few financial actors exponentially increases the possibility for coordination and capacity for adaptation, as can be seen in the making of Matopiba.

The increasing multi-scale linkages and capacity for dynamic adaptation cuts both ways, however – although not with comparable capacities. Given the formation of international organizations and networks around social and environmental issues, localized contestations against the unbridled expansion of capitalism can also quickly scale up. This means that places that are historically peripheral can suddenly become the targets of large international campaigns against a development project, for instance. A few organizations can directly pressure the most powerful economic actors in a commodity chain, such as traders and retailers, not to acquire products from a certain place.

The encounter of highly mobile, but also highly coordinated multi-scale capital with multi-scale contestations increases the possibility of spark-producing collisions and of unexpected, indirect effects. Recent literature has called attention to how certain crops with flexible and multiple uses play into complex value webs in the agri-food system, with the possibility of dynamic rearrangements (Borras et al. 2016). Soya, which has been the main commodity expanding in Matopiba, has been one of the “flex crops” par excellence, and even the anticipation of its possible multiple and flexible uses has changed the behavior of agribusiness actors (Oliveira, Schneider 2016). In this flexible and interconnected context of the agri-food system, authors have also pointed to the multiple interlinkages and spill-over effects of projects and policies around land and the environment and their contestations (Hunsberger et al 2015). One recent striking example has been that the requirements for sustainable sourcing in biofuels in the European Union allowed palm oil tied to land grabbing and deforestation in Indonesia to simply fill another European market gap. Once European rapeseed previously used for foodproducts was increasingly converted to biodiesel, palm oil from Indonesia filled the gap for oil in food use (Borras et al. 2016:108). In other words, contestations, regulations and other limiting conditions in certain places, sectors and time

periods are in practice linked to the absences of these limiting conditions in other places, sectors and time periods. Many of these spillover effects due to interconnectedness are being currently formulated as "indirect land use change" or ILUC (Oliveira, Hecht 2016:270; Borras et al. 2016:110).

In the last years, contestations around the expansion of soy in Matopiba and its damaging effects against peasants and the Cerrado biome have reached the international scale. In the second semester of 2017 alone, there were multiple publications on the region by Brazilian authors presented in international conferences or in English (Spadotto et al. 2017; Hershaw and Sauer 2017; Pitta and Vega 2017), two international fact-finding missions to the area (FIAN 2017) and a mobilization of international environmental NGOs to get traders and retailers to commit to stop purchasing commodities from deforested areas of the Cerrado (Manifesto 2017). In part, this has been a reaction to the aforementioned announcement by the Brazilian Government in 2015. During the term of Kátia Abreu as Minister of Agriculture, based on studies by the State Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) of 2014, the government officially embraced and promoted Matopiba as a new agricultural frontier, planning to create different policies around it. Evidence of renewed interest of international investment in the region has also increased in the last years, both through potential plans around cooperation with Japan and through the involvement of foreign investment, including foreign pension funds involved in land speculation in South Piauí (Mendonça, Pitta 2015).

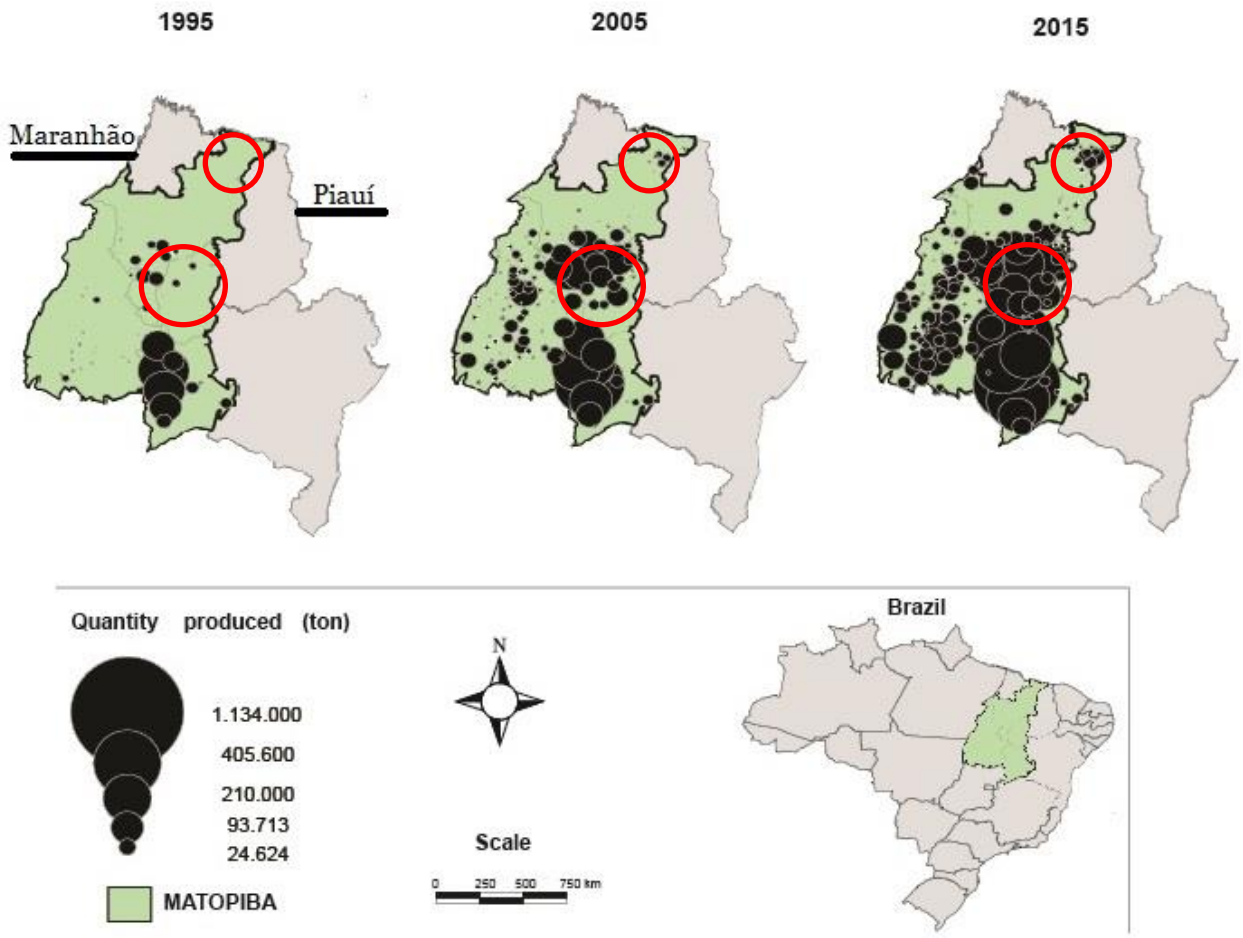
However, the massive socioecological transformations in the four states did not start recently, but have, rather, been going on for several decades. The state of Bahia, especially, is already a more consolidated hub of agribusiness, following expansion in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the expansion of soy into Maranhão, Piauí and Tocantins gained speed in the mid-1990s and the early 2000s (see Graph 1). Local social movements and local researchers, in particular, have already been following the destructive socioenvironmental impacts of expansion of industrial agriculture in the region closely for many years[2]. So why did the Brazilian Federal Government announce this frontier with such confidence in 2015? The paper will explore how Matopiba was politically forged also as a shift from other more contested frontiers, while emphasizing the importance of politics in the trajectories of land grabbing across the globe. As written by Alonso-Fradejas (2015:512), "trajectories of agrarian change are not a story foretold, but the product of multiple and dynamic politics". States, as responsible for balancing imperatives of capitalist accumulation and social legitimation (O'Connor 1973), are often the co-managers of the adaptations to contestations that ensure both profitability and social peace, and the Brazilian state, through multiple institutions, has had a strong role in the promotion and management of this frontier.

This paper builds on the research done for my Master's thesis at the International Institute of Social Studies. I focused on two states and particularly on two subregions of Matopiba: the North-East of Maranhão (also known as Chapadinha and Baixo Parnaíba) and the South-West of Piauí. They are both more recent soy frontiers within Matopiba, in which soy production expanded mainly in the 2000s, while also having relevant differences between them, such as in the profile of soy producers. While many larger companies have installed themselves in South Piauí, production of soy in East of Maranhão has been mostly dominated by "gaúchos", larger farmers of origin in south Brazil (Paula Andrade 2012;

[2] Some examples of earlier research are: Conceição 1995; Carneiro 2008; Paula Andrade 2012; Alves 2009; Alves 2015.

Pitta, Mendonça 2015).

I conducted fieldwork in the regions in August and September of 2017, conducting interviews with key state officials, researchers and members of social movements, and visiting two peasant communities (Araçás and Carrancas) in Buriti (Maranhão) affected by soy expansion and five affected communities (Melancias, Baixão Fechado, Sete Lagoas, Brejo das Meninas and Santa Fé) in the municipalities of Santa Filomena and Gilbués (Piauí), the latter as part of the Fact-Finding Mission on Land Grabbing in Matopiba organized by FIAN, Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos and CPT. Finally, I interviewed officers of the Ministry of Agriculture, of Embrapa Cerrados and of JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) in Brasília.



Map 2: Soy production in Matopiba in tons 1995, 2005 and 2015 (Circle on the top shows north-east Maranhão; circle on the bottom shows south-west Piauí). Source: PAM/IBGE. Organized as a map by Lorena Izá Pereira.

Stars indicate the municipalities visited in fieldwork / Source of image: Google Earth 2017.

2. Early incursions in Matopiba: overview of main policies and processes

The declaration of the area of 337 municipalities, corresponding to the Cerrado biome in the four states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia, as a unified frontier, under the name of Matopiba, was a political decision. This decision was technically supported by the studies of Embrapa Strategic Territorial Intelligence Group in 2014 and was consolidated in a Decree by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2015. In fact, Matopiba is formed by diverse territories, with different histories, and even as an agribusiness frontier it has been conceptualized and amalgamated in different ways.[3] The consideration of it as a continuous area of Cerrado is also a simplification, as it shares many transition zones to other biomes and a plurality of ecological subdivisions (Pitta, Vega 2017). Nevertheless, these states also share many features in common that are highly relevant to the frontier formation, including an abundance of legally ambiguous public lands and a cheaper land market (Pitta, Mendonça 2015), lower urbanization rates and higher poverty rates compared to the average of Brazil (IBGE 2010) and a peripheral position relative to the economic and political centers of the country.

A significant part of Brazil's interior, especially in the Center-South, had undergone the conversion of large portions of land to industrial agriculture in previous decades, with soy having consolidated itself as Brazil's main production and exportation crop (Oliveira 2016). While the central and southern states still dominate the production of soy[4], Matopiba has increased its share of Brazil soy production (in tons) from 5.6% in 2001/2 (CONAB 2003:22) to almost 11% in the 2016/17 season (CONAB 2017:116).

It was largely in the 20th century that a national project of intentional occupation of these hinterlands was formed, with its strongest expression under the military dictatorship of 1964-1985, which embraced a project of conservative agricultural modernization and actively encouraged farmers from the South of Brazil (largely descendants of European migrants, nicknamed *gaúchos*) to take over lands in the center and north of Brazil, especially in the Cerrado biome, supplanting the traditional occupants of these regions (Alves 2005; Delgado 2010). Soy gained an increasingly important role in Brazil's agriculture after the selection of new seed varieties suitable for tropical climates, largely developed by the new State Agricultural Research Corporation, Embrapa, created in 1973 (Schlesinger 2006:17).

For the promotion of the agricultural frontier in the Cerrado, two key programs that started in the 1970s were Polocentro (Program of Development of the Center-West Region) and Prodecer (Program of Japanese-Brazilian Cooperation for the Agricultural Development of the Cerrado) (Inocêncio, Calaça 2010). In the context of a soy moratorium by the United States in 1973 – until then the biggest producer by far -, purchasing countries became more interested in developing the cultivation in South America, and Japan in particular pursued direct cooperation with Brazil, often through its cooperation agency, JICA (Schlesinger 2006). The second and third phases of Prodecer reached three states of Matopiba and propelled the soy frontiers there in the 1980s and 1990s.

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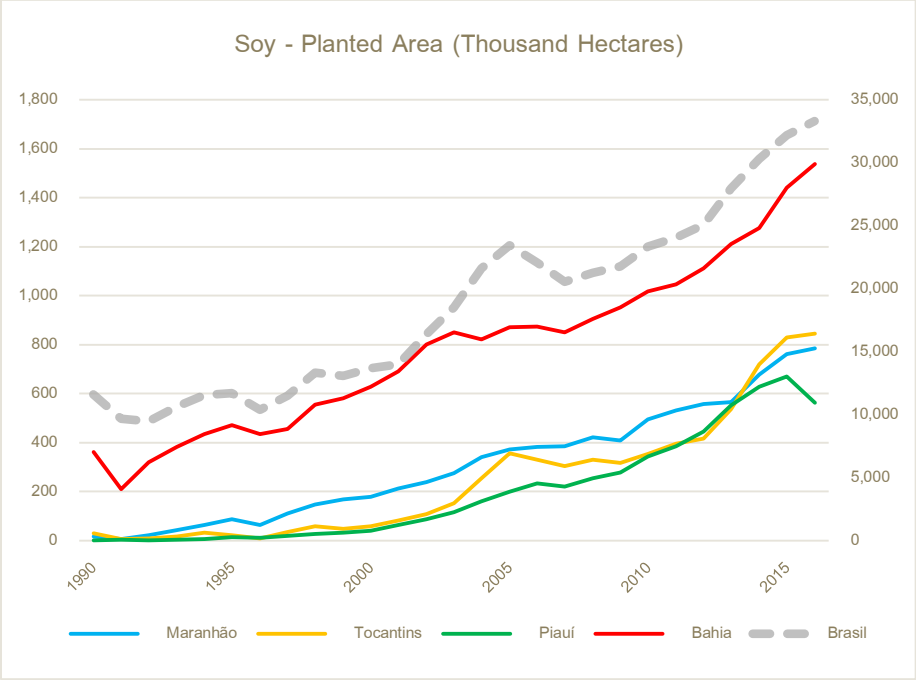
[3] Previous names given by researchers and companies have been Bamapito, Mapitoba, Mapito (excluding Bahia) and variations of proposals such as North, Mid-North and Center-North Corridor.

[4] Mato Grosso state alone concentrated 26,7% of the 114.075.300 tons of soy produced in total in Brazil and 27,5% of the 33.909.400 hectares occupied by soy in Brazil in the crop season of 2016/2017 (CONAB 2017:116).

of Brazil's plantations of soy in hectares in 2016/2016.

Early incursions of intensive agriculture into Matopiba were also connected to the programs of the military dictatorship directed to the Amazon. These included Great Project Carajás, officially launched in 1980, which was based around the iron mining project led by Companhia Vale do Rio Doce – at the time a state mining company - in the state of Pará and the construction of Railway Carajás that led to a port in São Luís (capital of Maranhão). The government offered several economic and fiscal incentives to associated enterprises, which helped propel a charcoal production boom and first plantations of eucalyptus in the East of Maranhão in the 1980s, along with the arrival of sugarcane companies (Paula Andrade 1995a).

Through different policies, the Brazilian state helped encourage specifically the expansion of soybean into the states of Maranhão and Piauí. In 1991, Companhia Vale do Rio Doce proposed the North Corridor of Exportation Program, pointing to the advantages of using the multimodal transportation infrastructure to export soy from Maranhão, Piauí and Tocantins (Frota and Campelo 1999:4; Carneiro 2008:86). While Bahia was the first Matopiba state in which soy plantations expanded and continues to have a larger production compared to the three other states, the south of Maranhão also had a quick expansion in the 1990s and has developed an important agribusiness hub around the city of Balsas (Souza Filho 1995, Carneiro 2008). The evolution of planted area in the four states can be compared in the graph below:



Graph 1: Expansion of planted area of soy in the four Matopiba states (Source of data: PAM/IBGE; my organization in graph form). Two scales: four states (left); total in Brazil (right).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, southern farmers who had already installed themselves previously in the East of Maranhão started planting soy. According to the chief of Embrapa Cocais, Embrapa had an active role in prospecting

and promoting the expansion of soy in this region (Carlos Freitas, interview 8 August 2017). However, the soy produced in the south of Maranhão still currently concentrates 60-80% of production of the state (Márcio Honaiser, interview 9 August 2017). In the state of Piauí, production of soy also took off in the 2000s, leaping from 91.014 tons of soy in the state in 2002 to 308.225 tons in 2003 (PAM/IBGE 2017). Amidst this boom, larger companies such as SLC, Pinesso, Insolo, Radar and Dahma have acquired property there.

As can be seen in the examples of the previous establishment of eucalyptus and sugarcane in the East of Maranhão, the arrival of southern farmers and the appropriation of lands – usually the illegal appropriation of public unclaimed lands, called *grilagem* – often preceded the expansion of soy. Indeed, much of the grilagem in Maranhão and Piauí occurred in the 1970s and 1980s before the soy boom, not only due to the encouragement of 'colonization' by the Federal Government, but also with the participation of state governments and local elites in a frenzy of land appropriation (Alves 2009; Miranda 2011:25). Land itself has also gained value as a commodity in Matopiba and land speculation has increased in the last years, with the installation of specialized land companies (Pitta, Vega 2017).

Expansion of areas of soy in Matopiba gained traction under the commodity boom of the 2000s, heavily floated by the expansion of China and the Brazilian government's reembraced strategy of basing growth on exportation of grains/oilseeds under the Workers' Party administration (Delgado 2010). Although there had been hints of renewed interest in a policy for the Matopiba region through the proposal of the Center-North Corridor in 2012, a more concrete proposal only came to fruition in 2015, with the announcement by the Federal Government of the intention to create a Plan of Agricultural Development, a Managing Committee and a Development Agency for Matopiba. This was largely led by Kátia Abreu as Minister of Agriculture, herself a large farmer from Tocantins, and occurred already in a period of political instability that preceded the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. According to the Secretary of Agriculture of Maranhão, who was a member of the Matopiba Committee, the committee did not have time to enact policies (Márcio Honaiser, interview 9 August 2017). The Plan of Agricultural Development that was being formulated within the Ministry of Agriculture was never reviewed or published (Eduardo Mazzoleni, interview 15 August 2017). Still, the announcement by the government attracted the attention both of potential investors and of social movements and organizations critical to the unbridled expansion of agribusiness capital.

3. Socioenvironmental havoc and the challenges of scaling up political contestations

The territorialization of industrial agriculture in Matopiba has largely occurred at the expense of other beings that previously occupied those lands. The uniform oilseed and grain monocultures have largely supplanted complex Cerrado ecosystems, that hold a high proportion of Brazil's plant and animal biodiversity. Satellite images revealed that over 60% of agricultural expansion in Matopiba between 2000 and 2014 occurred over native vegetation, deforesting over 2 million hectares (Carneiro Filho and Costa 2016:9).

Source: Google Earth 2017

Before agribusiness expansion, however, these lands were not "pristine wilderness", but, ecosystems largely co-managed and inhabited by traditional and peasant populations. All the communities I visited in Maranhão and Piauí had been established at least for several decades, with diverse histories of territorialization (such as migration from other regions or fixation of previous tenants and rural workers), usually without formalization of land titles. Both in the East of Maranhão and South of Piauí, the communities have traditionally relied on diverse sources of livelihoods, including: plantation of subsistence crops (rice, beans, cassava, pumpkin), raising animals, extracting fruit and other forest products, with limited commercialization and occasional wage labor, including through seasonal migrant work in other states.

While there have been cases of direct expulsion and multiple reports of threats and violence committed against these communities in the past decades by new landowners and farmers, many researchers and my own fieldwork have pointed to the predominance of a process of gradual strangulation of communities in Matopiba (Souza Filho 1995; Paula Andrade 2012; Pitta, Mendonça 2015; Pitta, Vega 2017). Due to the geographical formation of these areas, industrial agriculture has largely spread across the plateaus, which communities historically used for extraction of forest products, hunting and the free grazing of livestock. However, across the years, in addition to the difficulties caused by the loss of their commons and reserve areas, communities have struggled to remain on land due to growing ecological conflicts which

seep into the lowlands, such as through reduction of water availability, reduction or disappearance of native land animals and fish used as food sources, contamination of water and land by pesticides and loss of food crops due to new pests. These effects, along with the lack of basic infrastructure in these regions (such as schools and electricity lines) and the lack of other opportunities for income generation, have pushed communities to sell their lands or to gradually move to municipal centers[5]. Even though some young men are employed in the soy plantations – especially in strenuous seasonal work, such as removing the remaining roots of the deforested Cerrado trees – there are few opportunities for labor incorporation in the farms.

Although these communities are gradually being pushed off their land, it is also true that we should not expect uniform patterns of political reactions of those potentially dispossessed by land deals (Hall et al 2015). Saulo Costa has pointed to the importance of everyday forms of resistance in the current attempts of peasants to maintain their traditional lifestyles, despite pressure for incorporation or expulsion in East Maranhão (Costa 2016). In many of the speeches I heard given by affected peasants in public meetings in Piauí, they had to balance their frustration over the negative socioenvironmental effects they were suffering with difficulties in pointing fingers to the companies and *gaúcho* farmers, who are often their neighbors. Denouncements might not only lead to violent retaliations, but also to the loss of "good neighbor" relations that might have been formed over the years. Some large farmers fulfil roles of patronage, by doing occasional favors for the peasants (such as giving small loans, rides or making donations for community festivities), and larger companies operating in the area often promise and/or enact small improvements such as building schools or starting income generation projects, in the absence of state infrastructure and policies.

Still, in my fieldwork in Maranhão and Piauí, even peasants who had not had much previous contact with organized movements of resistance, in general formulated a strong acknowledgement of loss of their commons over the years and feelings of disenfranchisement. Effective reactions to such a forceful and state-supported advancement of industrial agriculture largely depend on the possibility of regional interlinkages and the capacity to scale up and connect with organizations at a national and/or international level. In the past two years, after the announcement of the Matopiba frontier by the Federal Government, more movements and organizations have turned attention to the region. Nonetheless, given the rate of changes occurring previously to the federal policy, the extensive illegal appropriation of public lands and the fact that Brazil has some of the largest and most influential rural social movements in the world, it is also relevant to question why more contestations around the processes in Matopiba did not scale up previously.

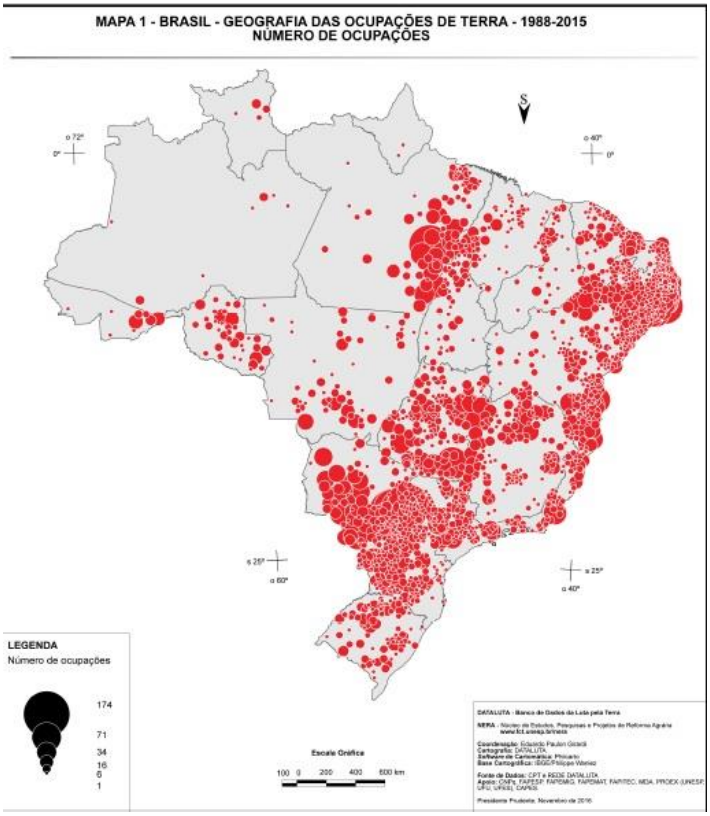
There are many factors that influence the difficulty in scaling up contestations. Some factors are not specific to Matopiba, but have to do with erosion of capacities of contestation by social movements and activists in Brazil as a whole in the last years. The factors pertaining specifically to Matopiba, in turn, can be better understood *in relation to* other places. Still, some preliminary generalizations about the previous relative obscurity of the violent processes in the region (outside of the regions themselves) can be made.

First, networks of contestation are held back by geographical isolation of the processes in Matopiba. Each of

[5] In many cases, peasants do not sell an actual formal title of land – which they do not have – but are paid for their "possession" or to forego their expectation of land titling.

the four states surpasses 250.000km² of extension. The affected areas are often hundreds of kilometers from the state capitals, where many civil society organizations and state institutions are based. Furthermore, there is a strong symbolic process of invisibilization and otherization of the biome of the Cerrado and of the traditional peoples living there. Isolete Wichinieski, one of the coordinators of the Campaign in Defense of the Cerrado, explains that there is a need to rescue the image of the Cerrado as a complex biome composed of multiple ecosystems and inhabited by traditional populations, as the identification of the Cerrado as the grainery of Brazil has largely already been naturalized in the collective imagination (interview, 4 September 2017). Activists of CPT in Piauí that I interviewed also expressed that they need to make an effort to convince the general population, and even their own state officials, that there are communities living in the Cerrado region of Piauí and that they are not simply backward peoples.

Finally, the history of the formation and territorialization of rural social movements in Brazil is pertinent to the capacity of multi-scale resistance in Matopiba. Brazil's largest and most influential movement, the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), started in the South of Brazil and has expanded its territorial base upward (Fernandes 2010:164-169), and still has a weaker presence in the regions of Matopiba. MST was largely built around the demand for land reform and redistribution and one of its main political instruments has been the occupation of large land estates that do not fulfil their social function. A map compiling the occupations of land by rural social movements in Brazil from 1988 to 2015 (below) shows that the areas of Matopiba have largely been outside of this particular political process of land struggles.



Map 3: Land occupations in Brazil 1988-2015 (DATALUTA 2016:15)

This is due, also, to the particular rural formation of Matopiba, in which many rural communities have been settled on unclaimed public lands for decades, but have not received the formalization of their titles. Many of the struggles are, thus, not focused on repossession and redistribution – as in regions of Brazil in which more waves of dispossession and the consolidation of a private land market have already occurred – but to avoid dispossession and achieve recognition of traditional forms of life. In recent years, more rural social movements in Brazil have formed around multiple collective identities, often grouped under the umbrella-term "traditional populations" (Almeida 2008:25). However, the struggle for policies and legal forms for collective territories outside the model of land reform settlements is still under construction, as territorial rights are still not as clearly regulated in legislation for traditional populations that are not indigenous or *quilombola* (black rural communities). In addition to movements based around ethnic identities in Matopiba, the northeast of Brazil has also had a stronger expression of church-based movements (Poletto 2010). Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT)[6] is one of the most expressive organizations that provides support to rural communities in the Matopiba states. Other rural social movements, human rights organizations, labor unions, academics and a few state officers also engage in constellations of contestations to land grabbing and environmental degradation.

This type of synergy has actually occurred in East Maranhão in the past decades and there were earlier scaling up of contestations. Already in reference to the conflicts around the expansion of production of charcoal, eucalyptus plantations and expansion of sugarcane around the Great Carajás Project in Maranhão in the 1990s, several unions, church-based entities, researchers and other civil society organizations formed networks of resistance and facilitated visits of state officials to the areas to verify the existence of violations (Paula Andrade 1995a). In the 2000s, with the expansion of conflicts around soy, once again a network of resistance was formed, which led to the constitution of a Forum in Defense of Life in the Baixo Parnaíba and propelled a mission in loco by the Plataforma Dhesca (Brazilian Platform of Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Human Rights) in 2005. One key actor in these processes of resistance has been the Sociedade Maranhense de Direitos Humanos (SMDH), a human rights organization that has given socio-legal support to communities in East Maranhão since the 1980s. In addition, researchers of the Federal University of Maranhão (UFMA) have played the effective role of scholar-activists in the last decades, conducting research with several affected communities (Paula Andrade 2012). The monitoring of violations by activists and researchers has often connected with legal contestations to ensure territorial rights of the communities and to halt violations by agribusiness actors, including lawsuits filed by prosecutors of the Public Ministry, the state institution in Brazil responsible for the protection of diffuse and collective rights.

The possibilities for this type of network formation have been very different in South Piauí previous to 2015. The region of agribusiness expansion in Piauí is much further from the state capital, compared to East Maranhão, making the connection with organizations much more difficult. Moreover, the communities typically live in highly isolated places, between hills, and are more scattered compared to the East of Maranhão[7]. Nonetheless, church agents, labor unions and

[6] Although it is based in the pastoral movement of the Catholic Church, CPT has an ecumenic orientation (Poletto 2010:148).

[7] In 2010, Buriti/Maranhão had a population density of 18,33 inhabitants per square kilometer, while Santa Filomena/Piauí had only 1,15 inhabitant per square kilometer (IBGE 2010).

pastoral agents of CPT have also engaged with these communities. In 2009, another church-based organization called Cáritas, along with other movements, organized a Caravan of the Cerrados of Piauí to denounce the expansion of agribusiness and the support given by the state government. Pressure has also increased in Piauí to address the widespread *grilagem* of public lands in the state. In 2012, prosecutors of the Public Ministry of Piauí formed a special group to combat *grilagem* and a specialized Agrarian Court was formed to judge cases of land conflicts. The Agrarian Court has identified and blocked dozens of irregular estates in cases of *grilagem* of tens or even hundreds of thousands of hectares. It is now, however, with the formation of international campaigns that the south of Piauí is receiving much more visibility.

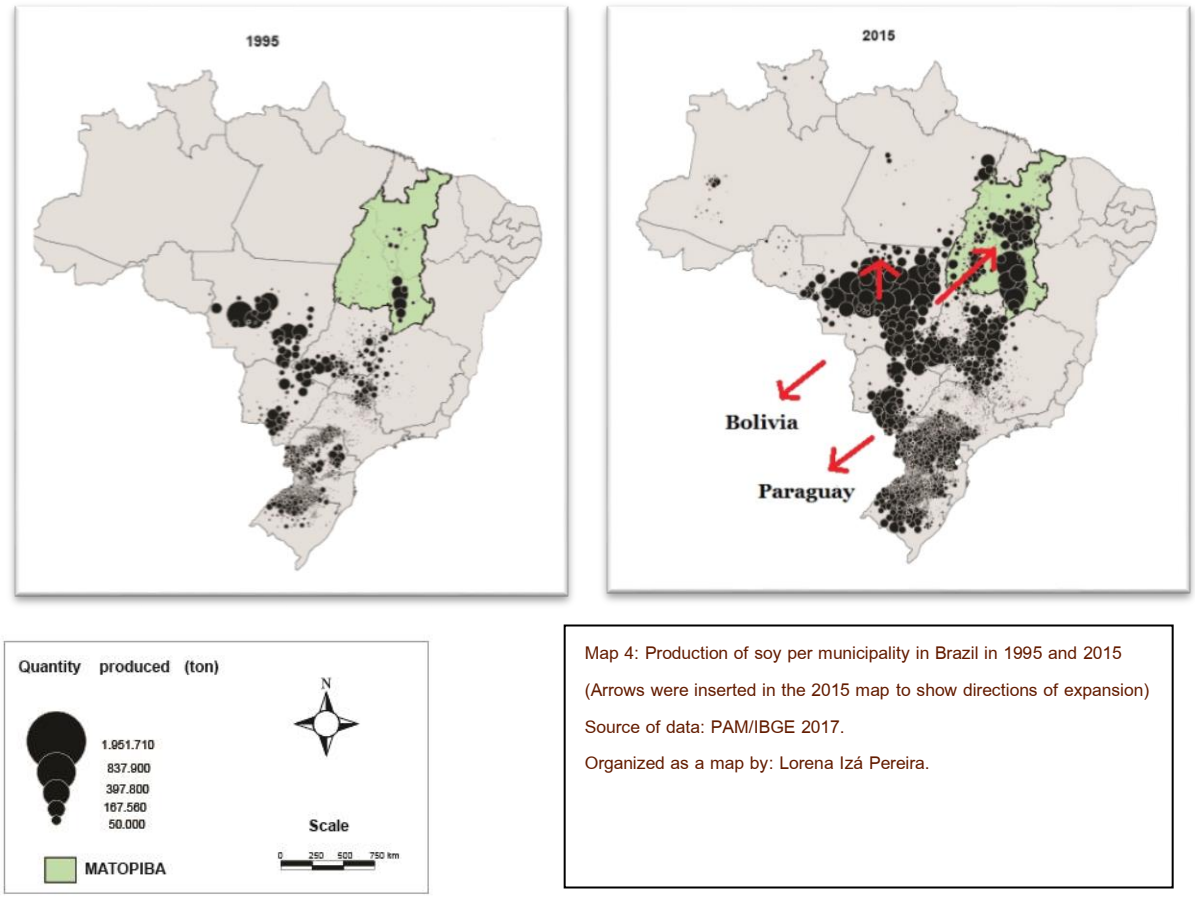
Finally, the formation of alliances between contesting groups and the possibilities of escalation to other levels should not be seen as a straightforward process. Since 2015, international environmental NGOs have also significantly increased their attention in the region. However, although socio-environmental processes are intrinsically linked in Matopiba, some streams of environmentalism are based on notions of preserving uninhabited areas of "wilderness" or bet on technological advancement as means for ecological efficiency (Martinez-Alier 2002), which can translate into the exclusion of traditional communities and support for further intensification of agribusiness. The Manifesto of the Cerrado signed by international environmental organizations such as WWF and Greenpeace in 2017, for example, privileges curtailing deforestation and favors intensifying livestock production and converting degraded grazing areas for soy expansion (Manifesto 2017). On the other hand, contestations around exploitation and dispossession might undervalue ecological dimensions and many rural social movements in Brazil are still in the process of incorporating ecological discussions (Almeida 2008:25). The Campaign in Defense of the Cerrado, launched in 2016 with the support of dozens of Brazilan social movements and organizations, has been an attempt to build a socio-environmental progressive platform for the Brazilian Cerrado (Isolete Wichinieski, interview 4 September 2017).

The question of whether these growing political contestations will push agribusiness or at least certain companies to contain their investments in Matopiba, and whether this will in turn push the spillover to other areas, remains to be seen. To engage in these questions, it is relevant to look back at how the agribusiness project for Matopiba itself emerged and strengthened itself as a seemingly politically viable alternative to other contested frontiers, and the different results of the contestations described above.

4. Shifting frontiers: Matopiba's connection to other territories and internal disparities

The technical documents produced by Embrapa Strategic Territorial Intelligence Group (GITE) in 2014 justified their choice of delimitation of Matopiba primarily on the criteria of selection of the Cerrado area of the four states (Miranda et al. 2014:9). At first glance, the expansion into Matopiba might seem like a logical direction, continuing policies that prioritized territorialization of soy into the Cerrado of Brazil and reaching the final portion of this biome to the northeast. However, the selection of the Cerrado itself can only be understood *in opposition to* the possibility of expansion into the Amazon. Looking at the map below of production of soy in Brazil (by tons per municipality) in 1995 and 2015, one can see that, in addition to the intensification of production in each area, soy has territorialized not only towards Matopiba, but also upward in the central state of Mato Grosso. Moreover, soy producers in Brazil have also expanded to other countries,

especially to Bolivia and Paraguay (Borras et al. 2012), which border some of Brazil's states with most intense grain/oilseed production (Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul and Paraná).



Map 4: Production of soy per municipality in Brazil in 1995 and 2015
(Arrows were inserted in the 2015 map to show directions of expansion)
Source of data: PAM/IBGE 2017.
Organized as a map by: Lorena Izá Pereira.

The expansion of soy in the north of Mato Grosso, however, has provoked multiple contestations, since it is covered by the Amazon biome, which has been the object of strong national and international concerns over deforestation since the 1990s. In 2004, the released data on deforestation rates in the Amazon showed alarming loss of vegetation that year, the 2nd highest deforestation rate in records. This attracted the attention of international environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, which released reports showing the connection between the cultivation of soy and the loss of the Amazon forest (Greenpeace 2014).

The pressure from civil society organizations also led to some political agreements around slowing down deforestation of the Amazon. One of the most influential agreements was the Soy Moratorium of the Amazon of 2006, through which traders and retailers committed not to buy soy from deforested areas (Greenpeace 2014). In 2008, the Federal Government officially joined the moratorium agreement. The new Forest Code of 2012 ultimately reduced environmental protection in Brazil – including by giving amnesty to certain environmental violations committed before 2008 – but kept the prediction of the previous Code of stricter restrictions on the Amazon biome, such as an obligatory legal

environmental reserve covering 80% of each private land estate.

In the context of stricter regulations and more contestations around the expansion of soy in the Amazon, Matopiba consolidated itself as a more "viable" option, especially considering the invisibilization of the Cerrado as a biome. In addition to less strict environmental regulations, there have also been fewer policies to measure deforestation and other forms of environmental degradation in that biome (Manifesto 2017). Other researchers have pointed to the connection between the shift of soy expansion to Matopiba and the contestations around expansion in the Amazon (Oliveira and Hecht 2016:270; Hershaw and Sauer 2017). Many of the environmental organizations that were involved in pushing for the soy moratorium are now recognizing this leakage effect and are pushing for a similar moratorium in the Cerrado (Manifesto 2017).

In this sense, the Embrapa 2014 Matopiba studies can be interpreted as an attempt to further define and legitimize an area of territorial expansion of industrial agriculture, creating a "viable" frontier. In the Embrapa Proposal of Territorial Delimitation of Matopiba, there is a clear intent to distinguish Matopiba from the processes of deforestation in the Amazon. The document states: "Changes in the use and occupation of land in Matopiba possess characteristics differentiated from what was, for example, the process of expansion of agriculture in the south arc of the Amazon, in the 1970s and 1980s, characterized by deforestation*."

Recently deforested land in the highlands of Santa Filomena (personal archive, September 2017)

However, considering the involvement of transnational actors, the promotion of Matopiba also needs to be considered in relation to potential frontiers outside of Brazil, especially since cooperation between states has also facilitate spatial shifts of agribusiness capital cross-borders. In the 2000s, Brazil was also involved in multiple agricultural cooperation programs with African countries, such as Cotton 4+Togo in West Africa and ProSavana in Mozambique. ProSavana, the Triangular Cooperation Program for the Agricultural Development of the Tropical Savana in Mozambique, was launched in 2009, in an attempt to replicate Prodecer. Evidence emerged that Brazilian soy producers were interested in starting operations in Mozambique under the umbrella of ProSavana. However, multiple contestations to ProSavana emerged, linking social movements and researchers from Brazil, Japan and Mozambique, which led to the Campaign "No to

ProSavana" and pushed the actors involved in the cooperation to have to adapt their plans (Calmon 2014). Difficulties encountered in Mozambique might have been a possible additional factor encouraging more investment and attention around Matopiba in recent years, since many of the actors that were involved in Prodecer and ProSavana and who are increasingly interested in Matopiba coincide. These actors include not only the governments of Brazil and Japan, but also private companies of each country, such as Vale and Mitsui.

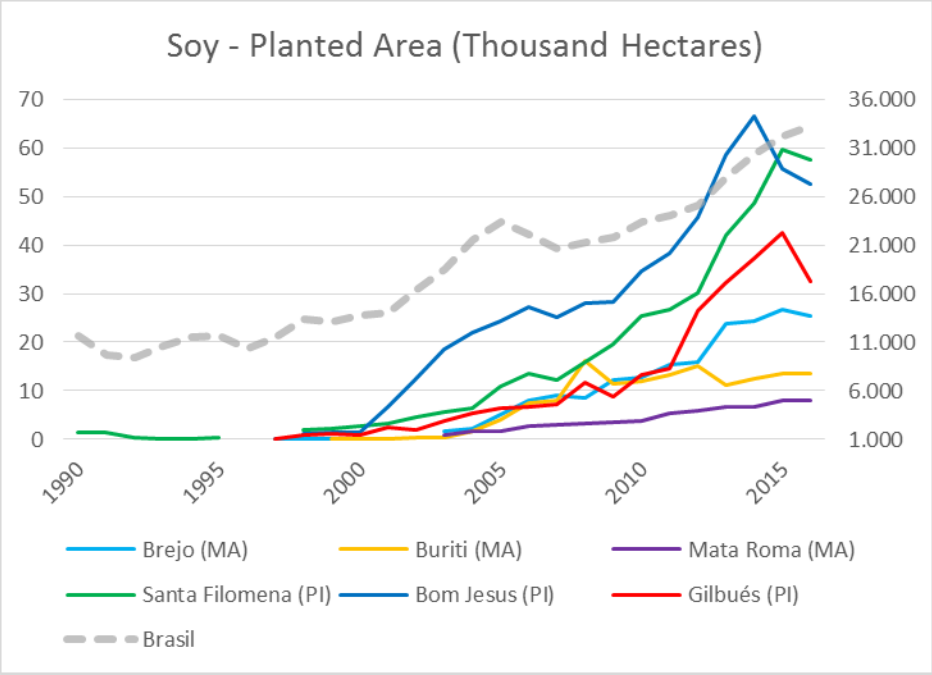
In 2014, 2016 and 2017, the Ministry of Agriculture of Brazil held events with the Japanese government called Dialogues Brazil-Japan on Agriculture and Food, in which possibilities of investment and cooperation in Brazil have been more discussed, with growing emphasis on Matopiba. The strategic alliance between Vale and Mitsui, a Japanese trader, has been present both in plans for Mozambique and those for Matopiba, as the current operator of Carajás Railway and other key infrastructure and logistics operations in Matopiba is VLI, a holding formed by Vale, Mitsui and a state-controlled investment fund (FI-FGTS).

The perception of Matopiba as an alternative to contested deals in Africa seems to have seeped into the discourse of the key actors promoting the Brazilian frontier. When interviewed, the Secretary of Agriculture of Maranhão, Márcio Honaiser, who participated in the Matopiba Committee, claimed that "one of the few regions [in the world] still with potential for expansion is Matopiba. There are savannas, there are other regions in Africa, but with many conflicts, with a lot of difficulties (...) They would have characteristics of potential in terms of soil and climate and even of extension, but with more difficulties to produce in the short term*" (Honaiser, interview 9 August 2017). It remains to be further clarified whether Japanese and Brazilian investments in Matopiba run *parallel* to those in Mozambique or if they have received an extra boost as a spatial shift to *avoid* a region in which contestations escalated and where institutional support for agribusiness was not as consolidated.

Another relevant clarification is that spatial shifts by agribusiness capital in response to contestations do not necessarily mean industrial agriculture operations leaving or avoiding an area completely, but can be restricted to the shifts in space by certain sectors or by certain actors. The moratorium of soy in the Amazon not only left a relative space open for the territorialization of soy in other biomes, but also diverted attention from other agricultural sectors, considering deforestation in the last years in the Amazon has largely been led by livestock. This is especially important considering the expansion of soy typically pushes livestock to new areas, while degraded pastures are often later converted to soy plantations, in a vicious, ever-expanding cycle (Domingues, Bermann 2012).

In addition, there are indications that spatial leaps of agribusiness investment have not only occurred into Matopiba in reaction to other contestations, but also within Matopiba, in relation with the conjuncture of contestations described in the previous section. As the graph below shows, in Santa Filomena, Gilbués and Bom Jesus, in the south of Piauí, where there have been fewer possibilities for organized and scaled-up reactions, the area of planted soy has expanded quickly, much above the general rate in Brazil. In the municipalities in the East of Maranhão, soy had advanced at a more moderate pace. One cannot simply make a straightforward comparison between the contestations or lack thereof and speed of territorial expansion of soy in East Maranhão and South Piauí, because there are multiple other differences between these regions to consider. The most important caveat is that the municipalities in South Piauí are typically much larger: Santa

Filomena and Bom Jesus each surpass 5000 km² in extension, while Brejo and Buriti are each smaller than 1500 km² (IBGE 2017). Also, the soy in some municipalities in East Maranhão (such as Mata Roma) shares space with eucalyptus plantations, which are estimated to cover around 30-40 thousand hectares in the region (Souza, Overbeek 2013).



Graph 2. (Source of data: PAM/IBGE 2017; my organization in graph)

All these particularities notwithstanding, there is also evidence that there was a mismatch between initial agribusiness expectations for soy advancement in East Maranhão and the actual trajectory. In this sense, legal and political contestations might have played a role in propelling spatial shifts outwards, at least by certain agribusiness actors. In 2003, Embrapa estimated that around 500-600 thousand hectares in East Maranhão could be used for intensive farming (Monteles 2003). In 2015, soy occupied a little over 70 thousand hectares in the region (PAM/IBGE 2017). According to the Secretary of Agriculture of Maranhão, the region still has potential for soy expansion, but it will be a slow growth compared to other possible new areas in Maranhão, due to the prevalence of small plots of land (Honaiser, interview 9 August 2017). However, as described in previous chapters, East Maranhão has also been a site of *grilagem* and companies have tried to irregularly appropriate large plots of land. A 2013 news article 2003 cited SLC Agrícola Ltda, one of the largest commodity producing companies in Brazil, as having acquired 213 thousand hectares in Buriti and starting soy operations in the area called Fazenda Palmeira (Monteles 2003). In 2012, SLC sold Fazenda Palmeira, which was then reported to be 14.625 hectares in extension (Olivon 2012) and, according to its website, the company no longer has farms in East Maranhão. This exit seems to be correlated to the growing reactions to *grilagem* and environmental violations in the region. SLC was one of the companies in Buriti to suffer a lawsuit for environmental damage by the Public Ministry in 2007. With the exit of larger companies, the main apparent actors involved in soy production in East Maranhão continue to be *gaúchos* (Gaspar 2013). This contrasts with the South of Piauí, which has the presence of larger companies, such as Pinesso, Radar, Insolo, Damha

and SLC.

The association of national producing companies with international financial capital – as has been the case of SLC, which was listed in the stockmarket in 2007 – can also implicate in further liability for socioenvironmental violations. Chain Reaction Research coalition, for example published last year a research report for investors on the risks of investing in SLC due to its association with deforestation in Matopiba (Rijk et al. 2017).

On the other hand, it is important to note that spatial shifts by certain agribusiness actors to leave areas in which contestations and tensions have mounted might also rely on leaving frontmen in place or in practice waiting for the "dirty work" to be executed by actors that are less liable or traceable. This has often happened in the process of *grilagem* in Matopiba, in which *grileiros* first "clear the area" and commit the intimidation and forms of violence required to remove people and later sell the regularized land to companies (Pitta, Mendonça 2015). The permanence of certain actors and sectors in an agribusiness frontier while tensions are focused on other actors/sectors resembles a trick of sleight of hand. This might mean that some shifts across space might be more apparent than real or can be otherwise interpreted as a shift across time (a postponement), as companies can return or appear more visibly in the region of contestation after the situation has been "subdued".

While this paper focuses on shifts across territories in response to conflicts, it is important to consider that the tenuous 'viability' of Matopiba and its embracement by the Brazilian state also emerged within a particular political conjuncture and larger shifts in forms of balancing coercion/consent by the state, under the Workers' Party governments. PT's progressive public policies – such as Bolsa Família and further access to pensions – helped alleviate historical poverty and provided safety nets for rural populations in Matopiba[8] affected by the gradual loss of territories. Moreover, the territorialization of national companies in Matopiba was also largely incorporated into and promoted by the neodevelopment program that allowed the co-management of capital accumulation processes by workers' representatives and capital, often via workers' pension funds (Boito Jr. 2012), potentially preventing denouncements at the national level of the expansion of national companies in Matopiba. Finally, much of the attention to land grabbing in Brazil immediately following the 2008 crisis focused on foreignization, potentially diverting attention from land grabs and concentration led by national actors (Oliveira 2008). Foreignization is still one of the galvanizing elements of political attention currently around Matopiba, although often it is still gaúchos and national companies leading or directly managing many of the land grabs.

There have also been important shifts in how land grabbing has been done in the last decades: rather than outright grilagem of dozens of thousands of hectares of public lands, often there are more piecemeal processes of gradual land capture, such as using communities themselves as fronts for claiming land titling and later selling land, as noted by an advisor of the Sociedade Maranhense de Direitos Humanos (Roseane Dias, interview 8 August 2017). Activists interviewed in Maranhão and Piauí fear that land titling for communities – especially if done individually – can ultimately still direct land to the hands of agricultural and land companies. These gradual and less outright violent processes can be

[8] In Maranhão, the level of extreme poverty reduced from 53.1% in 1995 to 27.2% in 2008; while Piauí had a reduction from 46.8% of people in extreme poverty in 1995 to 26.1% in 2008 (IPEA 2010:7).

more difficult to track and pose relevant questions on the possibilities and limitations of political contestations against land grabbing and environmental degradation in the long-term.

5. Conclusion

Scaled-up political contestations, in particular transnational campaigns – including networks of scholar-activists - with capacity to pressure directly some of the most powerful economic and political actors involved in land grabbing, such as in efforts for divestment and moratoria in certain regions, have increased their capacity for rapidly effective campaigns across the globe. The international campaign involving several NGOs and social movements against land grabbing in Matopiba, in part sparked by the 2015 Network for Social Justice and Human Rights and GRAIN report (Pitta, Mendonça 2015), helped bring increased visibility to the region in international media (McDonald, Freitas 2018) and is catching the attention of large institutions throughout the world.

However, the also growing flexibility of agri-food companies to source and sell throughout the word (Friedmann 1992) and of financial capital to shift investments means that placed-based political contestations can also indirectly lead to adaptations of capital to other less contested sectors and places and risks leaving social movements and researchers always "catching up" to shifting frontiers after much damage has already been done. This paper attempts to show that Matopiba partially emerged and consolidated itself as a project supported by the Brazilian government in response to other more visibly contested frontiers, both inside and outside Brazil. That is, the expansion of agribusiness there has partly been a shift away from the Amazon, in response to strong contestations over deforestation, and there is also evidence that Matopiba has received more interest and investments in the last years as an alternative to Mozambique, after cross-continental opposition from social movements emerged to an attempt of frontier-making in the north of the country. Within Matopiba as well, there have been spatial shifts, as has been the case of the exit of SLC from East Maranhão.

There are no easy answers to these questions, but the study of the multiple shifts in Matopiba can also push us to question theoretical assumptions that were made in the discussion of the land rush after the 2007-8 crisis, over certain directions of expansion, such as Africa as the last continent for agribusiness capital or weaker states as obvious directions for capital expansion. In the last years, multiple new shifts have already occurred in response to multi-scale contestations and it is important to re-center the contingencies of politics in our analyses to understand the effects of our own research in this process. Methodologically, it is fundamental to further engage in cross-historical, cross-geographical and cross-sectoral studies to visualize the shifts that have been occurring and how different places and strategies connect. Politically, this case also reveals the risks of processes of contestation that focus on certain phenomena (such as foreignization of land), places or sectors inadvertently playing into indirect land use change. As can be seen throughout the building of processes in Matopiba, what has been called indirect land use change is not only an occasional phenomenon, but has rather been the *modus operandi* of flexible and mobile capital in response to contestations. By reconsidering these indirect effects as shifting frontiers, I have attempted to highlight the relevance of politics and of interconnections to the making of the Matopiba frontier and implications of this for possible new emerging contestations and frontiers.

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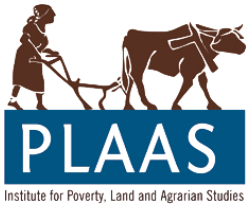
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