

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 13 | Issue 1

Article 4

4-15-2015

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Recommended Citation

Adams, Ryan Thomas (2015). "An Emerging Alliance of Ranchers and Farmers in the Brazilian Amazon," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 4, 63-79.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol13/iss1/4>

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An Emerging Alliance of Ranchers and Farmers in the Brazilian Amazon

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Abstract

Anthropologists have rarely worked with rural elites, despite their important role in debates about economic development and environmental sustainability. Based on a long-term ethnographic study of large-scale landowners in Santarém, Brazil, an important transition in political narratives and cultural economies of the rural elite in the Brazilian Amazon is examined. Capitalized grain farmers from Southern Brazil recently arrived in an area dominated by colonist farmers and extensive cattle ranching. I assert that an alliance between the newly arrived farmers and the local ranching elite has emerged, despite their different economic and cultural practices. Together these landowning elites have articulated a vision for the region's future emphasizing their role as productive Brazilian citizens, in contrast to both the small-scale farmers and foreign environmentalists. As a consequence of their alliance, immigrant farmers have taken on some local expectations regarding social obligations for landowning elites and the local ranching elites have become less risk averse.

Introduction

Evening has given way to night when a rancher arrives at the municipal fairgrounds for the public event to mark a new development with the grain export facility and casually offers a blessing to a dozen young men, women, and children who are waiting by the entrance, asking some about school or family news. He slowly makes his way to a seat reserved for him near the front, because he will be acknowledged in the speeches to come. It takes time to walk past the well-dressed people sweating in the new pavilion under the florescent lights, as most people have something they want to say to him. By the time he reaches his seat, a soybean farmer who has only just arrived hurries past everyone scowling as he offers quick “yes, no, yes” decisions to the person on the other end of his cell phone call - to take another seat in the same front row. They smile warmly at one another as the farmer hangs up and rolls his eyes, betraying a frustration that would be unusual to see from a rancher in regard to his employees. Nevertheless, the rancher laughs knowingly.

Research Site: Santarém, Brazil

Due to the enormous scale and heterogeneous nature of environmental and social conditions in the Amazon, no single site is entirely generalizable to the regional scale (Moran 1993, Brondízio 2005). Santarém, however, presents features that are useful in understanding rural elites more broadly and identifying patterns that can contribute to the literature on studying up, development in the Amazon, and agrarian change. It is the third largest city in the Amazon and is centrally located between Manaus and Belém at an important junction of the Amazon and Tapajós Rivers, surrounded by floodplains, upland areas with savannas, rainforests, small farms, and large cattle ranches. The main north-south road through the central part of the Amazon, Highway BR-163, terminates at a port facility in Santarém, giving the city an important role in the regional economy and a prominent place in regional politics.

The large-scale landowners in Santarém are cattle ranchers, and the terms “local elite” and “ranchers” are used to refer to them in this article. During preliminary fieldwork in 2003, I determined that owning 1,000 hectares was a local approximation of *grande fazendeiro*

(large-scale landowner), although I included some landowners who own less than that amount of land during my primary fieldwork in 2005, and in a recent follow-up project in 2012.¹ Their continued inclusion is justified because they remain active in the social and political circles of large-scale ranchers and they often purchase land to return to cattle ranching. Only one of the 77 landowners included in this study was a woman, which is not unusual, since the role of large-scale landowner is typically a male role in rural Brazil.

The local elite trace their families back to Brazilian merchants who relocated from Manaus, Belém, or the Northeast, or to immigrants arriving from Japan or interestingly, from the Confederate States of America.² The smallholder migrants living around the elite ranches and working for them arrived from many regions, but Northeastern Brazilians are strongly represented. Migration to Santarém peaked in the 1960s, when the local population grew by nearly 200% (Steward 2007). The small farmers rarely obtained legal titles to their land and are extremely poor (Futemma and Brondizio 2003, Moran et al. 2006, Randell and VanWey 2014). The rural area around Santarém was a zone of agrarian reform in the 1970s and 1980s, and many rural communities have government schools, health clinics, athletic fields, churches, stores, public cemeteries, and canals (Steward 2007).

Beginning around 2001, a new group of large-scale landowners arrived from South and Central West Brazil to assemble larger farms from existent small and medium properties. Most small farmers did not sell their land and persist in the area, but rural populations have declined enough in some communities that schools and health clinics have been closed and bus routes reduced. In other words, the rural communities have experienced some negative consequences of this land consolidation (D'Antona et al. 2011). The newly arrived large-scale landowners are capitalized grain farmers, using modern techniques to grow soybeans, corn, and other commodity crops. Most are descended from Southern Brazilians who trace their lineages to German and Italian immigrants. The term *Gaúcho* was used in the Central West to refer to farmers from any Southern state, even though, technically, it should only refer to someone from the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Some *Santerenos* refer to any white Brazilian from outside the Amazon as a “*Gaúcho*,” especially if they are involved in agriculture. I use that term or “farmers” to refer to them. The terms “large landowners” and “rural elite” refer to all large-scale landowners in the area—both local elite/ranchers and *Gaúchos*/farmers. Grain farming and ranching are almost entirely exclusive in Santarém and the two groups were plainly antagonistic when I first arrived in the region in 2003 at the beginning of the “soybean boom.”

Studying Up Among Rural Elites

The Amazon is an economically impoverished area and home to the world's largest intact rainforest. The dual concerns of economic development and environmental sustainability color most of the public engagements regarding the region. The *Gaúchos* and ranchers in this study have allied themselves through the use of a shared discourse, which emphasizes their role as “productive” Brazilian citizens in opposition to a perceived threat from foreign environmentalists and other members of civil society criticizing the unequal distribution of land. With this emerging alliance, they have become more influential and it is more important than ever to understand their ideas and practices, despite the fact that ethnographic research among elites is rare, and both ethically and methodologically challenging (Nugent and Shore 2002, van Solinge 2014). For anthropologists, there are also disciplinary barriers related to studying elites, as we continue to concern ourselves more often with the disempowered than the powerful. We are particularly hesitant to study landed elites in Latin America (Bobrow-Strain 2007). The field of anthropology, in general, has continued to study small-scale farmers and impoverished populations more often than the powerful, even forty years after Laura Nader's call to “study up” (Nader 1972).

This study is an example of studying up among the rural elite in order to understand how large-scale landowners engage in policy debates related to the economic and environmental future of the Amazon, and the resulting changes in their attitudes toward risk and patron/client responsibilities. The two groups of large-scale landowners are quite different in terms of their social relationships with smallholders and farm workers, and in terms of their

attitudes toward risk. As a consequence of their alliance, both types of large-scale landowners have influenced one another in regard to these characteristics: Gaúchos have adopted some locally understood landowner responsibilities related to the ranchers' patron/client relationships, ranchers have become less risk averse as a consequence of their interactions with the risk-tolerant farmers and some structural economic changes. After examining the literature related to agricultural change and the social context of large landowners, I will explain the differences between Gaúchos and ranchers and then describe the causes and consequences of their alliance.

Agrarian Transition, Development and Deforestation in Amazônia

The current wave of mechanized agriculture is merely the latest phase of economic development in the Amazon. The Brazilian government carried out several other regional development schemes in the last few decades to increase export earnings, promote territorial and ideological integrity in the sparsely populated rainforest region, and to alleviate poverty and political pressure related to landholding inequalities (Moran 1981, Bunker 1985, Hecht and Cockburn 1989, Schmink and Wood 1992). Following these various plans and projects, large-scale, low intensity cattle ranching and low technology, small-scale farming dominated the landscape. High levels of deforestation have been associated with these land uses, particularly with cattle ranching (Faminow 1998, Walker et al. 2000, Fearnside 2005, Walker et al. 2009, Bowman et al. 2012).

The alliance between the two elites took place within the context of an agrarian transition to a landscape and agrarian economy that is divided between modern industrial grain farming for the global market and a continuation of the lower technology practices that previously characterized the region. The expansion of large-scale agriculture in Brazil (Margolis 1972, Foweraker 1981, Alston et al. 1999) and soybean cultivation specifically (Faminow and Hillman 1986, Klink and Moreira 2002, Jepson 2006a) has been understood through a scholarly framework centered on frontier expansion. In South America, the expansion of modern grain farming (soybeans, in particular) has been watched with concern for the fate of the forest and smallholder farmers in the face of "progress" (Hecht 2005, Paulson and DeVore 2006, Macedo et al. 2012, VanWey et al. 2013). The effects of this transition on smallholders are often found to be negative, resulting in emigration or suffering (Altieri and Pengue 2006, Pereira and Leite 2011, Wald et al. 2013, Hoefle 2013, Hetherington 2013), but economic growth that accompanies agricultural development in the region has a positive net effect on the median income of the region (VanWey et al. 2013) and some researchers report a general improvement in life conditions (Le Tourneau et al. 2013).

The expansion of soybean agriculture into the Amazon is associated with an effort to finish paving the highway (BR-163) connecting Cuiabá in Mato Grosso State with Santarém, where Cargill has installed a deep-water grain export facility. Throughout the last decade, this infrastructure project has been a topic of intense interest, as national, state, and local governments have all held public meetings. The project is moving ahead, despite environmentalist critiques, because supporters and critics alike have a shared logic related to the benefits of the Ecological Economic Zoning (ZEE) procedure that accompanies the road project (Baletti 2012). Some areas were indicated as being suitable for forest preservation and other areas were designated for "productive uses," with mechanized agriculture favored in these areas (Steward 2007). Working in communities which lie along the BR-163 between Santarém and the established agricultural areas in Mato Grosso, Jeremy Campbell (2012) reports that the ranchers and colonist farmers in these communities are deeply concerned about losing out in the changes they predict will follow the zoning and highway paving project.

Patron/Client Relationships

Scott Hoefle (2000) distinguishes between pre-modern, modern, and post-modern patron/client systems in Amazonia. The first is a system of patronage whereby smallholders

and farm workers have personal relationships with the large-scale landowners due to their social and economic position. In exchange for support, the clients are honor-bound to provide political support to their patron's family. This is the classic patron/client system that has been in place since the first rubber boom at the end of the 19th century (Dean 1987) and more recent jute³ boom (Winkler-Prins 2006) in Santarém. The second "modern" system is more instrumental and is related to public services provided by government officials in exchange for political support. This is the kind of development policy relationship that Moran (1981) has described along the Transamazon. Conklin and Graham (1995) described a third type of relationship that has become more common in the region, in which international non-government organizations (NGOs), environmentalists, and communities bound by a common identity designation, such as indigenous, riverine communities or rural workers, become allies as part of a shared agenda to promote conservation and social justice. Hoefle (2000) describes this as a post-modern patron/client system, drawing attention to the ways that these relationships can generate two-fold political pressure, including a bottom-up pressure from the peasant or native communities and top-down pressure from the international organizations. In Santarém, all three exist alongside one another simultaneously, especially the pre-modern and post-modern patron/client systems. The ranchers continue to participate in the old-fashioned patron/client system previously described by Stephen Nugent (1993), following the pattern of the pre-modern system. The post-modern system in Santarém includes relationships among rural communities and social service or environmental NGOs active in the debate about the BR-163 project, among other land reform and sustainability initiatives.

Gaúchos: Modern and Risk-tolerant

When they first started arriving in Santarém, Gaúchos dressed in newer, fancier clothes than local landowners, looked different, ate different foods, spoke with a different accent, and drove newer, cleaner trucks. During the event mentioned in the opening of this article, the Mayor⁴ of Santarém remarked, "When you [Gaúchos] first arrived, there was a great deal of distrust between us, remember? You didn't like our music or our food and we thought you had a very different culture." These superficial social markers of difference were regularly remarked on by my contacts among the local elite when the Gaúchos first began arriving, but the underlying differences in terms of their position within the economy, their attitude toward risk in business and farming ventures and their relationships with their workers and the wider community imparted a greater level of significance to these superficial markers of distinction.

In general, the Gaúchos are eager to expand their operations and find new areas to colonize in what they describe as a missionary-style approach to (re)shaping the Brazilian economy and landscape, despite the risks. As Marcos⁵ explains, "When I first got here people were very prejudiced against me, but we brought technology and showed them how to use it. They can see the great potential of the area now, and this is because we came here and established our farms." In Santarém, Gaúcho farmers see their modern agricultural practices as an obvious improvement over subsistence farming because it is more modern.

Compared to the agglomerated agricultural zones in the South and Central West, Santarém is a more challenging business environment for farmers (Garrett et al. 2013), but rather than fear the less established business environment, the new arrivals I spoke with took tremendous pride in their role as "founders" of a new agricultural economy. Some of the more heavily capitalized farmers theorized that the less-capitalized farmers in Santarém would have been completely outside the farming economy in Mato Grosso, due to their inability to compete with larger scale operations in that state. Farmers in Santarém exchanged a greater exposure to risk for the chance to become established at the start of a new agricultural region.

The Gaúchos' modern farming techniques were matched with modern, instrumental, and impersonal relationships with employees. The farmers were not interested in engaging in the kinds of flexible patron/client arrangements that the local workers took for granted. One farmer explained his hesitancy, saying, "Everyone who works here is registered with a signed

document, and every one of them that works with agrochemicals has to pass an exam. We are audited when we apply for credit, so it has to be done. We understand how important bonds can develop between an employee and a farmer, and during a time of crisis the employees can be much more like a friend than an employee, but the kind of personal relationships that people from here are used to is just not possible in our operations. Some are unsatisfied with that and they leave. It is sad, but that is simply how things have to be done.” The phone conversation in the opening story exemplifies the tone of the more instrumental relationships farmers have with employees, in contrast with the local elite.

Local Elite: Risk Averse, Traditional Patrons

In contrast to the Gaúcho vision of an improving and expanding Brazil, the local elite expressed a powerful sense of abandonment by the rest of Brazil, as the government investment in infrastructure in the 1970s and the extension of credit in the 1980s both failed to bring about the modernization that they felt was promised. The threat of a sudden abandonment of new development plans and the accepted wisdom of a cautious approach in the face of economic uncertainty underlie many of their economic and social strategies. As Cancian (1967) famously noted, farmers with a high middle-class rank will innovate and expose themselves to risk less than would be expected given the generally direct relationship between wealth and innovation, and the ranchers in Santarém correspond well to this pattern. As one landowner put it, “If it goes well, I’ll expand [into large-scale mechanized production], but if it doesn’t go well, then I won’t. There’s always a good time, you know? Not at the beginning. I have plenty of area to work with when the time comes.” They recognize the potential loss of social position if they miscalculate and lose their wealth, and trust that their resources can be marshaled to “catch up” once a trend is clearly established.

The local elite built their wealth through a cautious approach that used intra-family economic diversity and vertical monopolies. In Santarém, the early colonial elite, drawn from leaders in the Church, military, and government, was partially replaced during the rubber boom by a class of merchants using a credit-extension practice (*aviamento*) and domination of the transportation sector to establish themselves as sellers and purchasers of products traded by the big firms in Manaus and Belém (Nugent 1993). While the rubber boom was more significant in terms of the global economy and the economic history of the Amazon, the jute cycle beginning in the 1930s played a greater part in the establishment of elite families of Santarém (WinklerPrins 2006). These connections between the clients and patrons are still an essential part of the public life of ranchers in Santarém, as exemplified by the rancher in the opening vignette, who conveyed his blessings and received good wishes from the crowd as he slowly made his way to his seat.

The Vieira family exemplifies the cautious, low-risk approach to economic expansion associated with the local elite. Mr. Vieira delayed entry into the jute market for over a decade, eventually purchasing an established business at a discount when the owner faced a financial crisis. The family benefited by adding jute to their rubber, merchant, and shipping businesses, spreading responsibility for these operations across their kinship network. Blending kinship responsibilities with business strategies has been observed in other contexts in Brazil, a cultural economic pattern that has been called “tropical capitalism” (Eakin 2002). Mr. Vieira’s son explains, “In reality, we’re a family business, see? So, [my father] is at the head [while] my brothers and I are below [him]. The decisions related to investments or financing, when it is time to make a decision, we always make a collective decision . . . and after that we determine which of the sons, which of the brothers, will have responsibility for that business.” The father is thus able to oversee the expansion of his family’s wealth while they carefully expand into new areas. They use their client connections and interconnected kinship/business network to establish favorable terms related to purchasing supplies and selling their products. The local elite were proud of their cautious approach and considered the brash, bold Gaúcho farmers to be unwisely optimistic. Without solidarity between these two rural elites, the recently arrived farmers were in a precarious position, with no strong local ties.

The perception of a threat from environmentalists and social activists drew the local elite and Gaúchos together. Their interactions were limited at first because the local elite and the farmers thought of themselves as being very different from one another. Their shared concerns about the influence of NGOs, environmentalists, and other civil society organizations emerged when they would encounter one another at the public events related to the ZEE and the plan to pave BR-163, or when they would interact while doing business related to agriculture and real estate. Eventually these interactions were more common in casual social settings, such as restaurants, bars, and beaches or in places like the new shopping mall.

Environmentalism, Social Justice, and Economic Growth

Santarém has many organizations working to improve the lives of the rural and urban poor, and there is a real need for their work, as the city and rural periphery are both home to an impoverished majority and an unequal distribution of land (D'Antona et al. 2011). In the Amazon, the landless movement is not strong, but the Pastoral Land Commission works through the Catholic Church to insure better land distribution in the region (Wright and Wolford 2003, Simmons et al. 2010). Other organizations, such as the Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM), work to promote integrated sustainability and social justice initiatives, including projects to sustain the livelihoods of rural communities (IPAM 2013). As Woolford (2010) shows, the struggle over land in Brazil results in regionally distinct alliances and interactions with state agencies. In Santarém, the Landless Movement (MST) is not active, but one of the strongest advocates for the small farmers in Santarém is the Rural Workers Union, which has been an active participant in nearly every public forum with land use, development, or reform that I have attended in Santarém since 2003.

Soybean expansion near Santarém triggered a wave of attention by the international press and environmentalists (Fearnside 2001, Rohter 2003, Lean 2006, Steward 2007, Valbuena 2009). Both the local elite and the newly arrived farmers considered themselves to be the target of first world attention, and resented the criticism of their efforts to develop the region. In 2006, Greenpeace employed a series of confrontational direct action events in Santarém to provoke conflict and demonstrate their opposition to soybean farming. Soybean agriculture in the Amazon was blamed for social injustice and deforestation while McDonald's and KFC restaurants were linked to these practices at the other end of the supply chain (Greenpeace 2006). McDonald's and KFC in turn applied pressure on Cargill to be certain that the soy shipped from their Santarém facility was not contributing to deforestation and illegal land claims.

Following this crisis, The Nature Conservancy (TNC)⁶ approached Cargill with a market-based solution to forest preservation that would allow soybean production to continue in the region (Baletti 2014). Working with Cargill, TNC developed a certification system providing approval for Cargill to purchase from farmers who have met certain legal requirements and have not deforested recently. The forest code in Brazil is actually very strict, with at least 80% (and some additional specified zones) set aside as an area of permanent preservation. The code was not well enforced, because Brazil has had limited funds for the responsible agencies, and the territories under scrutiny are vast. Since Cargill is virtually the only agent buying soybeans in Santarém, compliance with the forest code skyrocketed among soybean farmers and deforestation declined rapidly. This decline is attributable to the soy boycott, alongside other policies and structural economic elements (Hecht 2012). By 2012, the program was lauded by farmers and local political leaders, who point to the dramatic reduction in deforestation rates on large properties (Rosa et al. 2012, Nepstad et al. 2014), as do Cargill and TNC (Cargill 2011, The Nature Conservancy 2013), although not everyone agrees that reduced deforestation through the certification scheme is sustainable (Baletti 2014, Verberg et al. 2014).

Just as social justice organizations and environmentalists were beginning to criticize and draw attention to the Amazon soybean boom, Dorothy Strang, an American nun working with land reform activists in southern Pará State, was shot dead by gunmen hired by ranchers (Nepstad et al. 2006). In the months that followed, media reports blended concerns related to economic development, infrastructure, the soy boom, and land reform, and portrayed

large-scale landowners as vicious and greedy (Andrade 2005, BBC 2005, New York Times 2005). The local elite and Gaúcho farmers both felt unfairly targeted by foreigners and others who were unaware of the difference between violent criminals and non-violent, legitimate agricultural producers, which they considered themselves to be. One suspicious farmer explained how the crisis following the assassination of Dorothy Strang seemed custom made to bring attention and pressure on them in order to prevent them from competing with American agriculture. “She [Dorothy Strang] was from America, right? I mean, do you really think that was a coincidence? They say that she was trafficking weapons into the area. The news won’t tell you that. The whole thing is just a pretext. They want to shut us down, and all we want to do is feed our families and produce.” The local elite and Gaúchos began to see one another more empathetically, as they both felt targeted by the same foreign interests, and their sense of solidarity grew.

The participatory democracy BR-163 meetings took place in 2005 in the midst of the tensions related to Dorothy Strang’s murder and the continued expansion of soybean agriculture in the Amazon. These sessions served as a space for the growing alliance developing between the ranchers and farmers to solidify, in a similar pattern to the cooperative behavior that Campbell (2014) notes between a nordestino family and Gaúcho family further south along the BR-163 when the two families began interacting with TNC, and set aside their longstanding dislike for one another to develop a novel property claim. The growing trust between the farmers and ranchers in Santarém was signaled by the fact that, although they sat together in the initial gathering of all participants, they trusted one another enough to represent their common interests when they separated in break-out sessions. When the full meeting would reconvene, both groups of landed elites collaborated with one another to suggest edits (Figure 1). While the participatory democracy model is seen as a means to distribute political power to subaltern groups, in this instance it was a way for two different rural elites to find common ground and collaborate.



Figure 1. Large-scale landowners attending a participatory democracy “Public Forum” meeting in Santarém. (Photo by author)

Their alliance was based on a shared opposition to the agendas of the social justice and environmentalist groups and a shared vision for the future of the Amazon. A central element in their shared vision was a claim that a community with capitalized landowners has advantages in terms of the productivity of the landscape and economy. In interviews, they frequently cited examples of investments and improved community infrastructure. One farmer mentioned a series of projects that he invested in with local benefits: petitioning and advocating for improved local electricity service, repairs and improvements to the local school building, rebuilding a local bridge, repairing roads after the rains, and allowing local small farmers to store surplus grain in their silos without charge. The projects farmers described to me varied, but this line of argument was consistent among both ranchers and farmers. Their shared message was simply that large-scale production produced a better infrastructure and more prosperity than small-scale farming.

Nature of Their Alliance

While their social lives are basically distinct, farmers and ranchers interacted socially at local beaches, restaurants, their children's schools, and social clubs. There were only two cases of intermarriage that I was aware of in 2005 between Gaúcho and local elite families, but when I returned in 2012, there were many additional instances of intermarriage almost exclusively between Gaúcho men and local women. The social class differences in combination with Brazilian notions of race intersect in this instance, leading to a common perception that Gaúchos who marry locals are marrying "down." I was told on many occasions by both Gaúchos and Santarenos that Gaúcho men married local women due to the "passion" that local women possess and the inability of the Gaúchos to resist their appeal. In this sense, it lines up with the classic Brazilian tale of class mobility in which darker-skinned poorer Brazilian women marry wealthier white men, which Goldstein (1999) has called the Brazilian "color-blind erotic democracy."

As I mentioned earlier, the Gaúchos and local elite had been interacting in business negotiations from the very beginning. These interactions were based on local elite ownership of farm equipment stores, tractor dealerships, fuel depots, and various other retail and wholesale businesses that the Gaúchos frequented. While I did not see a single example of a large-scale rancher selling their ranch to the farmers arriving from the South, ranchers were engaged in real estate transactions with the Gaúchos. The local elite assembled small properties into medium-sized farms and bought urban properties to build or retrofit houses to meet the standards of the arriving farmers, with security systems, including a wall and locked gate, better electrical service to handle a full collection of modern appliances and air conditioning, garaged parking for at least two vehicles, and even swimming pools (Figure 2). By 2012, these investments were large enough to register "home construction" as a primary growth sector in Santarém (Pereira 2011).



Figure 2: A home with security features, including a gate, a high wall and electrified wire. (Photo by author)

When the twin pressures of environmentalist protest and pressure from civil society to produce more widely beneficial development plans pushed the two groups together, they were already familiar with one another through their business dealings. Their alliance was made possible through this familiarity and three shared elements of their ideologies: (1) they were Brazilians facing criticism from non-Brazilians, (2) they were both opposed to calls for land reform and redistribution, and (3) they were both “productive” and committed to economic growth. It is significant that the groups shared similar ideas, but they have not established a completely shared identity. In fact, farmers and ranchers rarely spend time together outside contexts related to their shared role in policy debates.

The local elite and Gaúchos are well aware of the interest foreigners have in preserving the natural environment in the Brazilian Amazon. Some landowners mentioned a rumored invasion by first world military forces to secure the rich ecological services of the Amazon, and most lamented the number of NGOs active in the area. The large-scale landowners felt that they were the local victims of a larger global plot organized by people who were much more powerful than they could ever hope to be. In reframing their position as representing “the local” against larger foreign forces, they recast themselves as the defenders of their community rather than as a threat to the impoverished majority, a rhetorical pattern that has been found in other soybean expansion zones (Hetherington 2013).

The large-scale landowners contrast their hope that the region will experience economic growth against calls for land reform and limits to the infrastructure projects related to development plans. Gaúchos and ranchers have a shared identity of “producer” (“produtor”) in contrast to “rancher” (“fazendeiro”) or “farmer” (“agricultor”). The novel use of this moniker has two important implications. There is now an identity term they can use which includes both groups, and the term carries an implication that their land uses are beneficial and contribute to economic growth. The use of this term, which emerged between my 2005 fieldwork and my return in 2012, represents a way that their shared social class position, shared vision of the future of the Amazon, and shared outrage at foreign environmentalists has led them to feel unified.

An event with tremendous symbolic importance in demonstrating the initial alliance of the two groups of landowners was the establishment of the Amazon Agro-Industrial Cooperative “CooperAmazon,” which was the first cooperative to be formed in Santarém. Cooperatives elsewhere in Brazil have served as a powerful force for social unity among farmers (Jepson 2006b, Burke 2012). The cooperative was launched with a ceremony in November, 2005 (Figure 3). CooperAmazon was a primarily Gaúcho organization formed under the aegis of the Rural Union, whose leadership was drawn exclusively from important local families at that time. By forming CooperAmazon under the umbrella of the Rural Union, the Gaúchos conveyed a certain amount of respect to the local elite, who were in strong attendance at the opening ceremony. While their alliance is not indicative of a new blended identity, it has resulted in mutual influence, in particular, in relation to their perception of risk and their relations with workers.



Figure 3. The ceremony launching CooperAmazon in Santarém, November 2005. (Photo by author)

Gaúchos Adopt Some Patron Responsibilities

Most of the ranchers I interviewed in Santarém went to great lengths to explain how their position presented them with social responsibilities and obligations that sometimes put a heavy burden on their finances and time. Their success in obtaining an elevated status had to be matched with economic power or political control in order to live up to the expectations of a patron. Employment decisions and compensation are enmeshed in social processes related to prestige and status. As the Gaúchos began cooperating with the local elite, they learned more about the importance of building connections and fostering goodwill among their poorer neighbors. When I returned in 2012, there were more local farm workers on Gaúcho operations, in contrast with the practice in 2005 of only hiring managers from the South and Central West. The local elite framed this shift as Gaúchos learning to act responsibly. The farmers are aware of the perception that they are still “outsiders” with questionable loyalties to their local workers and the wider community. One of the farmers I interviewed expressed frustration about still being perceived as an outsider after living in the area for several years, saying, “I am Paranaense [from the state of Paraná] by birth, but Santareno in my heart!” By hiring local workers, Gaúchos have taken a step toward being understood as responsible landowners.

Ranchers Become Less Risk Averse

Because of the new relationships they have cultivated with Gaúchos, the local elite have developed better connections to agribusiness throughout Brazil and a wider range of economic opportunities. Ranching in the area has always been an extensive, low investment activity associated more with land occupation and establishing a locally significant identity as a rancher (Hecht 1993, Walker et al. 2000, Hoelle 2012, Hoelle 2015). In 2005, ranchers in Santarém began improving the local cattle breeds, using artificial insemination for the first time, investing more heavily in the health of their herd, constructing new structures to modernize their ranches, and hiring better trained ranch hands. At the local cattle auction in 2012, the ranchers were far more interested in breed types drawn from more modern cattle ranching zones in Brazil (figure 4). The logic of using cattle as a place to invest when the economy is growing has its roots in past cycles of accumulation, as one rancher explained, “When [his retail business] started doing well, I took that money and used it to build up the ranch. The business builds the ranch, and the ranch is for the family.” Now, rather than expanding in terms of the quantity of cattle alone, the new phase also incorporates an improvement in the quality of the cattle. This investment is predicated upon an expectation that Santarém will now have a better connection to global markets following the infrastructure developments and other private investments related to the soy boom.



Figure 4: A rancher (center-right) buying cattle at the auction. (Photo by author)

Through discussions with Gaúchos, ranchers began to see some of the advantages of higher investment land uses. In some cases they took steps to integrate agribusiness through the extended family approach to wealth accumulation described above, wherein siblings and children take on projects related to mechanized agriculture. Three of the ranchers I spoke with sent their sons to agricultural programs at universities in Southern Brazil to train in agronomy after the arrival of soybean agriculture. Another rancher who had fallen on hard times was trying to get his second and third oldest sons to work on local farms to gain skills and knowledge. The rancher in the opening story cultivated a sense of connection with the farmer by laughing and expressing understanding when the farmer was frustrated with the complications related to dealing with his workers. The ranchers are sympathetic to the concerns of the Gaúchos, in part because they see possibilities in the new, expanding agricultural economy. One notable change from my first trip to Santarém in 2003 is that instead of talking about ranch operations exclusively in terms of the size of their cattle herd, ranchers now describe their ranches with reference to their equipment and structures. This mirrors the way Gaúchos talk about their farms in terms of investments such as silos, equipment sheds, tractors, and combines. The local elite are still more cautious than Gaúchos, but their approach to ranching is becoming more progressive and professional.

Conclusion

Gaúcho farmers moved to the Amazon and have formed an alliance with local elite landowners based on a shared vision of the region's future and the importance of productivity. While this alliance is not a unification of the two types of landowners, they have had a mutual influence upon one another, with Gaúchos adopting some of the Patron responsibilities and local ranchers becoming less risk averse. A less risk averse local elite could have important implications in terms of the pace of growth in the regional economy, and the greater density of social connections for Gaúchos should accelerate their integration into the region and increase the opportunities for farm-related employment among non-elite locals. The fact that this alliance was precipitated in part by an aggressive environmentalist campaign is ironic because the now allied landowners share an opposition to foreign environmental agendas. The trust and understanding the two groups of landed elites have developed among themselves will likely improve their political position as they struggle to reduce the influence of foreign environmentalists in regional politics.

Notes

¹ A consequence of working closely with large-scale landowners in Santarém is that I was not able to spend much time with the small-scale landowners in the region. Under the politically tense conditions, the farmers and ranchers I worked with could have seen that as a betrayal of trust.

² A few families trace their roots to a wave of Confederate Americans who fled to the Amazon following the Civil War (For more on the "Confederados" see: Guilhon 1979).

³ Jute is a plant imported from Southeast Asia that grows in marshy areas and can be processed into a durable fiber that is used in many products, the most recognizable being sacks used for shipping coffee. Japanese immigrants brought jute to the Amazon, and smallholders planted it throughout the floodplains around Santarém. Families from the Northeast built factories in Santarém to process the plant for various products (WinklerPrins 2006).

⁴ "Prefeita" is actually a slightly different scale than mayor. They are the executive power with responsibility for a municipality.

⁵ Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

⁶ In the context of the political taxonomy in Santarém, TNC was not even considered an environmental organization, but an organization that worked with farmers. The primary TNC contact person for the farmers, Benito Guerrero, has a background in tropical agriculture, and appeared to be respected and trusted by farmers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Center for the Study of Institutions, Population, and Environmental Change (CIPEC) and the Anthropological Center for Training and Research on Global Environmental Change (ACT) at Indiana University for funding to conduct fieldwork in Santarém in 2002 and 2003, IIE Fulbright for funding to conduct ethnographic work in Santarém in 2005, and Lycoming College for funding to carry out follow-up research in Santarém in 2012. I am grateful for the feedback from Marianne Schmink, Brenda Baletti, Jeffrey Hoelle, Jeremy Campbell, Nick Kawa, and David Rojas on earlier drafts of this article, in particular a version of this given as a paper on a panel with many of them at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in 2013, however, I am solely responsible for the views expressed in this article and any errors.

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