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The faxinal system in crisis: the process of dispossession and its resistance in the collective agricultural production of southern Brazil

I. INTRODUCTION

The Modern export agriculture practiced in the Brazilian South region (constituted by the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul) since the mid-twentieth century has been established in a coercive mode, based on the dispossession - physically and economically - of former occupants, who appropriate the land in a traditional way, only partially included in the capitalist mode of production, and that develop a harmonious and self-sufficient social and ecological system, based on communal land ownership, which is extensively explored in order to guarantee the sovereignty of families that have maintained links with each other and with its space for more than three centuries (BARBOSA, 2010; CHANG, 1988; NERONE, 2015).

The so-called *caboclos* are traditional societies that inhabit the interior of the southern states of Brazil and have practiced, since the 17th century, an integrated use of soil, which involves a wide range of activities, such as forestry, production of *mate* (an herb used to make the appreciated regional tea), timber extraction and subsistence farming. In the region this type of space appropriation is called *faxinal system* or simply *faxinal*, a sort of traditional organizational structure that combines cattle breeding and extraction of forestry products in spaces of common property - the *common yard*, where the *faxinals* also live and develop their daily life - with limited spaces, assigned to each family, used for planting foodstuffs - the *planting lands* (CHANG, 1988). The *faxinals* are thus witnesses of a singular socioeconomic identity,

which derives from the link between anthropic uses and the preservation of nature, becoming examples of sustainable uses from multiple approaches (social, economic and environmental).

This work aims to offer an overview of the constitution and progressive dispossession verified in Brazilian *faxinals*. This dispossession involves not only material aspects, but it entails the dissolution of the immaterial, social, cultural and affective qualities of those commons, since capital articulates interventions both in the productive and reproductive spheres, through a strategic domination of the space.

II. THE FAXINAL SYSTEM HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

There is no consensus in literature on the moment in which the definitive conformation of the *faxinal system* occurred. Most theorists consider that the mode of social and productive organization developed in the groupings that were formed after the dissolution of the Spanish Jesuit missions in the 17th century could already be framed in that classification. Nerone (2015), for example, argues that the *faxinals* are the perpetuation up to the present of the social organization that the indigenous people assimilated in the missions. Tavares (2008), in a similar way, raises the hypothesis that this form of association originated from the link between indigenous people and black ones, both fugitives from the slavery that was established in the regional farms since

the arrival of the “troop economy” (based on caravans of cattle proceeding from the Brazilian southern extreme to supply the markets of Sao Paulo and Minas Gerais). The cultures mixture fostered the development of the *faxinal system*, with the aborigines bringing the tradition of common use of land and black people bringing the practice of taming. Chang (1988), in a different manner, considers that European immigration (up from the middle of the 19th century), mainly of Polish and Ukrainian origin, was fundamental in the modern configuration of *faxinals*.

III. THE SPATIAL, SOCIAL AND PRODUCTIVE ORGANIZATION OF A TYPICAL FAXINAL

The *faxinal system* consists of a peasant organizational structure based on cattle breeding and forestry in common areas, as well as planting foodstuffs in independent plots (CHANG, 1988). In other words, the *faxinal* people traditionally give to private land a social value offbeat to the capitalist notion of property. The *faxinal*, in general, is arranged in two main spaces (SAHR y CUNHA, 2005):

- The *common yard* is the elementary space, of collective property, where the community lives and raise animals (chicken, pigs, horses and oxen) loose in the field and in the forests, in addition to practicing timber extraction and *mate* production. The common yard is the community’s reproductive space, where its daily practices and cultural expressions take place. Barbosa (2010) states that despite the common usufruct of the land, ownership is individual, that is, each family has a section that can be fenced off, if they wish so.
- The *planting lands* are owned by the inhabitants of the *faxinal* themselves and are of particular use or leased from third parties. The most cultivated products there are tobacco, corn, rice, potatoes, cassava and beans.

In addition to the sharing of land and instruments of production, Vilpoux (2015) reports on the non-mediated forms of exchange and interaction, which occur in political relations, once these are established through customary power, by which members of pioneer families, especially the elderly, exert strong influence on others, although this is not reflected in control mechanisms. Nerone (2015) adds to this discussion the ties of *compadrio*, that is, of friendship, orientation, protection and,

ultimately, of authority, that are established between two people in the community.

For Vilpoux (2015), the main common interest that keeps *faxinals* alive is economic. The author defends the idea that families maintain the communal structure as long as it compensates them economically. When analysing the productive and budgetary structure of the households of a representative *faxinal* (*Taquari dos Ribeiros*), the author concludes that less than half of the families traded with animals and their derivatives, genres produced in the *common yard*. On the other hand, the production of tobacco and other agricultural genres in the *planting lands* represented the most important source for 90% of the inhabitants, with the tobacco, together with corn, occupying the largest cultivated areas. As a consequence of the importance of agricultural genres in the family income, especially tobacco, many residents of this *faxinal* have been encouraged to expand their production on the communal lands of the *common yard*, enclosing it. This increase of the commercial logic on the use of communal land has been greatly enhanced since the 1980s, with the expansion of this product and some kinds of crops, promoting the disruption - or dispossession - of the *faxinal system*.

IV. THE DISPOSSESSION PROCESS AND ITS RESISTANCES

The implementation of “*Pró-Rural*” (“Pro-rural”), a credit policy established by the state government in the 1970s, which facilitated the concession of resources to large rural producers, coincides with the spread of the tobacco culture in the interior of Paraná state. In the midst of the expansionary cycle, the companies of the tobacco production circuit sought out the *faxinals* in search of agreements through which they would be guaranteed the necessary investments and technical support in exchange for the annual delivery of a volume of tobacco pre-defined by contract. Tobacco culture was an unprecedented disturbance in the daily practices of these commons, since, according to Barbosa (2010), the work around it implied a dedication of time, effort and collective labour that was taken away from the others productive and reproductive activities of these societies. Added to this process is the need to continue expanding the cultivated area, as a result of the imperative to pay off the debts borrowed from the tobacco industry, facts that have made the *faxinals* see themselves immersed in a vicious cycle which has corrupted their traditional configuration and relative independence from capitalist practices.

The disaggregation of this mode of production and appropriation of space occurs with the confinement of the small cattle (pigs and chicken); immediately, families begin to enclose the *common yard* in individual pieces, privatizing and confining the largest animals as well preventing access to pasturelands by neighbours who do not have their own sections in sufficient area to sustain their cattle.

Despite the importance of economic factors - reflected in the enclosures of common lands - on the disintegration of *faxinals*, Vilpoux (2015) defends the idea that the privatization of the land is the outcome of the disappearance of the *faxinal* culture and not its starting point, as it is often proposed. For this researcher, the urban influence on the new generations has promoted the weakening of the ancestral culture in the young people, enhancing the attractiveness of maximizing the economic exploration of the land, once the social networks of these people have shifted towards cities. At the same time, a reduction in solidarity among community members has been detected, as well as in the commitment to collective activities in the younger population strata and among those who have a higher educational level.

In an attempt to deal with this process, in 1997 the existence of the *faxinal system* was legally recognized - through a state decree. From that moment, the municipalities with *faxinals* began to be economically compensated for its preservation, since they receive a higher quota of the Tax on the Circulation of Goods and Services (a state duty). Ten years later, the state recognized *faxinals* as a specific culture, taking off a series of protective regulations promoted by the state government and by some municipalities, that have prohibited any intervention on the *common yard* of the *faxinals* located in their territories without being previously agreed upon by neighbours in local assembly. Simultaneously, the cultural identity of the *faxinals* was legally recognized, as well as their agreements on the use of natural resources (SOUZA, 2009).

As a non-legislative measure, the “*Rede Faxinal*” (“Faxinal Net”) was constituted in 2004: an association that involves representatives of different state agencies, city councils and university institutions for the coordinated search of solutions that guarantee the survival of this

organizational system, making possible the permanence of its most reluctant residents, apart from raising funds for the realization of these projects.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The presented discussion allows us to conclude for the existence of an economic factor of pressure on the subsistence of the *faxinals*, which, when overcoming the dynamics of resistance offered by many of the components of these collectivities, leads to a process of dispossession and annihilation. This factor, of exogenous origin, corresponds to the coercion exerted by market-oriented production in large neighbouring properties. Many *faxinals* feel themselves incentivized to reproduce the productive configuration of these farms, planting herbs of commercial interest or renting their plots on the *planting land* for neighbouring owners. The growing economic gains arising from this mutation encourage them to extend this structure through the *common yard*, privatizing the previously existing plots, although until then not operational. There is, however, a second factor of tension: internal competition among the inhabitants themselves, which is inherent in any social organization. In the case of *faxinals*, this competition is currently manifested around the production of tobacco, bought by the large conglomerates in the sector, and the main source of income for the *faxinals* inhabitants.

Thus, it is possible and desirable an harmonization between divisive forces (derived from the interests of the *faxinals* themselves in producing commodities), on the one hand, and conservationists, on the other hand, through the possibility that families obtain economic benefits over private agricultural soil (in the *planting land*), at the same time in which the communal lands are legally protected, including the use of financial compensation instruments. To these legal, financial and economic mechanisms must be added the recent initiatives for the valorisation of the *faxinal* culture, promoted by the association between its inhabitants and external organizations, elemental for the preservation and reproduction of the ancestral way of life of these communities.