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Agricultural Frontiers as Controversial Place-making Territories

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Abstract: The intricacies of one of the most relevant agricultural frontiers in the world today – the State of Mato Grosso, in the Brazilian Amazon – are considered through an examination of place-making. Vast areas of rainforest and savannah were converted, since the 1970s, into places of intensive farming, to fulfil exogenous demands for land and agricultural production. Instead of merely studying the constellation of interconnected places, we examine the politicised genesis of the emerging places and their trajectory under socio-ecological disputes. Empirical results reveal three main moments of place-making characterised, respectively, by displacement, replacement and misplacement. In order to understand those intricate processes, it is necessary a qualitative intellectual jump: from place-making on the frontier to place-making as an ontological frontier in itself. Mato Grosso remains an unsettled frontier between a new socio-spatiality (shaped by fast economic growth) and the perpetuation of old practices (marked by exclusion and tensions).

Keywords: place soybean, landscape, agribusiness, Mato Grosso, Brazil

The new master he faced was nature, but
since nature is passive, man was the only
active agent present, and was free to do
what he would. It was in the exercise of this
freedom that the particular kind of
individualism associated with frontier
society developed.
Walter Prescott Webb (1952: 29)

[The] dignity of agriculture arises from the
fact that tilling the soil not only procures
means of subsistence but in this process
prepares the earth for the building of the
world.
Hannah Arendt (1998: 138)

Introduction

Our departure point is the dramatic spatial change and socio-ecological tensions associated with the expansion of the agricultural frontier in the State of Mato Grosso, in the centre-

north of Brazil and in the geographical core of South America. Vast areas of Amazon rainforest and savannah vegetation were converted, since the 1970s, into places of intensive farming and now constitute the world's fastest expanding area of agribusiness activity (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011). These will be analysed from the perspective that the semiotic and material frictions of modern agribusiness cannot be properly understood without reference to place-making; that is, 'the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live' (Pierce et al., 2011: 54). Place-making entails symbolic and material practices and discourses that create new built forms, new meanings, new social relations, and politicised interactions. In Mato Grosso, agribusiness production has certainly been a powerful place-making engine, given that in just a few decades it was transformed from a remote, largely forgotten part of Brazil into one of the most strategic hubs of production and export in the country. The intensification of agribusiness has produced spatial enclaves where capital dynamically circulates, as in the case of the large-scale farms and grain processing units around the main towns and in the countryside, and only marginally benefited wider regional society (particularly because agribusiness is largely exempt from taxes). Especially in the Teles Pires river basin – our main case study area, situated in the north of Mato Grosso, at the transition from savannah to forest ecosystems – the landscape in the rainy season is dominated by huge plantation farms that grow basically soybean in succession to a few other crops, such as cotton, maize and millet. The region is mostly occupied by first- or second-generation farmers, rural workers and commercial partners who now depend on the productivity of soybean and on its price in globalised markets (Ioris, 2017a). Those are all integral components of a dynamic place-making phenomenon, particularly because the intense production of soybean-dominated agriculture provides a very specific sense of place.

However, the modernisation of agribusiness in relation to place-making has not been sufficiently recognised by scholars working on the political-economy of agri-food networks. On the contrary, the geographies of food and rural development have remained largely elusive regarding the production of space under globalising pressures and the resulting repercussions in terms of nested, place-based contradictions. Where the juncture between globalised forces and localised spatial outcomes has been acknowledged by social scientists, there is often limited conceptualisation and limited critical assessments of the place-related intersections between the intensification of agri-food systems and the complexification of specific time-space interactions (at farms, regions, countries and beyond). For most academics, agriculture happens in places that are already established and they normally focus on topics such as natural resources, techno-economic trends and socio-economic institutions. Much less is known about industrialised agribusiness and its urban and regional repercussions in terms of place-making, social change and capitalist advance. And there is still a need for dedicated examinations of the range of connections between agribusiness development and place-making, that is, the intensely politicised processes of inclusion and exclusion mediated by the appropriation and transformation of the material and immaterial components of the lived reality. It is necessary to examine capital accumulation as a process of uneven development and global connections, but also with the emergence, interaction and transformations at the local scale (Pred and Watts, 1992).

In the case of the Teles Pires, a region previously characterised by exuberant natural scenery and numerous indigenous groups has been irreversibly jolted by roads, new towns and soybean fields that constitute now very different places. The place-making experience has combined elements of the ultra-modern economic boom with pre-capitalist practices left over from the conquest of the territory. Such extraordinary geography in the making

challenges conventional analytical approaches and seems to demand novel interpretative procedures. As discussed below, the transformation of the Teles Pires happened in less than five decades, always resorting to the monochromatic, but powerful, excuse of economic growth at any price. There was a constant promise of rationality, progress and welfare underpinning public policies and government action. To justify the imposition of the new agricultural frontier, the official discourse emphasised that it was 'no man's land', an empty space willing to accept the displacement of existing socionatural processes and their replacement, even if against the wishes of those already living there. Against what were considered rudimentary, excessively simplistic places, an even greater simplification was imposed: develop or die. The next pages will demonstrate that the synthesis of this vicious dialectics between displacement-replacement is the resulting pervasiveness of misplacement.

In order to cope with the intricate ontological questions related to place-making at the agricultural frontier we can find unexpected assistance in the ideas of a 'very special geographer': the recently deceased poet Manoel de Barros (1916-2014), regarded by the critics as one of the great names of contemporary Brazilian literature. The need to liberate the reality from its pre-arranged place-based configurations, and recreate the world, permeates Manoel's long and incredibly original artistic construction. Manoel left a vast artistic production full of incredible images and lavish verses that basically deal with what is considered secondary or irrelevant (e.g. encounters with stones, birds, insects, horses, organic and decaying matter, the habits of scattered rural families, etc.). From the micro and insignificant the poet constructs an argument about some of the most universal and unending questions of human existence. He understood that 'Things don't want to be seen by reasonable people' [*As coisas não querem ser vistas por pessoas razoáveis*] (Barros, 2013: 278) and also that 'That which goes nowhere has a great importance' [*As coisas que não levam a nada têm grande importância*] (Barros, 2013: 135). His attempt to go beyond the conventional and polite forced him to develop a new language, which he defined as the 'archaic Manoelian idio-dialect' [*idioleto manoelês arcaico*].

It is a fortunate coincidence that Manoel was born in Mato Grosso and spent his early years on the shores of the Paraguay River, where distances were immense and time seemed to move very slowly. In his words, his family lived 'in a place where there was nothing (...) and we had to invent' the world; 'invention was required to enlarge the world' and 'disturb' the existing, normal meaning of things. Manoel's ontological proposition was that Mato Grosso had yet to be 'invented' in order to decipher still unarticulated truths. Manoel realised, since his childhood, that the immensity of Mato Grosso was incomplete and, consequently, his world had still to be created, that is, the intense and sophisticated exchanges with nature and the small number of inhabitants needed to be complemented with broader social intercourses and connections with wider Brazilian and international society. A new reality needed to be invented was not only to be true, but because it was necessary to unlock the deep structures of the existing world. Central to Manoel's ontology is the difference between 'invention' and 'lie', in other words, the realisation that invention is diametrically in opposition to falsehood. In a public interview, Manoel de Barros – turned into the documentary 'Only Ten Percent is Lying' [*Só Dez por Cento é Mentira*] by Pedro Cezar, released in 2010 –¹ Manoel claims that only 10% of his argument is a lie and 90% is

¹ Information about the documentary can be seen at: www.sodez.com.br. The poet was extremely reserved and his work was only revealed to the wider public in recent decades when some well-known intellectuals started to praise the relevance of Manoel's poetry.

invented [*Tenho uma confissão a fazer: noventa por cento do que escrevo é invenção. Só dez por cento é mentira*]. In his verses he already states that ‘all that I didn’t invent is false’ [*Tudo que não invento é falso*] (Barros, 2013: 319). But, crucially, the new reality needs to maintain the organic ontology that rightly encompasses everything, including organisms, people, stones, fluids, landscapes and unsaid sensations. In his highly original poetry, ‘The trees commence me’ [*As árvores me começam*] (cfr. Barros, 2013: 311).

Before moving into the production (‘invention’, in the Manoelian sense) of Mato Grosso’s new agricultural frontier, a few words on methods are necessary. The present discussion is based on longitudinal fieldwork in the Teles Pires (involving three main fieldtrips) between 2013 and 2015, and follow up contacts with key players. The region was chosen because it is the main centre of soybean production in Brazil and it is recognised as a relevant experience of agricultural development. The analysis of the mechanics of place-making involved 28 semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and walks in the fields with farmers, attendance of public meetings, and the analysis of secondary data. With the help of local academics of the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) and of the State University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT), key interviewees and informants were identified, initial contacts were set up, and the research then followed a snowball approach. Interviews and other qualitative material were transcribed, coded and assessed in Portuguese; only the extracts reproduced in this paper were translated into English. The study focused on the most emblematic municipalities in the region – Sorriso, Sinop and Lucas do Rio Verde – which were established after the construction of the BR-163 motorway, with a length of 1,777 km, to connect Cuiabá with Santarém in the neighbouring State of Pará. The research dealt with material and figurative changes in these three municipalities: Sinop (the main commercial and services centre in the micro-region), Sorriso (one of the main agribusiness municipalities in the country) and Lucas do Rio Verde (a key agro-industrial centre). Inspired by Manoel’s ontological proposition about the world to be invented, we will demonstrate the troubling trajectory of places at the Teles Pires frontier and how place-making there has unfolded through a disconcerting dialectics of displacement-replacement-misplacement.

Invention through Displacement (1940s-early 1980s)

In stark contrast to the (fabricated) image of ‘democracy and egalitarianism’ ideologically associated with the American West by Frederick Jackson Turner (1920), the agricultural frontier in Mato Grosso, as much as in the United States, was initially based on a widespread practice of displacement. For many generations, the north of Mato Grosso was a faraway place, a universe apart and homeland mainly to secluded First Nation peoples (Buarque de Holanda, 1994). That began to change in the first decades of the twentieth century due to ideological calls for modernisation, progress and integration of areas considered wasteland. The federal administration launched the March for the West in 1937 and the Roncador-Xingu expedition in 1943 to fill the geographical voids still uncomfortably visible on national maps (Villas Bôas and Villas Bôas, 1994). But the integrationist project didn’t include the locals and their socio-ecology; on the contrary, the rest the country fell over the region bringing back the spectres of Alexander, Alaric and Pizarro. New places were forged out of the remnants of the cultures, values and, ultimately, places of those who used to live in the region (indigenous groups and squatter peasants) and also out of the destruction of socio-ecological communities. The occupation of the north of Mato Grosso, financed and stimulated by state agencies, happened through the widespread and systematic grabbing

[*grilagem*] of indigenous land (Oliveira, 2005)² In tandem with initiatives undertaken by the national government, the state (i.e. provincial) administration systematically sold large tracts of land at very low cost to property speculators, certainly without much interest in exploring the areas. Vast state-owned areas, with hundreds of thousands of hectares – described as *glebas* – were easily transferred to new owners by corrupt officials and many were later sold to colonisation firms (Moreno, 2007). The fact that these *glebas* were demarcated from distant offices without any fieldwork opened the door to major imprecision, inadequate property boundaries and monumental fraud.

The decisive phase of spatial transformation came with the resolve of the ruling military between 1964 and 1985 to force agriculture development upon the remote corners of the Centre-West region. Three National Integration Plans and other similar programmes, with international funding, were introduced in the 1970s. The State of Mato Grosso was actually considered the 'paradise of private colonisation' projects (Oliveira, 1989: 106), which since 1974 replaced the initial focus on public farming schemes (Santos, 1993). It was essentially a counter agrarian reform process that played a crucial role in the spatial expansion of capitalism in the country. Impoverished small farmers were brought from the southern states to try the same strategy adopted by their ancestors, who previously had to leave Germany and Italy and move to Brazil in the nineteenth century in search of a piece of land and a secure future (Schwantes, 1989). The region was aggressively advertised to prospective farmers as an opportunity to restart their lives anew, in a clear mechanism of 'place myth' that is necessary when negative stereotypes of the new frontier abound but there is an 'imperative for accumulation' (Brannstrom and Neuman, 2009: 125). Social mobility was notoriously restricted in the Brazilian countryside, but the frontier raised the promise of social betterment and the possibility to own a much larger property. Early research conducted by Oliveira (1983) in the region ascertained that families of farmers coming from the south were indeed in search of better conditions in the context of the progress announced by the government. In practice, poor peasants and small farmers struggled to reinitiate their lives in the adverse places of the frontier. The situation was worse for the indigenous populations, who could either move to precarious and fragile reservations or be decimated by diseases and abject exploitation.

The overall course of events was similar, but with relevant differences, to the genesis of capitalist farming described by Marx to explain the growing appropriation of collective land and expulsion of former peasants from their land in Ireland, England and Scotland. Marx argued that this separation of the peasantry from the land was a necessary condition for the development of capitalism, because it 'freed' the emerging proletariat from the land and permitted industrialisation and its capital-labour relation. It was a profound change of social and ecological conditions described as the primitive accumulation of pastures, forests, rivers, turfs, etc. This turbulent and often violent process not only fostered further industrialisation and helped the development of the wide capitalist order, but it also altered the pattern of agricultural production and commercialisation. Land was increasingly placed in the hands of a few large-scale landowners, which was essentially the 'usurpation of the common land and the accompanying revolution in agriculture' with acute effects on agricultural labourers (Marx, 1976: 888). According to Marx, land property relations are important pillars of capitalism and serve to explain the victory of capital. 'Modern landed

² Manuel de Barros (2013: 221) suggests that such forms of land use were a type of 'nothing-estates' [*nadifúndios*] where people used to speak the 'frog-dialect' [*Dialeto-Rã*] and had their own particular time and space.

property (...) cannot be understood at all, because it cannot exist, without capital as its presuppositions, and it indeed appears historically as a transformation of the proceeding historic shape of landed property by capital so as to correspond to capital' (Marx, 1973: 252). There are, however, crucial distinctions between the European experience of primitive accumulation in the early phases of capitalism and what happened in the Amazon as part of the expansion of Brazilian capitalism.

First, the main provider of capital and promoter of economic activity in the Brazilian case was the national state, which mobilised international funds through loans from multilateral banks. Second, the displacement of the peasants, squatters and Indians in Mato Grosso was associated with the previous displacement of poor subsistence farmers and labourers in other parts of the country, who were then encouraged to move to the growing agricultural frontier. Third, the pattern of production was highly unstable because of the serious dependence on government incentives and subjected to the hegemonic development priorities of industries and banks in the main economic centres (São Paulo in particular). The process of displacement in Mato Grosso happened as a coordinated form of primitive accumulation imposed by the political centres of Brazil which, like in the Europe, made pervasive use of fraud and violence. For instance, a farm to the southeast of the city of Sorriso (known as *Agropecuária Morocó*), in the centre of the Teles Pires region, which belonged to the American farmer Edmund A. Zanini was illegally transferred and sold to other farmers in 1972, leading eventually to a judicial proceeding. (The Zanini family fled Mato Grosso in 1977 and the dispute was only resolved by the courts in 2011.) Three decades later, Sorriso, located at the edge of the forest and with huge areas of easily cultivable land, is now one of the main hubs of soybean production for the entire country (Jepson et al., 2010). In a book by the local historians Dias and Bortoncello (2003), the brutality of displacement is cleverly concealed and Sorriso is praised as a beacon of abundance and economic growth that compensated for the 'loss of the paradise' in the south of Brazil (this is epitomised in the words of the poem 'My Place' on the cover of the book).

The town of Sinop, which is now the most important settlement in the region (113,000 inhabitants), had a similar trajectory, with the acquisition of 645,000 hectares in 1970 by another colonisation company, known as Gleba Celeste. The urban area of Sinop started to be opened in 1972 – the streets were named, ironically, after tree species, just as deforestation advanced rapidly. Residents came from the southern states and the majority acquired a piece of land of between 10 and 300 hectares (Santos, 2011). The founder of Sinop, Ênio Pipino, famously declared that Gleba Celeste 'was a green world, sleeping, in the loneliness of the Amazon' (in Souza, 2006: 144) and also that he was 'planting civilisations' and creating a liveable Amazon by opening roads and clearing forests and jungles (Pipino, 1982). Since then, the vector of displacement underpinning place-making continued unabated, as an persistent phenomenon based upon dispossession and constant movement rather than upon stability, through which different layers of belonging, ties to land and group identity are revealed (Connor, 2012).

Despite the immediate success of the new agricultural frontier, at the same time as new farmers continued to arrive in the Teles Pires region, most ruined entrepreneurs left for other parts of the Amazon and beyond. Tragically, a significant proportion of those who came in search of their own piece of land eventually returned to their places of origin in the south (alternatively, had to find employment in the increasingly large agribusiness farms): since 1980 migration out of Mato Grosso intensified and the rate even doubled in the 1990s compared to the 1970s (Cunha, 2006). This was particularly evident in the municipality of

Lucas do Rio Verde, which relocated 203 families of small farmers from the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Oliveira, 2005). After a difficult beginning, just a minority of the original pioneers remained in Lucas do Rio Verde – less than 10% – while most lost their properties due to the operational adversities, unfulfilled promises and accumulated debts (Oliveira, 1989; Santos, 1993). The fact that the frontier was strategically open for just a relatively short period of time in the 1970s and 1980s suggests that the vector of displacement conceded some space to the consolidation of landed property and the emerging of new socio-economic and politico-spatial relations. Gradually, many of the new farmers lost their land, which was more and more concentrated (through buying or leasing) in the lands of small number of large-scale landowners. The new phase was increasingly influenced by the operation of transnational companies and by the liberalising reform of the national state, which facilitated the entry of international investors and agro-chemical companies. In that sense, what has been happening in Mato Grosso in the last three decades, since the end of the 1980s, followed the well-known pattern of ‘land grabbing’ described in the international literature. That has unfolded though the dynamic of replacement, leading to the widespread feeling of misplacement, discussed below.

The Force of Replacement (end of 1980s-2000s)

The previous section discussed how the invention of new places at the frontier was achieved through displacement, involving the arrival of thousands of migrants in the short interval of only a few decades, the large-scale removal of the original vegetation, and the introduction of a gradually more intense production. Public and private agencies (i.e. controlled by the state or owned by private business enterprises) obviously had to make allowances to overcome the residues of pre-capitalist society, but the driving-force of displacement was hegemonic. The transition to a new socio-spatial order was not automatic and natural resources (land, water, timber, bushmeat, etc.) were made available with the dislodgment of those already living in the region. Nonetheless, displacement could not happen in isolation and, even as the existing socio-spatial features were being displaced, another key force – replacement – was emerging. Especially from the late 1980s to the first decade of the new century, some of the groups initially attracted to the agribusiness frontier were becoming redundant and had to swiftly adapt to a reality fraught with unexpected difficulties. It became increasingly clear that land in the new places was no longer available to all newcomers. Less productive workers and decapitalised farmers were largely replaced by a small number of skilled machine operators (trained to cope with the rapid automatisisation and informatisation of farming procedures) and by a small number of increasingly wealthy landowners in possession of vast properties. The initial movement of attraction and displacement, followed by the growing importance of repulsion and replacement, can be explained by the political genesis and perverse evolution of place-making at the Teles Pires agricultural frontier.

In the first period of the frontier, due to the political and economic risks involved, a large number of migrants were needed for the consolidation of the frontier, thus justifying investments in infrastructure, securing policy concessions and satisfying public opinion that something was being done about agrarian tensions in the south. Soon after this first impetus, several political and economic constraints affected the ability of the federal administration to keep the doors wide open (in particular the burden of public debt and high inflation in the late 1980s). In this way the same frontier that attracted migrants, as a seductive mirage and promise of a better life to most, began to replace the majority of those

initially involved. Those original farmers who found themselves in a cycle of debt had essentially three options: become labourers in rural properties, try to receive a small plot in agrarian reform projects or transfer their activity to a small farmstead near to the towns. Not only the small farmers faced difficulties in maintaining their activities in areas of the agricultural frontier, but many large property owners and rural companies struggled to cope with the costs of transportation, distant markets, low productivity and, especially, dwindling subsidies and incentives.

It should be noted that replacement was not only restricted to the concentration of landed property and the conversion of the weaker farmers into farm labourers. It involved other profound changes in economic and technological trends, including the substitution of the various crops unsuccessfully tried in the 1970s (coffee, cassava, guaraná, pepper, rice, etc.) with the overpowering presence, higher profitability and symbolic importance of soybean (predicated on the use of intense agronomic techniques, expensive machinery and profound financialisation of production). As observed by Marx (1976: 905), the capitalist farmer results from the enrichment of some individuals who usurped the common land (with the impoverishment of 'the mass of the agriculture folks') and managed to benefit from technological revolutions. The Teles Pires has actually become a large soyscape that hosts an essentially soybean-based economy. In this particular context of place-making, the soybean was victorious from the outset, inevitably, because it played a central role in the consolidation of a model of regional development reliant on crop exports, in the hands of large-scale farmers. Those who controlled soybean controlled the flows of money, to the extent that what really started to matter in the region was the phantasmagoric entity of 'soybean-money' and 'soybean-based' social status. The production of soybean continued to expand almost uninterruptedly during the 1980s and 1990s in Mato Grosso.

At any rate, the advance of soybean production was not linear. Because of state reforms and monetary stabilisation plans, the early 1990s constituted a challenging period for the Brazilian agriculture sector. Agriculture was increasingly influenced by events taking place outside the sector, including trade liberalisation, deregulation, credit reforms and removal of price support policies (Helfand and Rezende, 2004). After a moment of great turbulence, there was a revitalisation of the frontier since the end of the decade, helped by currency devaluation in 1999, foreign investments in productive, and speculative, ventures; and growing demands from Asia (especially from China). Many transnational corporations (TNCs) were attracted to the Teles Pires in the period between 1999 and 2005, when booming commodity prices resulted in a sizable increase in crop production, albeit increasingly under the influence of replacement.

The overall experience was rich of surprising and remarkable developments. For instance, to avoid the replacement of those who had been replaced, the municipal authorities of Sorriso and Sinop temporarily operated a form of 'place filter' that prevents the entrance of poor migrants: at the bus station there is a formal check and those unable to demonstrate means or income receive a free ticket back to their homelands. Such form of spatial filter operates in the opposite direction when the same authorities organise farm fairs to attract attention by those willing to do business in the municipality. The same frontier that attracted migrants, as a seductive mirage and promise of a better life to most, began to replace a significant proportion of those initially involved. The impact of replacement pressures can be appreciated in the following interview extract:

I came to Mato Grosso 29 years ago, lost my initial property because of the banks [*impossibility to pay back the loans*]... and I am now trying to preserve my small piece

of land, only 1.5 hectares large, in Sinop. I sell my milk directly to my clientele; I refuse to give it to the industry because they pay almost nothing. I try to survive, but so much is still lacking. When I go to the hospital, I am really humiliated... Soybean is not helping us at all and the future is not looking any better... (Interview with small-scale farmer, Sinop, Jul. 2015)

There are also other political and symbolic repercussions of the uncompromising replacement of farmers and technologies in the Teles Pires. Soybean production has been constantly portrayed by sector representatives as a fine expression of technological efficiency and administrative knowhow, which is used as undisputed evidence that rational, high-tech development works. The claim is that technified agribusiness has replaced the tradition of chaos, incompetence and turbulence typically associated with previous rounds of economic development in the Amazon with a new socio-spatial reality based on rationalism, knowledge and competence. The argument demonstrates the true narcissism of the frontier, in which self-constructed claims of heroism and unquestionable achievements serve to fulfil a prophecy of success and sanction the new agricultural frontier as the triumph of determination and entrepreneurialism against what was considered a place of ignorance and backwardness. It is an essentialist perspective by those who control place-making that, in practice, constantly denies alternative forms of agriculture or a different socio-economy. The symbolism and rhetoric of the successful frontier plays an important role in the definition of the new agriculture places against other possibilities who are outside (what Massey, 1994, describes as the production of selective inclusion and boundaries of exclusion). Although 'a great part of the land title in the Brazilian Amazon doesn't pass a serious judicial examination' (Oliveira, 2005: 91), the high productivity of soybean and the impressive expansion of areas under cultivation are used to vindicate the violence, the mistakes and the illegality employed for the creation of the frontier.

However, the narcissism of the frontier is insufficient to conceal the mounting contradictions of what Heredia et al. (2010) describe as the society of agribusiness. As in most of the Amazon region, agribusiness development superimposed an urban logic, and globalisation tendencies, over regional place-making (Rempel, 2014). Less than 30% of the population now live in the countryside and landowners typically live in the cities and commute every day, only spending more time in the rural property during seeding and harvesting periods. Those towns are defined by Elias (2007) as agribusiness municipalities with high levels of urbanisation and a range of specialised services to attend to the demands of modern agriculture (including logistics and financial services), but also with marked contrasts between the wealthy centre and a growing urban periphery consisting of low-paid workers and the unemployed. There are sustained cases of racial and socio-economic discrimination against those in the periphery. Normally those who came from the Northeast or other parts of the Amazon and who are typically non-white migrants (such as the majority of the residents interviewed in the periphery of Sinop and Sorriso, respectively in the deprived neighbourhoods of Boa Esperança and São Domingos). The mismatch between the narcissism of the frontier and the crude experience on the ground produces a tough synthesis to pull off. As observed by Otsuki (2012: 908-909), 'the frontier is a place in which various utopian visions collide' and in the case of the Brazilian Amazon '[i]llegality and the associated deforestation will never be entirely overcome if we do not grasp this creative process of place-making.'

The Resulting Misplacement

From the above analysis, it is clear that place-making in the Teles Pires produced urban and rural landscapes of intense economic activity that are also fraught with difference, tensions and unevenness. The high-tech agriculture practiced in the Teles Pires did secure national and international prestige among agribusiness players and is now widely praised for its productivity, rationality and entrepreneurialism. At the same time, there are striking contrasts, for example, between wealthy urban areas and agribusiness farms on the one hand, and the poverty of urban peripheries and small family farms on the other. Those differences are typical of *nouveau riche* regions, particularly in Latin America, where the accelerated expansion of a lucrative economic sector benefits primarily those with monopoly power over land, resources and markets. However, because of the distinctive origins and the turbulent advance of the agricultural frontier, it seems that there is more than just ostentation and socio-spatial inequality in the Teles Pires. The empirical evidence, primarily from long interviews with the locals, suggests that those living in the region have to constantly reinterpret their existence. Despite signs of progress and opulence, place-making in the Teles Pires continues to be in a state of great uncertainty and complex constraints. One main source of instability is the fact that, because of the politico-economic crisis of the 1990s, the region was inserted too easily into the circuits of global agri-food markets and neoliberal economic reforms (Ioris, 2015). Public and private life has been affected by those adjustments which, despite renovating the regional economy, reinforced the pattern of socio-ecological exploitation, vulnerability and political subordination (Ioris, 2016).

What is also particularly unique about the case of the Teles Pires is that the unsettling dialectics of displacement and replacement continues to define place-making in the region long after the opening of the agricultural frontier. Present-day circumstances, marked by the hegemony of neoliberal agribusiness at the expense of any other socio-economic alternative, remain directly based on the original mechanisms of territorial conquest and political control put in practice since the middle of the last century (Ioris, 2017b). The violent displacement of the earlier socio-ecological reality was not followed by a condition of spatial stability, but was instead complemented, and magnified, by a never-ending replacement of people, knowledge and social practices. Rather than the more common succession of displacement by emplacement (as the consolidation of the spatial configuration that characterises most areas of agricultural frontier), what happened in the Teles Pires was the consolidation of displacement by new waves of replacement. It is precisely this synergy between displacement and replacement that facilitated the employment of some of the oldest methods used during the grabbing of the Brazilian territory, such as highly exploited labour, large-scale deforestation and coordinated deception. The main source of this perverse renewal of displacement through replacement is the intersection between national economic growth policies and the demands of powerful local groups. The agricultural frontier was established to serve, and continues to attend, primarily, the politico-economic agendas of such groups. Certainly the main authority that decides the future of the region is located elsewhere, as actual place-making is embedded in trans-spatial flows and international networks through which power is exercised extra-territorially.

All things considered, place-making in the Teles Pires continues at a fast pace, but remains based on a fundamental paradox between the presumption of progress and collective achievement, and the concealment of the fact that most social and economic opportunities are increasingly restricted. While agribusiness is ubiquitous, not as merely an economic activity, but as the holy grail of modernisation and is formally available to all; in

reality it is touched by very few. The local population now lives a strange, increasingly troubled, disconnection between the proclaimed success of the agricultural frontier and the emerging realisation that not everything corresponds to those claims. In various contacts with farmers and residents, what became clear was the rising concern with, among other issues, the long-term viability of soybean production; the risks of a very narrow economic base; the isolation of the region in relation to input suppliers and soybean buyers, and the hidden agenda of politicians and sector representatives. These suggest that several decades of the spatial dialectics of displacement and replacement actually resulted in a pervasive, although often silent, sentiment of misplacement. Despite all the positive images transmitted daily in the local and national media, the region seems misplaced, its future is ambiguous and most of the population still struggle to reconcile being and belonging. New places have been produced, and afterwards many have been destroyed, because of the alleged advantages of the agricultural frontier, whereas these are, in effect, signs of great weakness. Moreover, misplacement is not a passive synthesis of displacement and replacement, but it is actually the third term of a highly idiosyncratic trialectics (cfr. Ioris, 2012) and, therefore, has also become a central driving force in the process of place-making. For instance, the sense of misplacement in the Teles Pires is appropriated by the hegemonic groups and then used as justification for new rounds of capital accumulation (more recently under strong calls for efficiency, better logistics and competitiveness).

The empirical evidence, primarily from documents, meetings and interviews, suggests that despite signs of progress and opulence life in the Teles Pires remains in a state of great uncertainty and stiff constraints, particularly to small farmers living in-between large estates:

When rains we can see the '*veneno*' [literally, 'poison', but actually meaning agrochemicals] coming down the river, destroying our waterbodies, and with the hydropower dams now it is only getting worse. It started with cattle, the cutting of trees, now soybean... These farmers don't care that we are seeing, that it is affecting our life... We could do more, but we need more things, more help [from the government]. (Interview with a small-scale farmer, Mar. 2014)

Interview extracts like this expose a situation in which many social groups are always 'out of place' due to policies and measures that consolidate the agricultural frontier as narrow places of settlement and production. In addition, there are serious concerns in the Teles Pires with, among other issues, the long-term viability of soybean production; the risks of a very narrow economic base; the isolation of the region in relation to input suppliers and soybean buyers; and the hidden agenda of politicians and agribusiness leaders that seem to exclude the many people:

We live because we are obstinate, because we occupy our space, but I am really concerned about the continuous difficulties. What kind of development is this that leaves us with only a tiny bit of space? (Interview with a small-scale farmer in an agrarian reform project, Dec. 2014)

Those trends affect not only peasants and family farmers, but similarly disturb the situation and the prospects of large-scale farmers:

I arrived here in Sinop 36 years ago; I came with strength and innocence, there was so much to do what I didn't have time to think [about the changes]. The government then needed to maintain territorial sovereignty and used the farmers to occupy the land. People like me agreed, because they wanted more land. Our dream was to have a [rural] property, it was a family dream, something from my grandfather. (...) Initially, we had rice, then gradually soybean. It was a great period, the structural problems were still there, but things really improved [in our lives]. We managed to evolve, technologically speaking, productivity increased a lot. What the farmers could have done, we did. But now lots of people are deep into debts, the last decade has been very difficult. Many will leave the sector, I am afraid... The big companies created a monopoly... I am anticipating that I myself will also file bankruptcy, maybe next year... Only those with good savings or excellent credit will remain. Those who can, go into politics. What we really need is more incentives to hard work. (Interview with a soybean farmer, Sinop, Jun. 2015)

Such comments suggest that several decades of the spatial dialectics of displacement and replacement actually resulted in a pervasive sentiment of *misplacement*. Despite all the positive images transmitted daily in the local and national media, the economic success of the region seems misplaced, its future is ambiguous and most of the population still struggle to reconcile being and belonging. The fact that misplacement is the dialectical synthesis of the interplay between displacement and replacement taking place in the Teles Pires, further reveals the full extent of the colonisation of space by capital (along the lines of the Marxist ideas about the production of private landed property and primitive accumulation). A clear indication of that is that present day agriculture in the Teles Pires is now decisively associated with the activity of transnational corporations (controlled either by national or international capital, as mentioned above) in charge of selling off farm inputs and controlling credit and foreign trade. More importantly, new places have been framed because of the alleged advantages of the agricultural frontier, whereas these are, in effect, signs of great weaknesses of its narrow production base. Something that is particularly relevant in the Teles Pires is that the unsettling sense of misplacement, which results from dialectics of displacement and replacement, continues to define place-based interactions in the region long after the initial opening of the agricultural frontier. Present-day circumstances, marked by the hegemony of agribusiness at the expense of any other socio-economic alternative, remain directly based on the original mechanisms of territorial conquest and political control put in practice since the middle of the last century. The violent displacement of the earlier socio-ecological reality was not followed by a condition of spatial stability, but was instead complemented, and magnified, by a never-ending replacement of people, knowledge and social practices.

Finally, the recognition that misplacement has also been converted into a force for place-making has another unexpected and probably surprising result: the progressive and disturbing shrinking of space in the Teles Pires. This raises the spectre of another uncomfortable paradox, which is a growing number of places that together represent a much-abridged social space. The regional space has not only been produced through place-making, but has also been wasted, corrupted and ultimately diminished. In other words, if the physical map of Mato Grosso retains the same area (around 90 million hectares) and the Teles Pires has the same boundaries as 40 years ago (with an increasing number of municipal authorities), the social and socio-ecological space has gradually reduced year by year because of place-making. The process of place-making has relied on the acute degradation

of nature, the destruction and waste of timber, land and biodiversity, and on the subjugation of those who came to the region naively in search of an improved future. An important element of the reduction of space when the agricultural frontier advances is the decoupling of intense farming from food production. This problem is not unique to the Teles Pires region, but it is particularly embarrassing that the main area of agribusiness production in the country is, in effect, a large food desert where most of the basic staple foods, such as rice, beans and vegetables, are imported from other Brazilian states; in addition, large agribusiness farms are less agro-ecologically complex (i.e. in terms of biodiversity) and less efficient than smaller farm units. The prevailing direction of place-making under the influence of agribusiness has produced a reality of prevalent misplacement, in which places are less ecologically viable, more unstable and much smaller than during the previous socio-spatial situation.

The Frustrated Invention of Mato Grosso

Due to the convergence of developmentalist policies and the attraction of large contingents of migrants, the northern section of Mato Grosso has become one of the last, and most important, frontiers of agricultural expansion in the world. Instead of a gradual advance of private property and market transactions as in other areas of agricultural frontier, the government planned and imposed the new places in the Teles Pires upon vast areas and easily mechanisable tablelands since the 1970s. The main conclusion that can be drawn from the specific historico-geographical experience is that it followed a very different trajectory to that proposed by Manoel de Barros. In the 1920s, the poet wished for an 'invention' of Mato Grosso, because it was a world apart, fraught with anachronisms and subject to spatial forces that isolated people into remote communities. Manoel's main proposition was to reconfigure those places and realise human potentialities at the same time, but he also warned about a rival pathway, which was qualitatively inferior and would produce a misleading reality based on lies and wrongdoing. From the empirical evidence available, there is plenty of material to infer that Manoel's stipulation was not observed. On the contrary, the geographical typology provided by Manoel – that is, the difference between invention (as something genuine and positive) and falsehood (as inauthentic and dubious) – helps us to realise that place-making in the Teles Pires has been an accumulation of lies, instead of the proper invention of the world. That happened through another crucial paradox (in a long sequence of perverse paradoxes, some discussed above): what was considered too simple a space was displaced and replaced with an even simpler space, which is only deceptively more sophisticated or more advanced.

The false place-making at the new frontier (in the Manoelian sense) followed a distinctive spatial dialectics of displacement, replacement and, in the end, misplacement of economy and society. What existed before had to be violently displaced through the firm hand of the state and the involvement of a large number of impoverished farmers from the south of Brazil (and also some business enterprises in search of the easy, subsidised government incentives). The region was opened up to public and private colonisation schemes (either promoted by the national and provincial levels of the state or by private companies) and rent-seeking companies in an intense place-making process boosted by the state through the construction of roads, airfields, storage facilities and the growing expansion of urban settlements. Soon after the frontier was considered irreversible, there was an opportunity to accommodate the needs and aspirations of all those initially involved. Although at first the aim was to occupy areas considered (or made) empty and cope with

major structural deficiencies in the best way possible, since the 1980s the main driving-force was to replace the promise of land for all and emphasise high-tech, efficient agribusiness production as the only way forward. Instead of making the world bigger, as Manoel wanted, place-making has been characterised by spatial compression through the accumulation of land and accelerated financialisation of production (particularly under the sphere of influence of TNCs and private banks). The ultimate result is that Mato Grosso's space has been shrinking since the early days of the agricultural frontier, due to socio-cultural and socio-ecological erosion. Another factor is the growing hegemony of neoliberalised agribusiness, which has further reduced socioeconomy, agri-food production and interpersonal interactions to the narrow practices and distorted semiotics of agribusiness.

The frontier is not only a chain of numerous places that are profoundly interconnected (a simultaneous diversity, as described by Pred and Watts, 1992), but the new places also reveal a great deal about tensions related to spatial change and are themselves geographical frontiers between the new spatiality of agribusiness and old, exclusionary practices. Beyond the apparent uniformity of crop fields and the homogeneity of plantation farms there are major social inequalities, the almost forgotten genocide suffered by indigenous groups and the risks of a socio-economy reliant on a single activity (soybean). Although the advocates of agribusiness make optimistic claims about the 'brave new places', they systematically pursue strategies that are inherently partial and leave most of the population and socionature behind. The places dominated by agribusiness in the Teles Pires are based on a totalising activity that has excluded and undermined alternative forms of production and livelihoods that do not fit in the modernist spatial plan. That leads us to a final and very disturbing observation (which has worldwide repercussions): there was nothing inevitable in the process of rural and regional development promoted in the Teles Pires, but at the same time the problems, conflicts and injustices that characterise its turbulent geographical trajectory were all more or less visible from the outset. Very little could have been different, considering the past process of territorial conquest in Brazil and the brutal advance over the Amazon in the last century. In other words, the new places at the frontier have been impregnated with the worst forms of money-making, aggression and racism. The consequence is that, more than the soybean, the deceptiveness of place-making is the main contribution of this agricultural frontier to the rest of the world.

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