



Programa de Pesquisa em Resiliência da
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Cultivating Alternatives to Authoritarian Populism in Amazonia

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Abstract

Since 2016 an unelected government has controlled Brazil's federal administration and pursued an agenda that directs resources away from broadly popular social programs and toward agro-industrial development projects that benefit powerful landholders (who are often referred to as “producers” or *produtores*). Amazonian landholders defend these policies as necessary to promote agro-industrial growth, which purportedly benefits Brazil as a whole. Herein we see the authoritarian-populist logic in operation that excludes a majority of people in the name of benefiting a minority that is said to represent all “the people.” To devise and implement alternatives to such a situation, the grassroots non-governmental organization *Instituto Ouro Verde* (IOV) advances agro-ecological programs in support of “*agricultores*”: people who collectively recompose damaged ecologies to create conditions hospitable to a wide range of humans and nonhumans. Recent scholarship on authoritarian populism tends to focus on the performances and declarations by which those excluded from official figurations of “the people” make for themselves a way into spaces of political discussion. IOV programs remind us that, in Amazonia, the construction of “a people” never takes place in an ecological vacuum. Beyond declarations and performances, *agricultores* become *a people* by creating ecological conditions in which their claims may flourish.

Introduction.

“The political operation par excellence” Ernesto Laclau famously argued, is “the construction of a ‘people’” (Laclau 2005: 95; Bosteels 2016). From this perspective, “populism” is always part of politics insofar as collective actions tend to gravitate



towards peoples whose demands articulate those of other, disparate groups. In this paper we explore the efforts of a group of smallholder farmers who are contesting the attempts of powerful landholder to construct an equivalence between them and the Brazilian “people.” We note that Brazil has recently joined the ranks of countries experiencing the ascent of authoritarian populism. In 2016, the center-left Worker’s Party, in power since 2003, was ousted via an administrative *coup d’état* carried out by a coalition of right-wing political parties that proceeded to undermine social and environmental laws, institutions, and programs (Milan 2016, Santos and Guarnieri 2016, Singer et al. 2016). As with contemporary authoritarian populism elsewhere (Scoones et al. 2017), in Brazil this agenda has affected rural areas of the country and is supported by wealthy, powerful groups. Such was the case with a man we will refer to as Fabio, an agro-industrial farmer and politician whose business in Amazonia has thrived since 2016 and who in a conversation with one of us (David), defended the unelected administration in the following terms:

The prior [Worker’s Party] government was more concerned with the common people. They advanced welfare programs but they did so to the detriment of producers [*produtores*]. This is the reason why, even if the new government has very low popularity, the things they are doing are necessary for the well-being of the producers [*produtores*] and of the country as a whole.

Fabio’s defense of unpopular policies that negatively affect the majority—“the common people”—while favoring the minority—major landholders—hinges on a populist argument. Here the dismantling of social and environmental programs and institutions is justified as necessary to free resources that can be used in development schemes which benefit “*produtores*.” This term, *produtores*, refers to powerful individuals who direct others to clear forests for them, control colossal ranches and agro-industrial farms, export rural commodities, and import machinery and inputs. *Produtores* are, in short, at the center of expanding flows of inputs



needed to produce rural commodities and as such are seen as nothing like poor Amazonians—people whom landholders like Fabio tend to see as passive recipients of welfare programs that stifle the entrepreneurial spirit and create a culture of dependency.

We agree with scholars of populism that Fabio’s narrative depends on a symbolic “chain of equivalences” (Laclau 2005: 79) whereby a minority, the *produtores*, comes to signify the interests of all “the people” (“the country as a whole”), while a majority, the poor people of Brazil, are framed as undermining the general interest. Such political logic has a long history in Amazonia where, in the name of “progress” and “development,” land, resources, and political support has been made available to relatively few landholders—and taken away from vast numbers of indigenous, traditional, and poor non-indigenous peoples (Becker 2004, Cardoso and Müller 1977, Hecht 1989, Velho 1974). Echoing the years of the military dictatorship (1964–1985), the current revival of authoritarian populism has been accompanied by frequent acts of intimidation and deadly violence against peoples who, in the official discourse, are exterior to “the people” (Brazil being in 2017 the country with the largest number of environmental leaders murdered in the world, Global Witness 2018).

Such populist reasoning has not, however, gone uncontested in Brazilian Amazonia (Hecht 2012, Zanotti 2014). Two of the authors of this paper (Andrezza and Alexandre) have worked since 2003 in the same town where Fabio lives as members of the *Instituto Ouro Verde* (IOV), a grassroots non-governmental organization (NGO) that advances programs designed to help smallholder farmers. The institute’s largest initiative is the Seeds of the Portal project, which brings together smallholder farmers who are in the process of establishing agro-ecological sites on their lands by planting native species together with cash crops and produce to be consumed locally.

Beyond addressing urgent economic and ecological problems, this agro-ecological initiative is a political effort to the extent that it supports smallholder farmers’ land claims and helps them



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create strategies for succeeding in conventional agriculture (Rosset and Altieri 2017). Whereas agro-industrial development programs are typically associated with and led by *produtores*, at the IOV agro-ecological projects are often described as supporting “*agricultores*.” This latter term alludes not so much to the present status of smallholder farmers but to their potential for developing into a group that, bringing neighbors together, tends soils, vegetation, and waterways to broaden the diversity of humans and nonhumans living in the region.

By creating conditions under which smallholders may act as *agricultores*, IOV programs undermine the symbolic “chain of equivalence” (Laclau 2005) that makes *produtores* into signifiers of “the people.” The *agricultores* emerge in this program as “a people” whose claims articulate the demands of a wide range of humans and nonhumans who may flourish in more livable ecologies and equitable societies. The IOV’s support for *agricultores* is not, however, limited to symbolic actions on which the recent literature on populism often focuses (declarations or performances by which the excluded act as “a people” in the eyes of others, thus disrupting the symbolic scaffolding that sustains official figurations of “the people,” Badiou 2016, Rancière 2016).

As we show in the pages that follow, the Institute’s Seeds of the Portal project complements symbolic actions carried out by smallholder peasants by creating spaces in which they may also form ecological configurations that can sustain their political projects. This line of work reminds us that, in rural areas like Amazonia, the creation of a people does not take place in an ecological vacuum and depends on building complex webs of human–nonhuman relations in which “a people” is rooted. Before we examine the IOV programs, however, we shall first clarify the historical nature of authoritarian populism in Amazonia in response to which agro-ecological systems are being designed and implemented.



Part One. Authoritarian Populism as an Ecological Formation

“The People” of Colonization

The IOV operates in eight municipalities that are part of a region often referred to as the “Portal of Amazonia”: a large area several thousand square miles in area located at the southern edge of the Amazon basin and at the northern edge of the state of Mato Grosso. The name signifies that this region is a territory of transition. To the south one finds extensive ranches and agro-industrial plantations. To the north one finds areas in which native forests stand. Depending on one’s perspective, the Portal is either an area where the advance of monocrops may be contained or a place from which industrial agriculture will advance further into Amazonia [Figure 1].

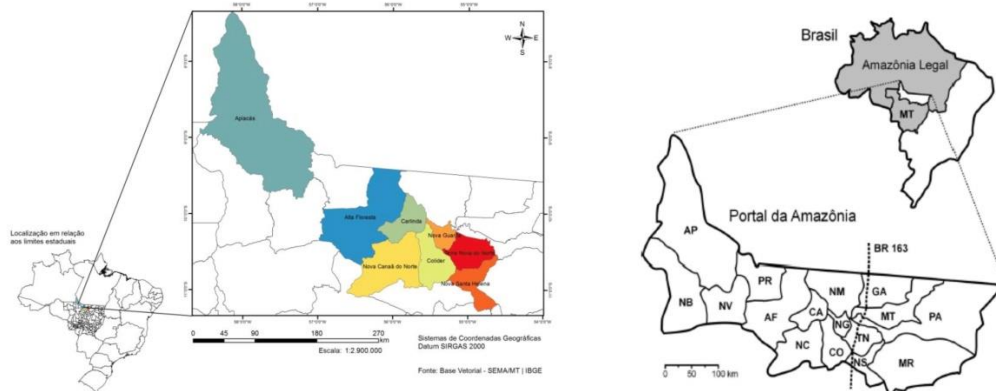


Figure 1. Left: Municipalities in which the IOV works. Right: the position of the Portal of Amazonia relative to the state of Mato Grosso (MT) and the territory legally considered Amazonia under Brazilian law.

In the eight municipalities in which the IOV carries out its work, cities and agricultural settlements were built in the 1970s by private colonization companies and land speculators who benefited from the military government’s political and economic support (Schmink and Wood 1992). Built as farming centers, the cities plotted racial and social hierarchies into a colonial space that favored the advance of monocultures and undermined family farming. Wealthy and



politically connected landholders, who were often white and had come to Amazonia after seeing their lands in southern Brazil bought lands in the city and its proximity to build houses and farmlands in which they grew perennial crops (such as coffee, cacao, and guaraná) near the urban core.

This area also experienced an influx of poor immigrants from southern Brazil who were relocated by the military government after they lost their lands due to the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects and agro-industrial expansion. A third group who also came to the region was composed of poor peoples who migrated from southern and northeast areas of Brazil, often had Afro-Brazilian and indigenous roots, and could only afford to live in peasant settlements, built tens of miles away from urban centers and highways, where soils tended to be less than ideal for agriculture. Such demographic distribution as a feat of design: While the companies who planned the cities expected large farms near the urban core to produce commodities for national markets, peasant settlements were built as reservoirs of labor and places where food would be produced primarily for local consumption.

In such spaces of colonization a singular figuration of “the people” flourished. A relatively wealthy minority comprising mostly white people was taken by local and federal officials as representatives of the general interest. They were apportioned land, provided subsidized credit, and often the support of local law-enforcement agencies if a land conflict broke out with indigenous or traditional peoples. But even if landholders was dominant in the political and economic landscape created by the colonization process, the status of its members depended on the vagaries of economic processes that pushed many of them into bankruptcy. In the 1980s, many large farms that were purported to be the cornerstone of Amazonian agriculture were undermined by economic crises and underperforming crops. Many farmers had to sell their land to landholders who managed to stay afloat during the crisis and who, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, abandoned farming and established huge ranches on their lands, as meat production

became the dominant economic activity in the region (Kröger 2012, Walker 2009).

It was at the outset of ranching's dominance, in the mid-1980s, that the term “produtor” began to be used in allusion to landholders who, like Fabio, capitalized on economic crises and changed their field of activity when needed so as to expand their operations. The term also alluded to landholders who forcefully asserted their territorial domains when challenged by social movements (Grzybowski 1990). Produtores in the Portal of Amazonia earn their living for the most part as ranchers, while in southern areas of the state they were predominantly agro-industrial farmers. In the 2010s, produtores faced a new economic crisis when ranching costs increased and meat prices collapsed due to a disease afflicting pastures and a corruption scandal affecting Brazilian animal protein exports. This moment of crisis was seized by landholders like Fabio who made large investments in machinery and inputs to establish high-tech monoculture plantations devoted to the production of soy for export [Figure 2].



Figure 2. Capital-intensive soy plantation established in a property in southern Amazonia that until 2016 had housed extensive ranching operations. Photo taken in 2017 (All photos were taken by David Rojas).

As in the earlier transition from perennial farming to ranching, the ongoing transition from large-scale ranching to soy farming will further concentrate land and wealth (Martinelly et al. 2017, Lapola 2014). As Fabio put it:

Those who cannot keep up with the pace of this transition [from ranching to soy] will be driven out of the market. That is it. If they do not use technology, if they do not improve their



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sites, well, then there will be others who will start to do things on their land. And they will start to produce more. And they will get a larger and larger share of the market [emphasis in the original pronunciation].

The they to which Fabio alluded were the produtores, “the people,” who used political contacts and ruthless economic maneuverings to take control over more and more land and increase their share of rural commodity markets. Their symbolic position as representatives of the general interest was rooted in their access to capital, land, machinery and inputs and their use of these factors to constantly enlarge their operations and gain access to more capital, land, machinery, and inputs. . . . [Figure 3]



Figure 3. Grain drier in Fabio's hometown. The dryer started operating in 2017 and is owned by landholders who are transitioning into capital-intensive soy farming.

As signifiers of “the people,” the produtores assumed a privileged political position that therefore depended on their capacity to build ever-larger agro-industrial systems. Those unable to continue investing to expand their properties were expected to be driven out of business. Herein lies one of the contradictions of produtores when regarded as “the people.” Not only are the demands of a wide range of groups being excluded from consideration due to the claims of a minority of landholders, these landholders themselves are responding only to the demands of monoculture ecologies which are seen by produtores as continually demanding new investments. In other words, when produtores constitute “the people,” political life gravitates not so much towards a small group of landholders as towards impersonal monocrop ecologies.



The Ecological Grounds of Authoritarian Populism

Alexandre Kojève argues that authority is “the possibility that an agent has of acting on others . . . without those others reacting against him” (Kojève 2014: 9, emphasis in the original). For Kojève, moreover, authority becomes authoritarianism when such an agent acts upon others by using force to quell resistance or avoid compromises (Kojève 2014: 8, 11–12). In Amazonia, monoculture ecologies can be said to have enabled authoritarianism insofar as they provided the means by which a minority that passed itself off as “the people” imposed its will by force over indigenous and poor Amazonians (thousands of whom died as farms, pastures, and cities were established in the region Brazil 2014, Little 2001, Garfield 2001). The expansion of monocultures not only renders landholders “agents” capable of “acting upon others” but also creates an ecological situation in which impersonal forces undermine groups who strive to create alternatives to authoritarianism.

Smallholder farmers who are part of the IOV’s programs often struggle in spatial conditions that, since the opening of this agricultural territory, have systematically pressured them off their lands. Having for the most part moved to the region independently of one another, most peasant families in the Portal of Amazonia lack social mechanisms that extend beyond their immediate kin they can use to pool their labor. This is why usually rely on hired labor and machinery to open their sites, which on average extend over some 90 acres. And because opening their sites is a costly effort, smallholders are often forced to seek cash by working away from their lands in dangerous or poorly paid activities such as logging, gold mining, and wage labor. In other words, to open their sites and dwell on them, smallholders are often absent from those sites for months at a time, engaging in activities that rarely yield permanent wealth.

Even those who through these activities secure cash for them they can use to support opening their sites have little or no savings and thus face an economic situation in which a major illness or accident in the family, a year of adverse climate conditions, market fluctuations,



or infestation or invasion by a pest could mean bankruptcy. And even if no major setback hits family sites, smallholders fear soil depletion, which gradually reduces the productivity of pastures and farmlands and is often addressed by tilling the soil and applying agricultural inputs—a costly investment that only those who control a large area that has provided them with a substantial cash reserve can afford. Quite often, soil degradation leads smallholders to sell their lands to landholders who, by incorporating family farms into their estates, capture the labor of poor peasants put in their sites over the years.

Under these conditions, smallholders find their imaginations also captured by monocrop landscapes. Many families respond to economic adversity by devoting more and more time to crops or pastures on which wealthy landholders base their income and thus abandon food crops and cut as much forest on their sites as they can. Not only is ecological and economic diversity reduced at these sites but those who work them become a captive economic audience to companies who sell them engineered seeds, vaccines, herbicides, fertilizers, and machinery.

Another response is seen in the efforts of parents who encourage their kids to move to cities to study or work (which decreases the number of people they can ask for help with their chores in exchange for something other than money). Others establish close economic relations with dominant market players, become operatives for local politicians, and do what they can to expand their sites by buying land from bankrupt neighbors. It can be hard for neighbors who expect a majority among them to lose their land while a few expand their properties to see each other as allies who can join forces in pursuit of long-term objectives.

In Amazonia as elsewhere, the demise of family agriculture is the result not only of the destruction of local creativity and potential by external, larger authoritarian actors (Li 2014, Tsing 2005). Peasant sites can also be undermined from within by impersonal forces that capture smallholders' creative potential (Bear et al. 2014), which means that peasants to devote their own labor and imagination into becoming smaller replicas of powerful market players.



The complex historical entanglements between smallholders and produtores means that the former are not readily available as “a people” that, in itself, may offer an alternative to the official symbolic rendering of landholders as “the people.” To put this differently, having long been entangled in forces that have facilitated the advance of monocultures, smallholders are not the embodiment of a romantic past or pure political subjects to which one may appeal to arrest social and ecological destruction. In this situation, IOV projects bring smallholders into an organization in which they may fashion new ways of acting as agricultores, this is to say, as members of a group in which neighbors, family members, and nonhuman entities recompose social and ecological relations.

3. Ecological Alternatives to Authoritarian Populism

A People against “The People”

IOV builds on the actions of groups that, for decades, have strived to devise alternatives to the advance of monoculture landscapes in places like the city of Nova Guarita. One of the eight municipalities in which the IOV currently works in the Portal of Amazonia, Nova Guarita was built in the late 1970s following a design that included the construction of a peasant settlement that today is known as Frei Galvão, which at one point in the 1980s accommodated several dozen peasant families. By the late 1990s, however, not one peasant family remained in this settlement and only two large ranches covered its entire territory.

As monoculture landscapes expanded, however, so did movements that sought alternatives to them. In the early 2000s, the social movement Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra–CPT) began demanding the reinstatement of the aforementioned peasant settlements and took legal action against one of the ranchers for subjecting his workers to conditions akin to



slavery. While the legal case against the rancher progressed, landless peasants from Nova Guarita and nearby municipalities established a camp in the city, occupying public buildings and thus forcing their way into spaces of political debate that had long been closed to them. When these tactics failed, peasants occupied the ranch under dispute and, enduring physical violence perpetrated by the rancher, demarcated their plots and began establishing crops and pastures—thus acting as if they were a people with the authority to change land tenure systems independently. After three years of struggle—during which some peasants lost their lives to violent conflict—smallholders succeeded in being recognized by local state officials as the rightful occupants of the land and one of the ranches formally became a peasant settlement once again.



Figure 4: Smallholder showing the Frei Galvao's location in an area where native vegetation had long been transformed into pastures

Declarations and performances, then, made smallholders into “a people” whose irruption in public life undermined dominant associations between the general interest and powerful landholders (Badiou 2016, Rancière 2016). Frei Galvão’s residents knew, however, that economic and ecological pressures could wipe out their political achievements. Their new settlement was distant from markets, most of its surface had been deforested, much riparian



vegetation had been destroyed, and as a result waterways were dwindling and soil fertility was withering [Figure 4]. If declarations and performances had changed their political situation in the eyes of others, they still needed to cultivate new ecological conditions in which could sustain their projects and keep their lands.

Organizing a People

As Frei Galvão's smallholders were struggling to stay on their land they approached participants in IOV projects and began a prolonged conversation about a series of issues (concerning strategies through which to diversify production, increase their income, reduce their dependency on costly inputs, replenish soil fertility, and recompose waterways). Similar conversations had taken place among IOV members since 2003 when the Institute opened its doors in the area. In such discussions, urgent ecological and economic claims were addressed in the context of much broader questions concerning the possibility of smallholders to act as a group capable of establishing more livable conditions for them, their kin and neighbors, and the wide range of nonhumans on which their livelihoods depended:

A response to such questions emerged gradually over years of IOV involvement in the region and took the form of an organizational arrangement that was designed to increase the autonomy of peasants. Whenever a group of smallholders such as those in Frei Galvão joined the IOV it became one of the base-groups or "nuclei" on which this grassroots organization was based. Each municipality has at least one such nucleus (*núcleo*) that had emerged in peasant communities who had been engaged in land struggles supported by social movements (in particular the Movement of Peasant Women, the CPT, and the Rural Youth Pastoral). As a result of shared experiences related to the struggle for land, the IOV was constituted primarily by groups rather than isolated individuals. When a nucleus joined the IOV some of its leaders became members of the Institute's General Assembly and as such were responsible for electing



the Institute's Directive Council, assessing the results of previous projects, discussing budgets, taking strategic decisions, and approving the inclusion of new *núcleos* as well as individual members.

By 2009, the IOV's work was based on three *núcleos* that were advancing a range of programs and actions designed to support family farming that included the establishment of agro-ecological sites, a solidarity economics program that brought farmers and consumers together, a community center, and a leadership formation program. In 2009 Frei Galvão's and four other nuclei joined the Institute, expanding its range of actions with financial support from the Norwegian-backed federal program *Fundo Amazônia*. The IOV then began implementing a large-scale agro-ecological program, Seeds of the Portal, which expanded previous initiatives by bringing all nuclei together into regional networks of exchange through which smallholders could share the fruits of their labor with one another.

A Space for Agricultores

The most visible outcomes of the Seeds of the Portal project are agro-ecological plots established at peasant sites using a method known as the *movuca*. Whereas agro-industrial architecture seeks to bring plant metabolism and life cycles of a wide range of organisms into an human (industrial) periodicity, the *movuca* intends to bring agriculture closer to the protracted time of succession processes. Following this approach, a blend of seeds that includes native plants with short lifespans, fruit trees, and large native trees that may live for centuries is mixed with soil and applied to a given area [Figure 5]. The *movuca* thus creates a process of species succession whereby plant species with short lifespans grow and then die, generating in the process fresh biomass that helps enrich soils and thus creates conditions under which other species with longer timespans may flourish.



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Figure 5. Preparations for (and demonstration of) the *movuca* method in Frei Galvão. Left mammoc and plantain stalks to be used in future agro-ecological sites. Center-Left native seeds to be used (in the background a diagram of an agro-ecological project). Center-Right IOV technicians and smallholders mixing a variety of native seeds with soil as they demonstrate the *movuca* method. Right. Seed-soil mixture being applied in a previously deforested area.

The *movuca* method mobilizes the regenerative potential of various plant species which smallholders manage along the way through strategic pruning, selective uprooting, and planting additional species over the years during which the agro-ecological site flourishes. The resulting agro-ecological formations have the potential to enhance soil fertility, rehabilitate waterways, and yield fruits that farmers may consume or sell to supplement their income. Over the long term these new, more diverse ecologies could reduce smallholder dependence on costly agricultural inputs, alleviate (and even reverse) ecological degradation, and offer new sources of income. Crucially, however, the most significant outcomes of the Seeds of the Portal project may not come at the level of the individual property but rather through the links they create between smallholders living hundreds of miles apart.



Figure 6. The building of a community center in what had been the main house of a ranching state. Left and Center: the 2011 construction project. Right: the new common area in operation in 2012.

Agricultores not only work on their family farms tending ecologically diverse sites. They also contribute to larger groups whose collective undertakings gravitate toward communal



spaces like the one in Frei Galvão that the three of us helped improve in 2011.¹ During that year, smallholders raised new pillars in and added a new floor to a house that just a few years earlier had been the command center from which a rancher had directed attacks against Frei Galvão's peasants. In 2009 the house had been transformed into a community space and by 2010 it housed one of seven community seed banks established by the Seeds of the Portal project (today the project has eight seed banks and a large regional seed bank is in the planning) [FIGURE 6]. While housing a seed bank the building linked 28 families in Nova Guarita with 132 families in all six municipalities that at the time were taking part in the Seeds of the Portal initiative.



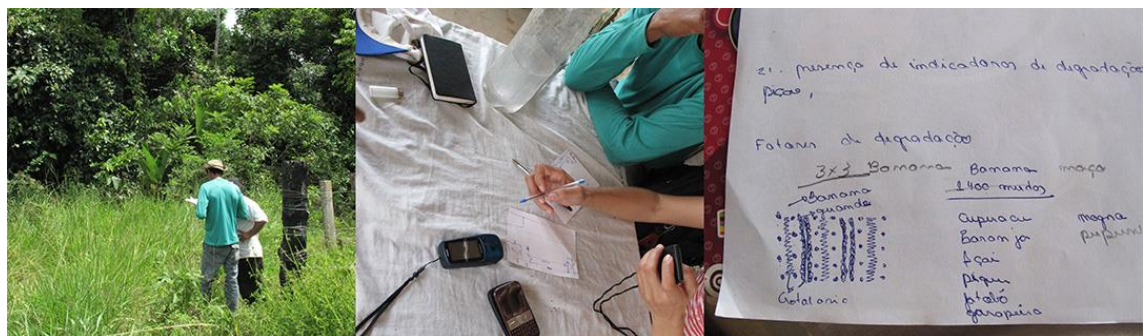
Figure 7. Activities advanced in Frei Galvão's community seed bank. Left: Seeds storage in the communitarian bank. Right: Easter celebration right outside the seed bank.

As a node that connected Frei Galvão's nuclei with other IOV communities, the seed bank enabled leaders and the Institute's technicians to disseminate the principles underlying agro-ecological systems as smallholders themselves built seed exchange networks. For several months Frei Galvão's community seed bank served as the residence of two IOV technicians (a brother and sister whose parents were smallholder farmers) who spent their days listening to farmers' ideas concerning where on their sites they wanted to establish their agro-ecological systems and which species they planned to include in them. Using GIS tools, IOV technicians estimated the area to be cultivated at each site as well as the kinds and amounts of seeds that

¹ Andrezza and Alexandre supported it from their directive positions at the IOV while David, who in 2011 was living with a peasant family who worked on the project, contributed labor to the construction process.



each family needed to complete their plans (no two families had the same agro-ecological project in mind and the IOV technicians were tasked with supporting each individual plan)[Figure 8].



Other IOV technicians carried out the same kind of work around the other seed banks, thus consolidating data on total amounts and kinds of seeds and stalks that the project as a whole needed to meet demand for all 132 families that in 2010 were involved in the project. With this information in hand, Seeds of the Portal participants, together with the IOV's General Assembly, created a system that, using funds from the Fundo Amazônia, would purchase seeds (and most stalks) from smallholders, and then distribute them, free of charge, to the seed banks and individual peasant sites (while all project participants benefited from the project by receiving seeds and stalks free of charge, those who were also members of the Seeds Network benefited additionally from selling these materials to the project).

Beyond a flow of germplasm, the Seeds Network combined market and non-market strategies to create new organizations. To gather the seeds needed to establish the agro-ecological sites supported by the project, a sub-group of smallholders within the IOV created a Seed Network that today includes 12 groups of gatherers distributed across eight municipalities, comprising a total of 172 people who gather seeds from remaining forests on their properties and sell these to the project. The actions of this core group have allowed more than 1,200 families that in total have established more than 2,500 hectares of agro-ecological systems at their sites while dissemination activities related to this processes have reached an audience of



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more than 4,300. The multiplicity of groups and municipalities means that the project has access to a wide range of native forests, which is why, today, the Seeds of the Portal project can include 180 seed varieties in the agro-ecological systems it supports. The price paid by the project for each particular seed type is defined by the General Council based on estimates of the amount of labor required to obtain, clean, and transport each kind of seed from remaining forests to seed banks. Similarly, the question of who in the Seed Network can sell a given kind of seed to the project is determined by network participants who together identify which seeds will be purchased from a particular gatherer and in what amounts by his or her locality's seed bank (a decision that is taken in consideration of the type of forests that remain at each gatherer's site).

To coordinate this web of transactions, Seed Network participants in each community elect a Director for each seed bank who is in charge of arranging seed collection and is responsible for storing seeds under conditions that guarantee their preservation. Each Director also contributes to a regional seed exchange by sending excess seeds to other seed banks and receiving materials sent by other banks. In the process, bank Directors, who are always smallholders with no relevant formal education, acquire significant knowledge of seed varieties and preservation techniques. Moreover, to spread such knowledge among both seed bank directors and gatherers, the IOV has, in association with Kew Gardens in the United Kingdom and the Middle Amazonia Herbarium, carried out botanical workshops in which gatherers are introduced to methods of botanical research and species identification [Figure 9]. In these workshops the Seed Network has gathered samples of more than 286 specimens, thus producing an overview of existing ecological diversity in the area where the Seeds of the Portal project is carried out.



Figure 9. Members of the Seed Network in a workshop on species identification.

The Seed Network created as part of the Seeds of the Portal initiative currently moves more than 13 metric tons of seeds each year and has provided materials to more than 150 agro-ecological sites that have been established over the past seven years. These agro-ecological sites extend over more than 2,500 hectares and each has become an experiment that is generating knowledge on interactions among and between species, germination rates, and the impact of agro-ecological configurations on soils and waterways. Several IOV technicians who support smallholders in establishing these sites (themselves the sons and daughters of smallholder peasants) have earned undergraduate degrees in biology and forest engineering while working for the Institute. To support these efforts the IOV has established an Agro-Forestry Research Center [Figure] and research programs in agro-forestry with universities in Brazil and abroad, and is currently involved in the development of a Master in Agro-Ecology with the Federal University of Mato Grosso.

The Seed Network does more than providing a system of supply and demand designed to furnish opportunities for impersonal exchanges; it also articulates flows through decision-making channels that take into account the needs and capacities of the parties that participate in the exchange, pulling together smallholders who share their work between them through market



exchanges that are subordinate to social and political objectives. The network also strengthens the links that tie people to the land as it offers project participants the opportunity to generate new knowledge and revenue from their increasingly diverse sites. The wager is that *agricultores* may comprise a people who can harness their own creative potential and combine that creativity with the regenerative capacities of nonhumans to produce ecological conditions that may sustain something other than monoculture modes of living.

Conclusion

If “the political operation par excellence is the construction of a ‘people’” as Laclau argued (Laclau 2005: 95; Bosteels 2016), then it can be said that this operation is not carried out by humans alone and to be a people one needs the collaboration of a wide range of beings.

Authoritarian populism in Amazonia has the form of a political decision-making system that systematically benefits *produtores* who at their turn claim their claims to be those of the country as a whole (to the extent they would generate tax revenues and boost economic growth, thus making it possible for public and private institutions to invest in health and education, create jobs, and in other ways promote the public interest). Here the *produtores* become a minority that, as a signifier of “the people,” authorizes actions against indigenous, traditional, and poor rural communities who are framed as “the people’s” “constitutive outside” (Laclau 2005: 81, Bosteels 2016:). Such populism, moreover, bears the distinct traits of authoritarianism as the symbolic equivalence between *produtores* and “the people” is cemented by force. As was the case during Brazil’s military dictatorship, today increasingly frequent acts of violence against indigenous, traditional, and poor non-indigenous peoples in Amazonia have for the moment secured the dominance of powerful economic and political actors in the basin.



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While recent literature on authoritarian populism elucidates the symbolic chain of associations on which much of the *produtores*' political dominance is grounded, its emphasis on the symbolic roots of populism sidesteps important non-discursive aspects of rural life. If we concede that politics may be “something more-than-human and less-than-social” (Moore 2016: 5) and that rural politics is configured in part by ecological processes (McMichael 2016), we may also regard authoritarian populism as the result of ecological configurations whose roots go beyond symbolic, human–human relations. Towns like Nova Guarita, with their peasant settlements in remote areas and large states near urban centers, created spaces in which landholders could establish themselves as dominant actors even if they were not recognized as legitimate authorities and even in cases when they did not use force to that effect. Cash-strapped peasants, who had to work for extended periods of time away from their sites, struggled tending crops and pastures at a distance from markets and enduring the effects of soil depletion came to doubt that soils, waterways, and plants could ever sustain family farms. A singular reading of ecological constraints led many to work in close association with landholders who captured the value of peasant labor.

Under such conditions, emancipatory rural politics of the kind advanced by the IOV's agro-ecological efforts not only address the issue of a minority that positions itself as representative of all “the people.” Equally important are the impersonal conditions that capture the labor and imagination of landholders who are pulled apart from one another as they strive to navigate ecologies that, increasingly, are hospitable to only a handful species and wealthy landholders. These conditions are addressed through a series of strategies that have emerged from practical experimentation and extended conversations: a grassroots institutional structure based on nuclei each of which draws on a shared history to come together as part of a group of groups; a flow of seeds that provides a space in which smallholders can engage with remaining forests and learn about native species; and a Seed Network through which smallholders share with each other the fruits of their labor.



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The outcomes of these efforts remain limited. The 150 agro-ecological sites supported by the project cover only a small portion of the sites involved. These sites, furthermore, represent but a fraction of the land in the Portal of Amazonia. Most smallholders taking part in the Seeds of the Portal project are, in addition, yet to derive substantial income from their ecologically diverse plots. What they have achieved, however, is still a fundamentally “political operation”: a space where smallholders who have long been put asunder by the forces driving the expansion of monocultures are considering the possibility of alternative futures in which there will be a space in which *agricultores* can thrive.



Figure 10. Left: Agro-ecological site in a peasant site. Right: The smallholder who tends the site shows to one of us (David) an image of the site with the agro-ecological site outlined in pink.

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