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Received: 11/26/2021
Accepted: 06/01/2023

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ABSTRACT

The last four demographic censuses portray in a capital way the progressive decline of rural areas in Brazil. In the southern states, this process has intensified in the last forty years, as well as other important phenomena, such as aging, masculinization and decline of agriculture to occupy the labor force, as mentioned in several studies. Nevertheless, there are other vectors of transformation that feed these dynamics, such as the succession crisis that affects a large number of family farms in the South of Brazil. The aim of the article is to propose a reflection from the theoretical perspective, examining the strategies adopted by rural families based on what the literature calls patterns of succession. This is a qualitative research, with a theoretical review and analysis of the existing literature on the subject. In this sense, if in past times the families were generally large and there were many candidates to take over the property, the current situation is very different. The issue takes on a transcendental importance, especially in view of the consequences it brings to society as a whole. Among the main conclusions of this study is the recognition that the current scenario is quite different from what prevailed until the 1970s. In the center of these changes, it appears that the succession patterns described in the literature no longer reflect the current succession scenario generation in Brazilian family farming.

Keywords: Rural succession. Family succession. Rural exodus. Rural youth.

RESUMO

Os quatro últimos censos demográficos retratam de forma maiúscula o progressivo declínio das áreas rurais do Brasil. Nos estados meridionais esse processo se intensificou nos últimos quarenta anos, assim como outros fenômenos importantes, a exemplo do envelhecimento, da masculinização e desagrarização, tal como aludem diversos estudos. Não obstante, há outros vetores de transformação que alimentam essas dinâmicas, a exemplo da crise de sucessão que atinge um grande número de explorações familiares no Sul do país. O objetivo do artigo é propor uma reflexão a partir da perspectiva teórica, examinando as estratégias adotadas pelas famílias rurais a partir do que a literatura denomina padrões sucessórios. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, foi feita uma revisão teórica e análise da literatura existente sobre o tema. Nesse sentido, se em tempos pretéritos as famílias geralmente eram numerosas e havia muitos candidatos a assumir a propriedade, a situação atual é muito distinta. A questão assume uma importância transcendental, especialmente diante dos desdobramentos que acarreta para a sociedade como um todo. Dentre as principais conclusões deste estudo está o reconhecimento de que o cenário que se apresenta atualmente é bastante distinto ao que predominava até os anos 1970. Na esteira destas mudanças constata-se que os padrões sucessórios descritos na literatura já não refletem o atual cenário da sucessão geracional na agricultura familiar brasileira.

Palavras-chave: Sucessão rural. Sucessão familiar. Êxodo rural. Juventude rural.

INTRODUCTION

The agony of rural areas and inland regions has become a recurring topic of debate in both academic and political-institutional spheres. In the case of Spain, the controversy is reflected in the phenomenon known as the “Empty Spain”, a demographic transformation process that condemns no less than 4,983 out of the 8,214 existing municipalities to extinction, according to data from the National Institute of Statistics of that country (SPAIN, 2019).

However, according to the same source, in just 44 years, the population of Madrid has seen an increase of as much as 73% (SPAIN, 2019). Thus, the other side of depopulated rural Spain is reflected in urban densification, with all its well-known implications (collapse of public services, socioenvironmental impacts, real estate speculation, just to name a few examples). The fact that only 30% of the Spanish territory concentrates 90% of its total population (SPAIN, 2019) exposes the seriousness of a situation that is extremely complex to address. This is especially challenging because, quite often, the established powers perceive it as a trend for which there are no viable solutions in the short, medium, and long term. The reality of the “Empty Spain” and the embedded



rural exodus is not an isolated fact but a recurring scenario in many countries in the northern hemisphere where the framework for territorial planning is far from being balanced.

The dynamics of depopulation respond to various causes, both economic and non-economic, which reflect the particularities of productive structures as well as historical circumstances. The demographic reasons are well-known, such as the decline in fertility rates, the premature departure of young people, and the masculinization of rural areas. Regarding the southern region of Brazil, this situation has been described in other studies (SACCO DOS ANJOS; CALDAS; POLLNOW, 2014; COSTA; FROEHLICH; CARPES, 2013; SACCO DOS ANJOS; CALDAS, 2003).

One of the most visible aspects of the transformations taking place in rural areas is the aging process of their population. Figures concerning the state of Rio Grande do Sul illustrate this statement. Indeed, in the last decade, according to data from the last two agricultural censuses (IBGE, 2006; IBGE, 2017), the number of farmers aged over 65 has increased from 17.5% to 23.1%. On the other hand, the number of young farmers (up to 25 years old) has decreased from 1.9% to 1.2%. These and other data are a cause for concern due to the consequences they entail, especially as they may jeopardize the future of food production and the vitality of sparsely populated areas in the country.

Among the economic causes for rural exodus and the depopulation of small inland towns, the expansion of areas dedicated to the production of agricultural commodities, especially soybeans, stands out. This expansion has been increasing over the last three decades. In its course, this movement leads to the abandonment of productive activities typical of family farming (NIEDERLE; GRISA, 2008). In the Brazilian context, the major milestone of these changes corresponds to what has been referred to as the “conservative modernization” of agriculture (DELGADO, 2012).

It is a change promoted by the authoritarian state (1964-1985) which, instead of implementing the long-awaited agrarian reform demanded by social movements since the late 1950s, chose to favor the introduction of technological innovations (chemical fertilizers, pesticides, mechanization, etc.) through subsidized rural credit. As a result of this mechanism, land concentration and the process of social exclusion in rural areas are deepened. According to the Sacco dos Anjos (2003, p. 123, quotation marks in the original),



In the short term, the agricultural and technological solution to the agrarian issue is likely to perpetuate social exclusion. The relentless promotion of export-oriented agriculture, which absorbs the majority of the country's resources, implies a systematic disregard for crops and activities aimed at serving the domestic market. The classic dualism of "rich crops versus poor crops" is established, as reiterated in the discourse of the farmers themselves, alluding to the blatant contradiction in government treatment.

The export agenda becomes increasingly focused on a reduced number of products that, nevertheless, prove to be extremely sensitive to market fluctuations. According to Mazoyer and Roudart (2010, p. 28), in a global context, it was during this period that the

[...] over 90% of the less privileged agricultural establishments had their development blocked and became impoverished due to the decline in prices to such an extent that, one after another, they ceased to exist and supplied labor to the expanding industry and service sectors.

The result of this situation becomes evident in states characterized by the strength of family farming, such as Rio Grande do Sul, where the total number of rural establishments was reduced by as much as 17.3% during the intercensal period (2006-2017). However, it is precisely the family farms in Rio Grande do Sul that have experienced a shrinkage of 22%, going from 378,353 to 293,892 productive units (IBGE, 2017).

The inequality observed in rural areas today is largely a result of the perpetuation of the same vectors of exclusion. Only those who have the capital to invest and integrate into vertically integrated processes led by large agro-industrial complexes and/or supported by the state through fiscal and credit incentives can continue to produce. Meanwhile, thousands of establishments are rendered unviable and unable to ensure the social reproduction of their members. In this sense, the increase in urbanization rates and rural exodus represent two sides of the same coin.

It is assumed that rural exodus has a strong interface with problems related to the succession of family-owned establishments. However, determining what is the cause and what is the consequence is a challenging task. The increase in family-owned properties without successors fuels the spiral of rural exodus, while this progressive depopulation leads many young people to not see the countryside as a promising environment to pursue a professional career. Some studies (ABRAMOVAY et al., 1998) have sought to demonstrate that succession patterns are being eroded due to the economic, social, and cultural transformations affecting agriculture and the rural environment as a whole.



According to Sacco dos Anjos; Caldas; Costa (2006), in the debate about generational succession in family farming, various conflicts emerge involving the ownership of land, which is invariably scarce and still represents the main asset of family heritage. On the other hand, Stropasolas (2011, p. 27) understands that the main intergenerational conflicts are centered around the

management of property centralized in the figure of the father as the head of the family; in the difficulty of parents accepting the ideas and innovations proposed by their sons and daughters; in the impossibility for young people to develop their own projects and productive activities on the property; in the limited participation of children in decision-making processes that affect the family unit; in the lack of financial autonomy for sons and especially daughters; in the absence of freedom or limited spatial mobility allowed for daughters.

It is important to consider, even in an introductory context, that inheritance is not necessarily related to generational succession. In many cases, as part of the family's strategies for social reproduction, one of the heirs takes over the ownership or possession of the land to continue in agricultural activities, while the others receive a different type of inheritance.

Thus, in broad terms, it is not about fixed transmission rules: the rule is both manipulated and depends on a process of socialization of individuals to adhere to them (BRUMER; ANJOS, 2008). Therefore, the family's interests may override the individual interests of its members, as what is actually at stake is the social reproduction of the family.

However, for the purposes pursued by this scientific article, it would be appropriate to inquire: what do the so-called "succession patterns" in the context of family farming consist of? What are the possible implications of the supposed changes in the schemes that previously governed the transmission of land assets within family-owned properties? The main focus of this article is to provide answers to these questions and stimulate the debate on a topic that is considered highly relevant.

The article was conceived based on a literature review that addresses succession patterns related to the dynamics of family farming, that is, studies that approach this social form of production from a long-term perspective. It is a reflective study in light of a specific theoretical framework, namely, studies on family forms of production. The emphasis of this approach is on works that focus on the southern states of Brazil precisely because it is a region where the property regime historically emerged from the transposition of patterns brought by immigrants (Italians, Poles, Germans, etc.)



from the old continent. In this review, the following categories were used: succession, family farming, succession patterns, southern states of Brazil, comparative studies.

In addition to this introduction, the paper is structured into three other sections. The first section brings forth elements related to the issue of social reproduction within the context of family farming. The second section analyzes generational succession in the context of the dynamics of family farming, while the third section addresses the usual forms or dominant succession patterns in southern Brazil. In the fourth and final section of the article, without claiming conclusiveness, we outline some relevant final considerations.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN FAMILY FARMING

Before addressing the forms of generational succession found in Brazilian family farming, it is necessary to discuss the reproduction of this social category. It is worth emphasizing that generational succession is one of the most challenging aspects in the study of the dynamics of family farming. Families invariably resist addressing a topic that is highly sensitive and a source of tensions within and outside the family sphere.

Social reproduction is a prominent topic in sociological debates (BOURDIEU, 1994). This notion is connected to the pathways that lead to the continuity of structures, practices, and institutions (BRUMER & ANJOS, 2008) that guide the functioning of societies. According to Almeida (1986), in the case of family farming establishments, there are two basic forms of social reproduction: short-cycle and long-cycle reproduction.

According to this author, the short-cycle approach refers to the reproduction of the family production unit on an annual basis, including how natural resources, knowledge, and labor are used to meet the family's needs and the dynamics of the production cycle. On the other hand, the long-cycle approach refers to generational reproduction. In this context, rural families adopt both types of strategies simultaneously to achieve social reproduction: short-cycle and long-cycle strategies (ALMEIDA, 1986).

The strategies of social reproduction in family rural properties are diverse, considering that property is a social value closely associated with the principle of descent or succession (WOORTMANN,



1995). However, family establishments have a peculiar logic of operation, where the farmer is both the employer and the employee. In addition, the social practices adopted within the family unit simultaneously involve the future of each member, the family as a whole, and the future of the family heritage (BRUMER; ANJOS, 2008).

Furthermore, Carneiro (2001, p. 23-24, quotation marks in the original) adds that:

In Brazil, despite the Civil Code establishing equal conditions among all children regarding inheritance rights, cultural rules (customary codes) modify the law according to the “interests” of a collective actor—the family—which imposes itself on individual interests. This practice becomes a reality especially when what is at stake is the maintenance of the integrity of the heritage as a condition for the functioning of the production unit and for the reproduction of a social identity based on land ownership and agricultural work.

In this sense, there is a great diversity of arrangements adopted by families to address the dilemmas of succession and the forms of heritage transmission, both in Brazil and in Latin America as a whole (SACCO DOS ANJOS; CALDAS; COSTA, 2006), particularly in the context of ethnic communities characterized by peculiar land division systems.

Among the strategies of social reproduction in the southern region of Brazil, migration, celibacy, and marriage are included. Regarding marriage, some renowned rural anthropologists assert categorically: it is not a simple matter of individual choice; strictly speaking, it is not just two individuals getting married, but two families coming to an agreement (WOORTMANN, 1995). According to Bourdieu (1962), until the mid-20th century, the main function of marriage was to ensure succession without compromising the family’s wealth. This was because, since female heirs would usually lose the right to inherit land upon marriage, the number of potential heirs to the family property would decrease, thereby avoiding excessive fragmentation.

Celibacy, on the other hand, was one of the ways to ensure the indivisibility of land and family wealth. In southern Brazil, religious and lay celibacy were widely used mechanisms by rural families. This relates to cases where sons and/or daughters entered religious life, thereby renouncing their potential inheritance rights to the family wealth.

Female celibacy, meaning the choice of daughters not to marry, was also a common practice among rural families. These daughters, in addition to performing household activities, also assisted in



productive activities. After the death of their parents, many of these women would reside on the property of the brother who assumed the ownership and leadership of the family establishment (CARNEIRO, 2001). To a large extent, they become part of what Marxist economic literature has referred to as the “non-transferable marginal forces” of family exploitation (TEPICHT, 1984), which are characterized by invisibility and devaluation (DEERE, 2004).

Often, the move to the city represents, for many young people, the intention to continue their studies in the face of structural difficulties (transportation, isolation, etc.) in the rural environment. The observations made by Wanderley (2003, p. 56) provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the Brazilian reality of family farming in relation to this issue:

Thus, in all regions of the country, and not only in its most impoverished areas, a significant portion of their reproduction strategies is still dedicated, under diverse forms, more or less successful, to ensuring the establishment of stable and inheritable land assets for future generations. Historically, these constant struggles are expressed through strategies such as precarious land tenure, migration, selling one’s own labor force, and practicing itinerant agriculture.

Regarding the “settlers from the South,” Wanderley (1999) refers to the case of families, mainly from Rio Grande do Sul, who sought new areas to settle their descendants in the west of Santa Catarina and Paraná, processes she refers to as “recampesinização” (repeasantization). According to the author, migration occurs when there is a frontier that can be occupied and when the way of life is threatened in the current location, either by the lack of land for the new generations or by the impositions imposed by the dominant classes. Additionally, the author considers that migration represents the search for autonomy and independence for young farmers (WANDERLEY, 1999). In this context, it is worth explaining the characteristics that define family farming as an analytical category. In this regard, we evoke the contribution of Gasson; Errington (1993). According to these authors, we are dealing with establishments where management is carried out by the owners themselves, the individuals responsible for the enterprise are connected through family ties, work is predominantly done by family members, the assets and property belong to the family itself, and the transfer of assets and property occurs within the family.

The social reproduction of family farms also occurs through the continuity of the activity across successive generations. Generational succession is one phase of the social reproduction process that seems to be constantly (re)organized. This aspect will be further expanded upon in the subsequent section.



GENERATIONAL SUCCESSION IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY FARMING

Succession involves the process of transferring the management of the rural establishment to future generations within the family itself. The transmission of family assets, including land ownership or property, is typically linked to the succession process but is not limited to it. It also involves transferring a set of values, knowledge, skills, and cultural practices accumulated over generations that can ensure the continuity of what Gasson (1986) refers to as the “farm as a family business”.

However, one should not underestimate the influence exerted by tradition and/or the cultural matrix of communities. Until the mid-20th century, rural families were usually large due to high birth rates. Having many children meant having available labor to ensure the expansion of cultivated land, the establishment of agro-industries, and the diversification of sources of economic income. However, this did not prevent families from sometimes facing the need to find solutions to guide their offspring into the world of work, even beyond their own domains.

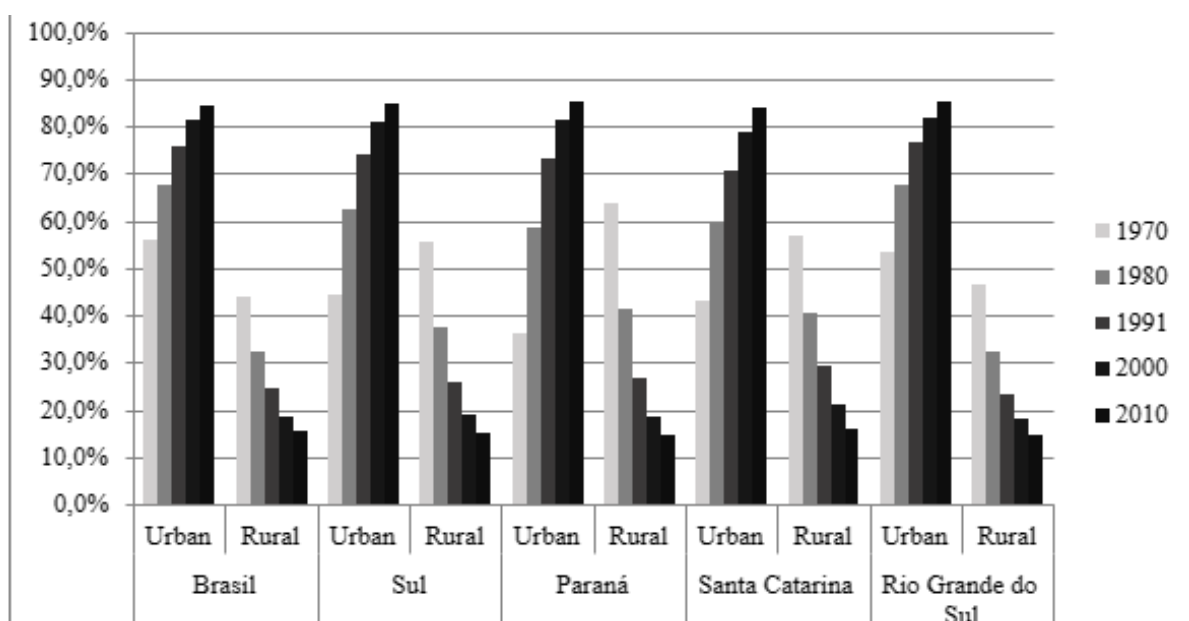
The subdivision of land through inheritance mechanisms, especially in regions of European colonization, is pointed out as making many family farms economically unviable as production units. An example of this is described in a study conducted by Seyferth (1985) in the region of Vale do Itajaí-Mirim in Santa Catarina, Brazil. In his research, he compared the systems of impartible inheritance and shared inheritance, showing that the social reproduction of family farming in that region was only possible thanks to strategies that avoided excessive subdivision of the colonies¹ that the immigrants, mostly of German origin, received from their ancestors.

Currently, with the ongoing rural exodus, the situation seems to be reversed. The issue today is families with at most one or two children whose decision to carry on the family establishment will determine the continuity or definitive cessation of activities that have thus far sustained the household's subsistence.

1 The term “colony” has a multifaceted meaning, as emphasized by Sacco dos Anjos (2003, p. 110, original quotation marks): “In the specific case of the Southern region of Brazil, the term ‘colony’ is an absolutely polysemic expression. It can refer to an agrarian dimension (around 30 hectares), as well as an entire region colonized by European immigrants [...]. But beyond these aspects, the expression gains importance particularly within the context of German communities (‘kolonie’), considering [...] that these were the first non-Iberian immigrants to settle in the southern part of the country”. (Our translation)

The demographic transformation experienced in Brazil, encompassing the three southern states and each of the southern federative units, is illustrated in Figure 1. As can be observed, from 1970 to 2010, there was a progressive decrease in the rural population and a drastic increase in the urban population. In the state of Paraná, the percentage of rural inhabitants declined from 63.9% in 1970 to only 14.7% of the total population in 2010.

Figure 1 | Rural and urban population from 1970 to 2010 in Brazil, in the South Region, and in the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul.



Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from IBGE (2020).

The rural exodus was imposed, while the socio-productive fabric of medium and large urban areas proved unable to absorb the population being expelled from the countryside. This observation can be seen in Table 1. In absolute numbers, the rural population in Brazil decreased by more than 11.2 million people from 1970 to 2010. Meanwhile, the urban population expanded from 52 to over 160 million inhabitants.

For the three southern states as a whole, the rural population decreased by almost 45% during the same period, while the urban population multiplied nearly 3.2 times. Among the southern states, the largest decline in the rural population was observed in Paraná (-65.4%), followed by Rio Grande do Sul (-48.8%) and Santa Catarina (-39.6%). When examining these numbers, one can have a tangible idea of the impact of a silent revolution whose consequences are undeniably concerning. The focus of this article addresses the issue of rural exodus.

Table 1 | Evolution of the resident population in rural and urban areas, in absolute numbers, in Brazil, the Southern Region, and their respective states (in thousands of inhabitants).

Geographical Scope	Residential Situation	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Brazil	Urban	52,096	80,436	110,990	137,952	160,925
	Rural	41,037	38,572	35,833	31,845	29,829
South	Urban	7,304	11,876	16,402	20,321	23,260
	Rural	9,190	7,154	5,726	4,784	4,125
Paraná	Urban	2,503	4,471	6,197	7,786	8,911
	Rural	4,425	3,156	2,250	1,776	1,531
Santa Catarina	Urban	1,246	2,153	3,207	4,217	5,247
	Rural	1,654	1,473	1,333	1,138	999
Rio Grande do Sul	Urban	3,553	5,249	6,995	8,317	9,099
	Rural	3,110	2,523	2,142	1,869	1.593

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from IBGE (2020).

The lack of interest in agriculture also affects other social structures such as marriage and the lack of interest of women in marrying farmers (SPANEVELLO; AZEVEDO; VARGAS, 2011). From a demographic and population behavior perspective, it is necessary to mention the processes of de-agrarianization², masculinization, and population aging observed in the southern region of Brazil in recent decades, as documented by Sacco dos Anjos, Caldas (2003), and Sacco dos Anjos; Caldas; Pollnow (2014). These processes have brought about changes to the scenario in which the dynamics of social reproduction of rural families take place.

From the 1970s onwards, with the limitations in forming new productive units and the decreasing continuity of family establishments across generations, the issue of succession has emerged with increased force. This phenomenon becomes relevant when the formation of a new generation of farmers loses the naturalness with which it was previously experienced by families, individuals involved in succession processes, and society itself (ABRAMOVAY et al., 1998). In this sense, according to Spanevello; Azevedo; Vargas (2011), two moments characterize the theme of

² Degrarization corresponds to the gradual loss of protagonism of agriculture as an activity that generates income and work in rural areas. This occurs simultaneously with the increase in the importance assumed by other non-agricultural activities, as well as income totally unrelated to agricultural production. This trend was one of the great contributions brought by the Rurban Project to studies on the Brazilian rural reality. See, by the way, Silva (1997).

the children's continuity as family successors in rural properties: while in the period prior to the 1970s, the probabilities of succession were higher, in the current period, the migration of young people to the city threatens the chances of succession.

According to Sacco dos Anjos; Caldas; Costa (2006), in the Southern states of Brazil, the watershed of changes in succession patterns in family farming coincides, indisputably, with the modernization of agriculture triggered from the second half of the 1960s and other associated transformations.

Another factor pointed out as influential in succession are the negative stereotypes that society, in general, attributes to the figure of the farmer. (FISCHER; BURTON, 2014). In this regard, a study conducted in the western region of Santa Catarina by Silvestro et al. (2001) can be mentioned, aiming to understand the succession patterns in family farming in that region. The authors found that the majority of young people who intended to stay in agriculture had low levels of education, regardless of the family's income level. The low level of education is a consequence of the belief that working in agriculture does not require education, or that those who remain in agriculture are those who cannot afford to study (SILVESTRO et al., 2001). In other words, the world of education is seen as antagonistic to the world of agriculture. In this sense, the availability of urban employment and the recognition of education as a means of social mobility have effects on the devaluation of agricultural work (CARNEIRO, 2001).

The issue of gender in generational succession is also addressed in studies that deal with the topic. The higher rate of young women leaving rural areas results in a process of masculinization of the rural population (ABRAMOVAY et al., 1998). Ferrari et al. (2004) point out that gender difference has an impact on generational succession in family farming, as young women express a strong desire not to continue reproducing the role of their mothers as a fundamental part of the social organization of the family production unit. This statement aligns with the findings of Sacco dos Anjos; Caldas (2003) and Sacco dos Anjos; Caldas; Pollnow (2014), who highlight the progressive decrease in the number of young women in rural areas of the southern region of Brazil over the past decades.



The study by Silvestro et al. (2001) also revealed that the majority of young males expressed a desire to stay in rural areas, believing that their future would be more auspicious in agriculture. On the other hand, young women saw the city as a place with more promising prospects than the rural environment. According to the authors, what is concerning is that:

In summary, the succession process in family farming is not subject to systematic planning by the family, nor does it receive any attention or support from public or representative institutions. This situation is consistent with the lack of educational preparation of the children who will take over the property (SILVESTRO et al., 2001, p. 100).

It is worth mentioning here that, according to the mentioned research, the interest of young people in becoming farmers seems to be higher in families with a higher income level (SILVESTRO et al., 2001). Economically better-off establishments increase the chances of having young people willing to stay in agriculture and in rural areas.

In Santa Catarina as well, Abramovay et al. (2001) observed that more than two-thirds of the male participants in the research expressed a desire to stay in agriculture. Among the interviewed girls, about one-third of them had the same desire. The authors emphasize that in this case, the girls' desire to stay in agriculture increased noticeably as the family's income increased.

According to the authors, the aspiration to live in the city is even greater when the income generation prospects in the paternal establishment are less promising (ABRAMOVAY et al., 2001). Similarly, they found that a large number of families encouraged their children to stay in agriculture. However, this encouragement diminished as the family's income decreased. It seems that vulnerability does not encourage them to stay.

In a research comparing two municipalities (Lagoa da Mata and Dois Irmãos) located in two different states of Brazil (Sergipe and Rio Grande do Sul, respectively), Woortmann (1995) studied aspects related to the social reproduction of rural families across generations through kinship relationships (marriage, godparenthood, inheritance). The author sought to understand how peasants resist and adapt to transformations within their communities, and found that despite ethnic and historical specificities, one thing unites both realities: the mechanisms they employ to perpetuate their peasant condition (WOORTMANN, 1995). The strategies of adaptation include different forms of succession, which will be discussed in the following section.



FORMS OF GENERATIONAL SUCCESSION

Many mechanisms are implemented by families to ensure their subsistence, with the degree of complexity varying depending on the circumstances that operate throughout the life cycle and generations. Economic factors interfere to the extent that they impose limits and possibilities on individuals and the family unit as a whole. This includes the size of properties and the degree of market integration (BRUMER; ANJOS, 2008). According to Silvestro et al. (2001), among capitalized properties, there is a greater propensity for young people to remain on the property. Regarding social factors, succession strategies often differentiate between men and women (BRUMER; ANJOS, 2008), indicating that gender is deeply intertwined in this process. In most cases, women are excluded from the dynamics of succession, as well as from the transfer of family assets. Compensatory compensations and symbolic arrangements are not uncommon.

Furthermore, cultural factors prove to be decisive in the direction of succession adopted by rural families, with differences according to the cultural and ethnic origins of the populations. The relationships within the family directly influence the succession process, as well as the context in which the family is embedded. Therefore, it is important to consider that the rules and mechanisms adopted by families are relatively flexible.

In a classic study on the subject, Seyferth (1985) found that the social reproduction of family agriculture in the region of Vale do Itajaí-Mirim in Santa Catarina, Brazil, was only possible in German communities whose families managed to avoid excessive subdivision of the colonies. According to this author,

The awareness that the reproduction of the peasant group is only possible by keeping the colony indivisible as a production unit leads to the activation of mechanisms to reduce the number of heirs – with a clear preference for ultimogeniture, although the heir is not always the youngest child. [...] Ultimogeniture is attributed both to the tradition of the immigrants' origin and to the logic of the household group's development cycle (SEYFERTH, 1985, p. 22).

Therefore, the reproduction of family farming in that region was directly linked, to a large extent, to indivisible inheritance, thus ensuring the peasant condition for at least one of the heirs. In other words, at least one legatee would have the means to take over the family business. The main strategy for children who did not receive land as an inheritance was to seek wage labor or engage in



what later came to be called pluriactivity³. In this case, the majority of the land colony would go to the heir who would continue as a tenant farmer, invariably being the youngest son (SEYFERTH, 1985). This preference for ultimogeniture, also known as “*minorato*” (minority), is also mentioned by Woortmann (1995), referring to the institution through which paternal land is transferred to the youngest son, who, in return, takes responsibility for caring for the parents in their old age. According to Mello et al. (2003), until the mid-1960s, this practice ensured, to a greater or lesser extent, the continuity of family farming in western Santa Catarina.

On the other hand, according to Carneiro (2001), among the early generations of Italian immigrants in the southern region of Brazil, succession typically fell to the eldest son. Later on, the need to acquire land for the other male children altered this pattern. The sons needed to stay on the father’s property, even after getting married, to help with the work and save money to buy land for the others.

From a gender perspective, the dynamics remained unchanged. Women were not considered potential successors and received a symbolic inheritance, typically consisting of dowry and a certain amount of money from the father (CARNEIRO, 2001). The groom’s family secured the land, while the bride’s family provided the dowry. However, female inferiority within these processes extended beyond exclusion from succession or, in the case of those who did not marry, having to submit to the authority of a brother who took over the family establishment.

It is necessary to emphasize that for married women, the commitment was precisely to produce “numerous offspring”. One must note the important remark made by Seyferth (1974) about the “*figueira do inferno*” (hellish fig tree) in his classic study on German colonization in Santa Catarina:

The woman who could not bear children, who was, as popularly said, a “*figueira do inferno*” (hellish fig tree), was therefore the colonist’s misfortune. This problem brought, from what I observed in the German settlement area, the very common custom of “experimenting” with the bride. I asked, rightfully, about the reason for that strange custom. The uniform response I obtained is that since offspring is the capital with which they sustain their farming, the colonist could not or did not want to risk marrying someone who could not give them children. Hence, the conjugal prelibation (SEYFERTH, 1974, p.76; original quotation marks).

3 Although relevant, the issue of pluriactivity goes beyond the objectives outlined in the development of this article. In the Brazilian case, this subject was introduced in the second half of the 1990s. Regarding this matter, it is advisable to refer to the pioneering studies of Sacco dos Anjos (1995) and Schneider (1999).

When studying family farming, also of European origin (German and Swiss), in the region of Nova Friburgo in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Carneiro (2001) identified that the division of assets occurred equally. However, as they did not develop strategies for preserving their heritage, there was a progressive fragmentation of properties, leading to a situation of structural threat to social reproduction and the maintenance of agricultural operations (CARNEIRO, 2001).

During the period between the 1940s and 1950s, the German geographer Leo Waibel conducted one of the most important scientific missions to Brazil. In his posthumously published work titled “Chapters on Tropical Geography and Brazil” in 1958, Waibel presents a crucial question for the feasibility of colonization projects in southern Brazil. It relates to the appropriate size of properties, aiming to ensure a minimum dimension below which the survival of families could be threatened. According to his words,

To understand the problem, I would like to introduce you to the German expression “Minimale Ackernahrung,” which refers to the minimum amount of land required to provide a farmer and his family with a decent economic and cultural standard. The “Minimale Ackernahrung” depends primarily on two factors: the characteristics of the land and the agricultural system that the farmer must implement (WAIBEL, 1958, p. 240, original quotation marks).

Through Law 4.504 of 11/30/1964, also known as the Statute of Land, a series of legal definitions were established, including the “minimum fraction of subdivision”, which is understood as the smallest dimension that a rural property can have. To a large extent, the purpose was to establish provisions that would prevent the formation of small landholdings. However, the legal framework does not prevent families from entering into informal agreements, many of which can generate tensions and conflicts among potential heirs.

Over the years, traditional succession mechanisms have been modified by various factors, including the closure of agricultural frontiers, agricultural mechanization, and the migration of young people to cities in search of income and job opportunities. According to Mello et al. (2003), there has been a kind of implosion of traditional succession and inheritance criteria in family farming in the western region of Santa Catarina.

The patterns of succession are being altered, both by internal forces within the farm (reduction in fertility rates and the number of potential heirs) and external forces, such as economic difficulties



experienced in agriculture and the persistent precariousness of economic and social structures. This includes deficiencies in public services in rural areas, such as education, healthcare, transportation, access to electricity, telecommunications, and more. Studying the issue of succession in the context of family farming is not only relevant as a subject of academic and scientific reflection, but also as an opportunity to generate updated and in-depth knowledge that can assist the government (federal, state, and municipal) in establishing strategies to address the problems arising from rural exodus, the formation of pockets of poverty in urban peripheries, the reduction of prospects for rural youth, and the mitigation of the demographic changes mentioned earlier. Increasing access to land is also a way to promote social justice in rural areas.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The data from the last four population censuses bring the reality of the southern states of Brazil closer to what has been happening in countries of the Old Continent since the early 1950s, as in the case of Spain mentioned earlier. Rural exodus can be understood as both a cause and a consequence of the succession crisis observed in hundreds of family farms. In this regard, the premature departure of young people adds to the ranks of rural exodus, but at the same time, it becomes responsible for fueling disillusionment among those who still remain in the countryside. The departure of young people and the discontinuation of family farming units mutually reinforce each other.

Based on these premises, we sought to build a reflection on the succession patterns within family farming, as well as the interfaces of this issue with other factors that converge towards it. Demographic data records the progressive decline and aging of the rural population, but also changes that have been occurring within household groups.

Throughout the text, we highlighted the main mechanisms of generational succession that involve family farming. However, if in the past families were generally large and there were many candidates to take over the property, the current situation seems to be quite different. To avoid excessive fragmentation of production units, families adopted procedures aimed at ensuring the indivisibility of the establishments. But these strategies and practices were not taken into account among families linked to other cultural backgrounds, with various forms of shared inheritance



prevailing. The excessive fragmentation has led to the formation of many smallholdings.

Currently, the conditions are different. Factors such as the smaller number of children, masculinization, aging, and de-agrarianization, portrayed in various studies, show that the current scenario is significantly different from what prevailed until the 1970s. As a result, the succession patterns described in the literature no longer fully reflect the current scenario of generational succession in Brazilian family farming.

Understanding the current succession patterns that prevail in family farming is essential for comprehending the dynamics that involve this social category, as the decisions made within family farming units impact the continuity of this social category and the future of rural regions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To CNPq and CAPES PRINT-UFPEL (processes nº 88887.468275/2019-00; nº 88887.363956/2019-00 and nº 88887.363881/2019-00), as well as to the Instituto de Estudios Sociales Avanzados (Spain), where the international missions took place (2019-2021).



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