

Brazil's Foreign Policy, the Environmental Agenda, and the Agribusiness Storylines

A Política Externa do Brasil, a Agenda Ambiental e as Linhas Narrativas do Agronegócio

La Política Exterior de Brasil, la Agenda Ambiental y las Líneas Narrativas de los Agronegocios

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Abstract

This paper examines the agribusiness influence on Brazilian politics and how it has affected the country's foreign policy agenda. The method used is discourse analysis. More specifically, we rely on Maarten Hajer's concept of *storylines*, developed in his influential book *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* (1995). The purpose is to analyze how *ruralist* storylines, reshaped by the agribusiness lobby, has portrayed the Brazilian reality and how they were able to forge consensus about its controversial practices and questionable results. By uncovering how their discursive strategy was produced, we aim to verify which facts and arguments have selectively been exposed, and which ones have been excluded, or even shown in a distorted way. The main results show how these entrenched storylines have molded Brazil's foreign policy.

Keywords: Agribusiness; Ruralists; Discourse analysis; Storylines; Foreign policy; Brazil; Environment protection.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a influência do agronegócio na política brasileira e como isso afetou a agenda de política externa do país. O método utilizado é a Análise do Discurso. Mais especificamente, no conceito de linhas narrativas criado por Maarten Hajer, apresentado em seu influente livro *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* (1995). O objetivo é analisar como as linhas narrativas ruralistas, readaptadas pelo *lobby* do agronegócio, retratam a realidade brasileira e como, por meio delas, conseguiu-se forjar consenso sobre as práticas polêmicas do setor, bem como sobre seus resultados questionáveis. Ao desvendar como foi produzida essa estratégia discursiva, pretende-se analisar quais fatos e argumentos foram expostos seletivamente e quais foram excluídos, ou apresentados de forma distorcida. O resultado mostra como essas linhas narrativas têm moldado a política externa do Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Agronegócio; Ruralistas; Análise do discurso; Linhas narrativas; Política externa; Brasil; Proteção ambiental.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la influencia de la agroindustria en la política brasileña y cómo ha afectado la agenda de política exterior del país. El método utilizado es el Análisis del Discurso. Más concretamente, el concepto de líneas narrativas creado por Maarten Hajer, presentado en su influyente libro *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* (1995). El objetivo es analizar cómo las líneas narrativas ruralistas, readaptadas por el *lobby* del agronegocio, retratan la realidad brasileña y cómo, a través de ellas, fue posible forjar consensos sobre las controvertidas prácticas del sector, así como sobre sus cuestionables resultados. Al develar cómo se produjo esta estrategia discursiva, pretendemos analizar qué hechos y argumentos fueron expuestos selectivamente y cuáles fueron excluidos o distorsionados. El resultado muestra cómo estas líneas narrativas han moldeado la política exterior de Brasil.

Palabras clave: Agroindustria; Ruralistas; Análisis del Discurso; Líneas Narrativas; Política Exterior, Brasil, Protección Ambiental.

1. Introduction

In the last decades, Brazil has stood out as a prominent actor in international climate negotiations and a proponent of

several important initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The country is also a key player when it comes to reducing emissions on a global scale. If, on the one hand, it is among the world's biggest emitters;¹ on the other, it has a relatively low carbon energy mix, with almost 45 percent of the domestic energy supply coming from renewable sources (Empresa de Pesquisa Energética, 2022b). Most significantly, it is home to approximately 60 percent of the Amazon, the world's largest tropical rainforest.

Brazil is also an agricultural powerhouse, being the world's largest net food exporter. It has the biggest bovine herd on the planet, with 217 million heads, and it is the top exporter of soybeans, orange juice, sugar, corn and meat on the planet (Klein & Luna, 2019; Contini & Aragão, 2021). Agricultural exports accounted for 47.6 percent of the country's total exports by value in 2022 (Ministério da Agricultura e Pecuária, 2023). Besides, agriculture also plays a key role in the national energy mix. Bioenergy is responsible for almost 20 percent of the country's final energy consumption (EPE, 2022a; EPE, 2022b).

Unlike other major world economies, whose GHG emissions result mostly from industry, energy and transportation, most of Brazil's emissions come from Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF), which correspond to 46 percent of the country's total emissions, and agriculture and cattle raising, corresponding to 27 percent (SEEG, 2022). Both activities are intrinsically associated since drivers of deforestation include forests that become cattle pastures and, later, croplands (Capobianco, 2021; Zalles, et al., 2019).

Since Jair Bolsonaro took office in 2019, the overall perception is that environmental protection policies have been systematically weakened. In fact, he is the first of Brazil's presidents with an openly anti-environment speech. To support his arguments that there are too many environmental and local communities' restrictions, he constantly reinforces and reshapes old, entrenched narratives about Brazil's socio-environmental conditions and agriculture.

His declarations have also been marked by unchecked liberalism, furthering the opening of indigenous reserves for mining, reduction of deforestation fines, and the expansion of agricultural production in the Amazon. This has emboldened interest groups - land grabbers and speculators, illegal loggers, clandestine miners, farming businesses - who have taken advantage of the dismantlement and defunding of the bodies responsible for preventing and punishing deforestation and protecting the rights of indigenous populations.

In the international arena, the Brazilian position became less constructive, and it is unlikely that the commitments made in the Paris Agreement will be accomplished: deforestation rates have risen again since 2012, and the oil and gas sector has been expanding its participation in the country's GDP (Marques, 2018; Peyerl, et al., 2022). Even though the administration has recently softened its international discourse due to external pressures, it still sends signals of the old agenda, especially to the domestic public.

Brazilian agribusiness, on their turn, claims that the criticism of Brazil's environmental record is mostly aimed at targeting its highly competitive agriculture, being a pretext for boycotts and protectionist measures. They argue that Brazil has a rigorous environmental legislation and the world's largest network of protected areas, with the country maintaining 66 percent of its territory covered with forests. Besides, 80 percent of the Amazon Forest is still preserved (Miranda, 2018; Abreu, 2014; Rosenfield, 2020).

This paper examines the agribusiness influence on Brazilian politics and how they have affected the country's foreign policy agenda. Our purpose is to analyze how their discourse has portrayed the domestic reality and how they were able to forge consensus among different sectors of the Brazilian society about their practices and the subsequent results. By

¹ According to *Sistema de Estimativas de Emissões e Remoções de Gases de Efeito Estufa* (2021a), Brazil is the world's fifth-biggest emitter, accounting for 3.2 percent of the world's total GHG, only behind China, U.S., Russia, and India. The methodology used by SEEG excludes the bloc of 27 countries of the European Union and differs from the one adopted by the Brazilian government. The government account refers to net emissions, considering therefore, that forests and native forests remove GHG from the atmosphere (sinks). SEEG data refer to gross emissions. To Climate Watch Data (2020), Brazil was the sixth largest emitter in the world in 2019, also excluding the European bloc. To Global Carbon Atlas (2021), which considers European countries individually in its account, Brazil is the world's 12th largest emitter.

uncovering how their discursive practices were produced, we aim to verify which facts and arguments have selectively been disclosed, and which ones have been excluded or even shown in a distorted way.

Our focus, therefore, is on the discursive constructions that allow certain actions to emerge as legitimate instead of others (Khalid, 2017). More than the conventional view that sees language as a mere way of describing things, we believe that discourses not only reflect facts but also help to construct them (Avelar, 2020). For example, discourses given by different governments are an essential definition of a country's identity and, thus, shape its possibilities of action in the international arena (Dunn, 2003).

Considering this, the remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: in the next section, we present our method and theoretical framework for the analysis. In section 3, we proceed with a contextualization of Brazilian policies for agriculture, the environment, and their intersection with the country's foreign policy, with two subsections: one for the Workers' Party first period in power (2003-2015) and the second one for Bolsonaro's administration (2015-2022), divided into two subsections. In section 4, we present our empirical analysis. The final section summarizes our findings and discusses the reasons for the success of these storylines.

2. Methodology

In order to examine the Brazilian foreign discourses towards agriculture and environment protection, the method used was discourse analysis. By critically analyzing discursive practices (spoken, visual, and written), discourse analysts aim to investigate how we come to see some behaviors, customs, and norms as natural, thus naturalizing them. Therefore, it questions what the consequences are when taking certain assumptions as self-evident or as if there were no other alternatives (Dunn & Neumann, 2016).

Discourse analysis is part of the so-called "linguistic turn", which challenged the positivist underpinnings of mainstream human and social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century. It has its origins in the seminal work of Michael Foucault, which descended in a diversity of approaches, in a broad range of fields across social sciences.² What they all have in common, in addition to having the discourse as their object of analysis, is the refusal of the notion that language is merely the naming of objects that inhabit the world. Instead, discourse analysts argue that nothing in the language we use is random. Word choice is not only a result of the speaker's freedom, but it is constrained by its discursive conditions of possibility (Lynggaard, 2019; Souza, 2014).

Working under post-positivist assumptions, discourse analysts sought different epistemological perspectives to understand social phenomena rather than explaining everything through a causal relationship. Since reality is understood as socially constructed, concerns of meaning and its transformations over time became central and helped draw new conceptions about the nature of knowledge. Language was no longer only a medium of communication but it shared fundamental elements with the phenomenon to be studied (Howarth, 2000; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

Within the vast field of discourse analysis, we turn more specifically to Maarten Hajer's concept of storylines, which was developed in his influential book *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* (1995). Storylines can be defined as a rhetorical device employed to simplify a complex reality, a short-cut from a multitude of conflicting discourses that helps people to understand the uncertain reality that confronts them (Hajer, 2006).

These rhetorical devices, which are expressed through certain emblems - such as catch-phrases, metaphors or even images - are not just a linguistic event. They have an impact on the very functioning of the political system. Storylines have the

² According to Gill (2002), there are at least 57 subfields within Discourse Analysis. Some of the most known are the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) or the Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), guided by linguistics such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun Van Dijk; the French school of discourse analysis, organized by Michel Pêcheux, and the Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (or the "Essex School"), headed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

power to bind members of broadly different social groups into a loose but effective coalition. These groups do not necessarily share the same interests and goals but draw on the same storylines to make sense of the world around them for a time (Hajer, 2006). Elements from several discourses can be combined into a roughly coherent collection, in which the complexity of the individual discourses is hidden (Hajer, 1995).

Discourse coalitions strive to have their storylines endorsed – and thus institutionalized. When these storylines come to dominate a society’s conventional ways of thinking, shaping its institutional arrangements and structures, the result is what Hajer (1995) calls “discourse institutionalization.” Therefore, by propagating storylines, coalitions do not only present what is going on, they also impose their own vision of what reality is. When the new discourse and its storylines become dominant, political change occurs.

By examining different speeches of senior Brazilian representatives, we set out to analyze the participation of the *ruralist*³ storyline in the construction of the country’s foreign policy discourse, and how it may have limited the range of policy options available. Our purpose is to investigate how some storylines have shaped and given meaning to facts, and how these facts have been selectively exposed and portrayed.

Our hypothesis is that these discursive practices have helped to create a national political discourse strongly favorable to the large farmers interests, triumphing over the ecological agenda. In search of hegemony, different discourses compete to exclude contesting arguments. Discourses keep trying to displace opposing discourses (Souza, 2014). The winner is usually the one with more power to project its story and influence others with its own version of facts. Hence the importance of clarifying the political positioning of discourse participants (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Having this in mind, we made a qualitative reading of official speeches delivered by top Brazilian representatives between 1989 and 2021. This method facilitated the identification and the historical contextualization of the five storylines that underpin our findings. Each of the extracts presented were chosen because they are emblematic of the storylines we want to demonstrate. Our purpose is to analyze them beyond their linguistic patterns, pointing out the discursive strategies employed to advance specific interests. The final corpus consists of twelve fragments of speeches presented in the following order throughout the text:

1. Lula da Silva (the 2003-2010 Brazilian President) discourse presented at the 62nd UN General Assembly in 2007.
2. Jair Bolsonaro (the 2019- Brazilian President) at the 74th UN General Assembly in 2019.
3. Luiz Felipe Lampreia (Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s Foreign Minister from 1995 to 2001) at the 55th Regular Session of the UN General Assembly in 2000.
4. Jair Bolsonaro at the 75th UN General Assembly in 2020.
5. José Sarney (the 1985-1990 Brazilian President) at the 44th UN General Assembly in 1989.
6. Jair Bolsonaro at the 76th UN General Assembly in 2021.
7. Jair Bolsonaro at the 74th UN General Assembly in 2019.
8. Lula da Silva at his inaugural speech in 2003.
9. Lula da Silva, at a special meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council on the World Food Crisis in 2008.
10. Celso Amorim (Itamar Franco’s Foreign Minister from 1993 to 1995), at the 48th UN General Assembly in 1993.

³ The term “*ruralist*” derives from the Portuguese “*ruralista*”, i.e., from the countryside. It can be defined as a group of large landowners in association with major global agribusinesses companies. This coalition constitutes one of the country’s most powerful forces in congress (Vieira, 2012; Marques, 2018).

11. Jair Bolsonaro at the 74th UN General Assembly in 2019.
12. Jair Bolsonaro at the 76th UN General Assembly in 2021.

The analysis is based on the original speeches, which were taken in their entirety. Due to space restrictions, the original documents could not be attached, but they are easily available and found in the References section. We also looked at interviews and declarations made to the press throughout the same period so as to understand the context in which these discourses were embedded.

By providing an empirical account of these discourses, we seek to open up new ways to understand and analyze the Brazilian political scenario, especially its environmental, agricultural and foreign policies. They could all benefit from the exposure of their embedded ideas and the role of their language on their policy processes.

3. Brazilian Foreign Policy, the Environmental Agenda, and the Agriculture

In this section, we offer a brief overview of Brazilian policies for agriculture, the environment, and their intersection with the country's foreign policy. The most recent period was analyzed in greater detail because of its greater importance for the current scenario. Therefore, we divided it into two subsections: one for the Workers' Party first period in power (2003-2015) and the second one for Bolsonaro's administration (2015-2022).

As in other developing countries, environment protection entered the Brazilian agenda mainly due to exogenous pressures, and it remained so for many years. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (CNUMAH), held in Stockholm in 1972, represented the emergence of the environmental movement in international politics. At that time, ecological concerns came almost exclusively from rich countries, strongly influenced by the natural disasters that occurred in the years before the conference, such as acid rain (Lago, 2013; Hajer, 1995).

In Brazil, the military regime, in power from 1964 to 1985, was very resistant to what it considered foreign interference in its national sovereignty. During the CNUMAH, Brazil, along with other developing countries, led a vigorous resistance to the Stockholm agenda. The then called "Third World" pointed to the fact that developing countries were the ones responsible for environmental degradation, due to their early industrialization and that poverty was the main cause of pollution (Lago, 2013)

Within the Brazilian delegation, there was a fear that the Amazon would be seen as a global common good, undermining the country's control over it. Moreover, by the beginning of the 1970s, Brazil was experiencing the so-called "economic miracle," with GDP growth rates exceeding 10 percent per year. In this scenario, there were concerns about the implications of the green movement for its economic growth (Lago, 2013).

The Amazon was portrayed as an empty space that needed to be occupied and integrated with the rest of the country, an area continuously under threat from other countries, especially the most powerful ones (Gonçalves, 2001). The region, therefore, suffered an intense process of social-spatial transformation with the opening of major highways, the expansion of agricultural areas and millions of small farmers being encouraged to migrate to those "empty spaces" (Avelar, 2020).

Increasing food production was also a concern. One of the reasons for the persistent inflation from the 1940s onwards was the chronic lack of food for a growing urban population. Therefore, since the mid-1960s, the sector has massively benefited from government support, such as large amounts of subsidized credit, guaranteed minimum prices, and the purchase of regulatory stocks (Napolitano, 2014; Klein & Luna, 2018).

The government also invested in the development of agricultural technologies adapted to tropical weather under the leadership of the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (*Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária - Embrapa*) and,

within a timeframe of four decades, fueled by productivity increases and the incorporation of new cultivated areas, Brazil went from being an importer to one of the world foremost commodity exporters (Pinto & Pinto, 2016).

The result was a process known as a “conservative modernization,” based on traditional and largely concentrated land tenure, with smaller-scale farmers - usually relying on family labor and producing for the domestic market - surviving on the margins. The government did not try to promote an agrarian reform, nor did it challenge the power of the rural oligarchy. This dual agricultural model culminated in one of the biggest inequalities in the world⁴ (Klein & Luna 2018, Sencébé, Pinton & Cazella, 2020; Pinto, et al., 2020, Pinto & Pinto, 2016).

Throughout the 1980s, Brazil faced a severe economic crisis and, consequently, less credit was available to agriculture (Pompeia, 2021). By contrast, the government invested in large mineral and hydroelectric projects in the Amazon, which attracted a new wave of migrants and caused land speculation (Anache & Deus, 2018). At the same time, impressive images of the destruction of the tropical forest made this an issue of international concern, with global pressure mounting, especially after the assassination of Chico Mendes⁵ (Humphreys, 1996; Lago, 2013).

In 1988, a new civilian government took power and tried to strike a balance between local interest groups and the need to be part of the international community as a credible stakeholder (Fonseca, 2004; Oliveira, 2017). When the UN proposed a new conference to update environmental issues, Brazil offered itself as a host country (Saraiva, 2009). At Rio-92, which gave rise to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Brazil occupied a leadership position from the beginning (Kiessling, 2018). According to Ricupero (1996), the country managed to convert a potential vulnerability into international prestige, consolidating climate change as an issue in which it started to play an important role.

However, Brazilian speeches would continue to follow roughly the same script from the military regime, i.e., emphasizing that environmental protection could not be divorced from economic development and that any foreign attempt to wield environmental concerns to hinder Brazil’s right to explore its natural resources was unacceptable and a breach of the country’s sovereignty (Vieira, 2012; Kiessling, 2018; Viola, Franchini & Ribeiro, 2012).

Since Rio-92, Brazil’s foreign policy has promoted the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”, based on the fact that current climate problems were mainly caused by developed countries due to their pioneering industrialization. Therefore, they should act first, with greater ambition, offering financial and technological support to the developing world. This concept would eventually be incorporated into the Kyoto Protocol through more strengthened commitments to most developed countries (Milhorance, Sabourin, Chechi & Mendes, 2021; Viola, 2013; Friman, 2016).

Throughout the 1990s, the agricultural sector, farming and cattle raising, or “agribusiness,” as it came to be called, have expressively increased their share in the Brazilian trade balance. In this scenario, a myriad of new lexical items has come to the forefront. The term “agribusiness,” created in the U.S. during the 1950s, was adapted and incorporated by the Brazilian press. “*Latifundiários*” (large landowners) which conveys an idea of an archaic mode of production, with low productivity and efficiency, was replaced by “*ruralists*” to change public perception towards the sector (Pompeia, 2021; Avelar, 2020).

3.1 The Workers’ Party years

Starting in 2005, during Lula da Silva's first two-terms (2003-2010), Brazil managed to reverse decades of deforestation in the Amazon. Through an array of measures,⁶ forest destruction rates dropped consistently (Figure 1).

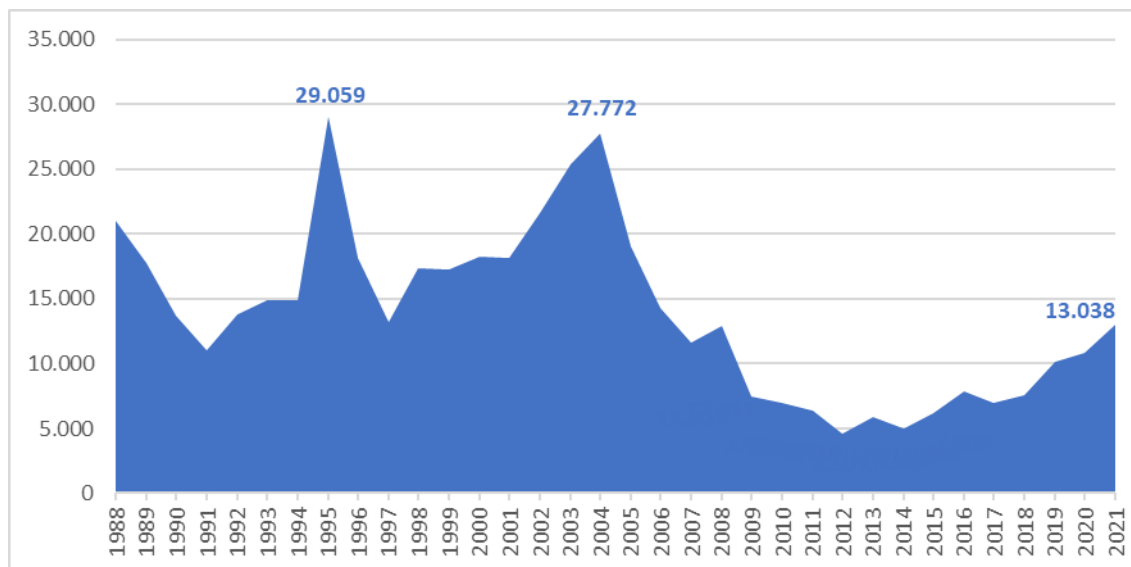
⁴ The Gini Index of land ownership distribution in Brazil is 0.73 (Pinto, et al., 2020).

⁵ Chico Mendes was a rubber tapper and union leader who fought for forest conservation to preserve their livelihood. He was murdered in 1988 by farmers who opposed his actions to protect the Amazon.

⁶ Among other initiatives, we can mention the launching of the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm) in 2004, the Sustainable Amazon Plan (PAS), the soybean moratorium of 2006, the creation of the Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade in 2007, and the establishment of the Amazon Fund in 2008.

Consequently, the country's total emissions fell by approximately 39 percent between 2005 and 2010, falling faster than in any other country in the world (Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais, 2022; Capobianco, 2021).

Figure 1 - Annual Deforestation Rate in Legal Amazonia⁷ (In Km²).



Source: Adapted from INPE (2022).

Deforestation reduction was accompanied by economic growth, with the rising demand for Brazilian agricultural products, showing that environmental protection could be consistent with economic development. It reinforced Brazil's credibility and negotiating power in international climate forums and dispelled the myth that the country was unable to preserve its environmental resources (Hochstetler & Viola, 2012).

It also allowed the country to shift its position in climate negotiations, moving from a conservative posture to a leading role in international climate debates (Viola & Basso, 2016, Vieira, 2012, Dayrell, 2019). Brazil had historically aligned itself with the developing countries bloc. One of the reasons was its high deforestation rates. However, with the pace of forest destruction declining fast, and a relatively clean energy mix, it could propose a more environmentally progressive agenda (Viola, 2013).

In 2009, at COP15 in Copenhagen, the Brazilian position went through an important inflection point, with the country taking a leading role amid an impasse in negotiations (Lorenzo & Vazquez, 2016). Brazil offered to reduce emissions between 36.1 and 38.9 percent of the projected emissions by 2020, including an 80 percent reduction of the Amazon deforestation by the same period.⁸

This commitment, which became a federal law, placed Brazil among a selected group of countries (mainly the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development members) that had enacted a Climate Change Law (Viola & Basso, 2015). However, the association with the Global South made the Brazilian position more conservative. According to Franchini and Viola (2019), the tireless defense of the "South alliance" was essential to keep Brazil's self-image as a leader among developing countries, even though it was ahead of the others in taking significant steps to fight climate change.

⁷ The region known as the "Legal Amazon" refers to an area of 5 million km², which covers eight Brazilian states and corresponds to 59% of the country's territory.

⁸ Compared to the average verified between 1996 and 2005.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that the *ruralist* lobby was always influential in Brasilia (Brum, 2019). China's rapid economic growth and exponential demand for commodities, such as soybeans and meat, strengthened the agribusiness bargaining power in government. They would grow even more powerful during Dilma Rousseff's (2010-2016) and Michel Temer's (2016-2019) administrations, since both became very unpopular throughout their terms, struggling with economic and political crises and, therefore, in need of political support to stay in power (Rochedo, et al., 2018).

3.2 Jair Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro took office as the Brazilian president in January 2019. His electoral agenda was based on a radical-right platform that combined economic liberalism and social conservatism (Casarões, 2020). His discourses were heavily hostile towards environmental protection, gaining him the support of several agribusiness entities (Fearnside & Schiffman, 2018; Avelar, 2020).

At his presidential campaign, he pledged to open the Amazon to mining and agriculture, threatened to extinguish the Ministry of the Environment (making it subordinate to the Ministry of Agriculture), and to pull Brazil out of the Paris agreement (emulating the U.S. under President Trump). Among his first actions in office was withdrawing the country's offer to host UN Climate Conference COP25, under the allegation of financial constraints.

Although so far he has not been able to fully carry through this agenda, he has weakened the application of environmental laws by way of budget cuts and the dismantling of monitoring and controlling bodies. Legal norms have been relaxed and the application of fines has been dramatically reduced (Oliveira, 2020; Boghossian, 2022). Backed by the government's leniency, national parks, indigenous lands, and protected areas are deteriorating due to the invasion of illegal activities in these areas.

The retrospective of Bolsonaro's years in power is frightening. Deforestation in the Amazon and other Brazilian biomes surged after Bolsonaro took office (MapBiomas, 2021). In 2020, as a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, GHG emission dropped by nearly 7 percent worldwide but increased by 9.5 percent in Brazil, even though the country's GDP shrank 4.1 percent (SEEG, 2021b). Even against this backdrop, a significant part of the government and the agribusiness sector continue to deny any harmful effect of their practices. Instead of changing them, they have opted for a public relations agenda to neutralize the damage that the first years of the Bolsonaro's administration caused in Brazil's international reputation (Watts, 2021; Sassine & Coletta, 2021).

4. Key Storylines

4.1 National Sovereignty

One of Brazil's foreign policy main entrenched storylines is that of a constant threat to the country's sovereignty over the Amazon. This is supported by historical facts, when foreign powers disclosed their ambitions over the region,⁹ but it has been artificially exaggerated to ward off any criticism of the lack of adequate public policies for regional development. According to it, environmentalist demands are just a pretext to question Brazil's sovereignty over the forest, paving the way for its internationalization, making it a global public good.

Against this backdrop, different Brazilian governments have treated the region only as a matter of geopolitical interests and national security. Regional and local problems are what matters least according to this storyline (Gonçalves, 2001). The prospect that the environmental protection discourse could prevent the country from making full economic use of the resources of its territory has since then been the primary concern (Lorenzo & Vazquez, 2016).

⁹ To cite a few, Brazil disputed Amazon territories with the French and the English at the beginning of the twentieth century, both settled through international arbitration.

In 2007, at the 62nd UN General Assembly, Lula said:

Brazil will under no circumstance abdicate either its sovereignty or its responsibilities in the Amazon. Our recent achievements derive from an increasing presence of the Brazilian State in the region, fostering sustainable development with economic, social, educational and cultural benefits for its more than 20 million inhabitants. (Silva, 2007, p. 904).

In 2019, Bolsonaro reinforced the same storyline at the 74th UN General Assembly:
Problems, any country has them. However, the sensationalist attacks we have suffered from a large portion of the international media due to the fires in the Amazon have awakened our patriotic feeling.

It is a fallacy to say that the Amazon is the heritage of humanity and a misconception, as scientists say, to say our forest is the lungs of the world.

Availing themselves of such fallacies, one or another country, instead of assisting, fell in with the press's lies and behaved disrespectfully, with a colonialist spirit.

They questioned that which is most sacred to us: our sovereignty!

One of them, on occasion of the G7 Summit, dared to suggest applying sanctions to Brazil without even hearing us. I thank those who did not allow this absurd proposal to be taken forward. (Bolsonaro, 2019, para. 33-37).

The “fallacies” to which Bolsonaro makes references in this discourse refer to some metaphors related to the Amazon that emerged throughout the 1980s, such as “heritage of humankind” and “the lungs of the Earth. These tropes¹⁰ resurfaced when the French President Emmanuel Macron said, during the G7 Summit in Biarritz, that the UN and the international community should grant “international status” to the tropical forest, sparking enormous uproar in some segments of the Brazilian society, especially among the military.

This neocolonialist argument, however, fails to make reference to the multiple occasions on which Brazil has worked together with other powers to invest economically in the region or to help protect its natural heritage. Just to mention a few examples, the military government launched in 1967, a free trade zone in Manaus, which should attract large transnational and national companies to manufacture durable consumer goods in the Amazon region. In addition, the Amazon Fund, set up in 2008, to help prevent deforestation, is managed by Brazil, and funded mainly by Norway and Germany. Finally, Bolsonaro's administration itself has asked for foreign help to protect the Amazon.

4.2 Protectionism

From the second half of the 1990s onwards, with its farm products gaining competitiveness internationally, Brazil embraced a market-oriented agenda, working actively to protect its agricultural interests, especially in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The big challenge was to gain access to the highly subsidized and protected agricultural markets of developed countries. The same combative stance was not observed for its industrial sector, which has been losing competitiveness since the beginning of the 1990s (OECD, 2018).

In this scenario, developed countries' concerns about environmental protection in Brazil were seen as protectionism disguised under good intentions. Accordingly, this storyline was incorporated into the Brazilian foreign policy discourse, as shown in the speech made by the Brazilian Foreign Minister, Luiz Felipe Lampreia, at the LV Regular Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2000:

First, the inconsistency between free trade rhetoric and the continued use of protectionist policies of various types by developed countries. As I stated at the World Trade Organization conference in Seattle, the name of this game is

¹⁰ Tropes can be defined as rhetorical devices that suggest more than the words literal meaning (Fischer & Forester, 1993).

discrimination. And discrimination, especially when waged against the weakest, is the absolute negation of solidarity. We must reverse these grave distortions in international trade, and especially as concerns agricultural products. (Lampreia, 2007, p. 795).

[...]

Secondly, not satisfied with the persistence of this highly discriminatory situation – where what is said often deviates from what is done – there are those in the developed countries who give voice to sectional interests and defend a new offensive against the exports of developing nations. This is what the new language of protectionism, camouflaged as humanitarian internationalism, would seem to suggest. It unfurls the seductive banner of labor and environmental standards, which, if adopted, would further restrict the access of products from developing countries to the markets of rich countries. (Lampreia, 2007, p. 795).

In 2020, at the 75th UN General Assembly, Bolsonaro reproduced the same storyline:

We provide food security to one sixth of the world's population, even while preserving 66% of our native vegetation and using only 27% of our territory for animal husbandry and agriculture. These are figures that no other country has.

Brazil stands out as the world's largest producer of foodstuffs. And for that reason there is such a strong interest in spreading out disinformation about our environment. (Bolsonaro, 2020, para. 24-25)

During Bolsonaro's administration, a trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur (the South American trade bloc) was finally signed in 2019, after 20 years of talks. In effect, the deal would exempt several Brazilian products from customs duties (such as fruits, orange juice and vegetable oil) and increase market access for beef, poultry, pork, sugar, and ethanol (OECD, 2020). However, several EU members have been voicing opposition to its ratification due to alleged environmental concerns.

This is not to say that there are no market interests involved in the environmental debate. In fact, for decades, the EU's common agricultural policy (CAP) subsidized exports, purchased production surpluses and accumulated huge stocks, which was very damaging to developing countries. However, while developed countries' protectionism is a fact, not everything can be attributed to that. Foreign pressure for environmental protection does not stem only from commercial interests, but also from a growing popular movement that sees the protection of tropical forests as crucial to mitigating global warming. This way, millions of voters pressure their representatives and demand drastic measures against countries that destroy their forests. Against this backdrop, trade agreements are increasingly influenced by the environmental agenda.

Although the image of a leader uncommitted to environmental protection is considered an obstacle to the expansion of the country's markets and has annoyed part of the Brazilian agribusiness, the reality is that a large part of the sector still supports Bolsonaro's administration (Avelar, 2020; Pompeia, 2021; Castilho, 2020). Given the expressive growth of exports to Asia and the importance of the agricultural sector for Brazil's trade balance, part of the agribusiness seems to have put off adapting to stricter requirements, of the European market for example, and focused on Asia's increasing demand. China has been Brazil's major trade partner since 2009 and has acquired 29 percent of the country's agricultural exports in the past 5 years, only 19 percent went to the European market (Rajão, et al., 2020).

The protectionism storyline has also a second facet, the discourse that Brazil is just a "victim" in climate negotiations. According to it, developed countries, due to their earlier industrialization, would be trying to impose on Brazil a climate bill for which they were the main responsible. Therefore, instead of controlling deforestation, Brazil should be compensated for what it has not destroyed. In 2019, Ricardo Salles, Bolsonaro's Environmental Minister told Bloomberg News that "Brazil is not a debtor. We're creditors" (Iglesias, Lima & Douglas, 2019).

This storyline, although it has assumed a blunter aspect during Bolsonaro's administration, has always been part of the

Brazilian discourse. In 1989, During the 44th Regular Session, Brazilian President José Sarney said of this:

Brazil is more keenly aware than any other country of its exuberant, rich and extraordinary natural world, its forests, its fauna and flora. We will not give up our right to preserve this rich heritage. We preserved it in the past, when the large colonizing companies formed in the rich countries invaded the wild areas of Africa, Asia and America, brutally despoiling them. Brazil rejected them. It forbade them to enter. During the 1960s, the Hudson Institute conceived the idea of a vast lake which would flood Amazonia. Brazil rejected the idea. If the world today is able to turn its attention towards Amazonia, it is only because Brazilians were able to preserve it up to the present day and will continue to preserve it for the future. (Sarney, 1989, p. 623).

4.3 The World's Breadbasket

Expressions such as “the world’s breadbasket,” “the world’s farm” or even “feeding the world,” have been often used by the Brazilian agribusiness and different administrations to highlight the country’s great disposal of arable land and water, in addition to its declared natural vocation to be a commodities exporter (Mitidiero & Goldfarb, 2021). Underlying those storylines is the attempt to oppose environmental protection to food security, thus, deforestation would be necessary to feed more people worldwide.

In 2021, at the 76th UN General Assembly, Bolsonaro used imprecise data to reinforce the “the world’s breadbasket” storyline:

Our modern, sustainable low-carbon agriculture feeds more than 1 billion people in the world using only 8 percent of the national territory. (Bolsonaro, 2021, para. 20, our translation).

According to Contini and Aragão (2021), farmers in Brazil fed about 10 percent of the world’s population in 2020. Thus, Brazilian agricultural production would be feeding 772.6 million people worldwide (more than half a billion outside Brazil), at least 200 million fewer people than what was propagandized by Bolsonaro. However, even this number is controversial and the study has been the subject of critics due to the simplistic methodology employed.¹¹

Most of Brazil’s agricultural exports are concentrated basically in one commodity, soybeans, with China accounting for almost 70 percent of Brazilian exports in volume (ComexStat, 2023). In China, they are used predominantly for animal feed. When we consider that human food is much more diverse, the storyline about Brazil guaranteeing the world’s food security turns out to be extremely exaggerated.

On the size of the area destined for food production, Bolsonaro uses distorted data to reinforce his narrative. In fact, only 7,6 percent of Brazil’s territory is occupied by cropland (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2021). However, he did not mention the pastures used to feed cattle, which occupies nearly three times more than that. In total, agriculture and livestock reach almost 30 percent of the country’s land area (Embrapa, 2018; FAO, 2021).

Previously, in 2019, at the 74th UN General Assembly in 2019, he used the same rhetorical strategy:

We cannot forget that the world must be fed. France and Germany, for instance, use more than 50% of their territories for agriculture, while Brazil uses merely 8% of its lands for the production of food – 61% of our territory is preserved. (Bolsonaro, 2019, para. 48).

More than the use of inaccurate data, the vital component of these discourses is to argue that in order to guarantee the world’s food security, environmental protection in Brazil will have to pay the price and in view of the size of still preserved

¹¹ See, for example, Pomar, 2021 and Copelli, 2021.

areas, there would be no problem in continuing to expand the agricultural frontier, even at the expense of the indigenous peoples and other traditional groups, as well as the biodiversity that lives in them.

More importantly, these discourses have yet to be matched in Brazilian reality itself. In evident contradiction to the fact that the country has been annually achieving records of productivity for its farm products, 19 million Brazilians did not have enough to eat in 2020, and 116 million more — most of the country — lived with some degree of food insecurity. Paradoxically, rural communities faced an even worse situation, with hunger afflicting 12 percent of households (Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional, 2021).

4.4 “The Country’s Engine”

A recurrent agribusiness storyline is the discourse about its alleged high performance, productivity, efficiency and competitiveness. In a scenario where other sectors of the Brazilian economy face stagnation, the primary sector would stand out as an island of prosperity. Therefore, different governments and agribusiness leaders have portrayed the Brazilian agricultural sector as a world apart from Brazil and its recurring cycle of upturns and downturns, “a Brazil that works,”¹² innovates and generates jobs.

Lula da Silva, at his inaugural speech, in January 2003, said the following:

The agrarian reform will be carried out on idle land, on the millions of hectares currently available for the arrival of families and seeds, which will spring up thriving with lines of credit and technical and scientific assistance. We will do this without affecting in any way the land they produce, because the productive land is justified by itself and will be stimulated to produce more and more, like the gigantic mountain of grain that we harvest each year.

Today, so many areas of the country are duly occupied, plantations are spreading as far as the eye can see, there are places where we have achieved higher productivity than Australia and the United States. We have to take good care — very well — of this immense Brazilian productive heritage. On the other hand, it is absolutely necessary for the country to grow again, generating jobs and distributing income (Lula da Silva, 2003, p. 10, our translation).

In 2008, during a special meeting of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on the World Food Crisis, Lula da Silva referring specifically to biofuels, said the following:

In 30 years we have achieved drastic cuts in CO₂ emissions and reduced demand for fossil energy, to the point of virtual self-sufficiency in energy with no adverse effect on food production. Much to the contrary. In this period, Brazilian agricultural production increased exponentially, thanks to gains in productivity, including sugar cane. The fight against hunger and poverty should start by awakening production possibilities in the most vulnerable countries. Brazil is doing its part. We have made massive investments in agricultural research and improvement. We are making our experience and knowledge available to other developing countries. (Lula da Silva, 2008, p. 919).

As we can see, even left-leaning governments, such as Lula da Silva’s, under the Workers’ Party - which had agrarian reform as one of its most cherished principles — did not dare to directly confront the agrobusiness power. Something that is extremely difficult when the dominant discourse is that this is the most important sector for the Brazilian economy.

The agrobusiness strives to oversize their importance to the country’s economy, including an aggregate notion of their generated income, much higher than that of the primary sector taken separately. The agribusiness’ figures for its share in Brazil’s GDP usually refers to a whole production chain involving inputs, machinery, distribution and services, usually called “beyond the farm gate” or a “systemic” account (Pompeia, 2021; Mitidiero & Goldfarb, 2021).

¹² In Portuguese, “O Brasil que dá certo,” is a very common rhetorical device used to extol the alleged superiority of Brazilian agribusiness when compared to other economical segments of the country.

Far more than a value-neutral scientific methodology, the aim is to advance the idea that this is the most important sector of the Brazilian economy. Accordingly, agribusiness would be responsible for about a quarter of the country's GDP. However, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE*), which employ a value-added methodology, agricultural participation in Brazil's GDP has changed little throughout the years, staying around 5 percent between 2015 and 2020 (Pompeia, 2021; Mitidiero & Goldfarb, 2021; IBGE, 2023).

Moreover, even though agricultural exports are substantial on Brazil's trade balance, it is important to note that Brazil is still remarkably closed to foreign trade when compared to other large economies (Canuto, Fleischhaker, & Schellekens, 2015). Therefore, the impact of the trade balance on the country's economy is not decisive for its GDP performance.¹³ This "country's engine" storyline skews the Brazilian society from realizing the true dimension of this sector for the economy, facilitating the adoption of agribusiness demands under the argument that they are necessary to keep the country growing.

Finally, as pointed out by Paulino (2014), countries such as the Netherlands, France and Germany, with a combined area that is less than 15 percent of Brazil's total area, are individually ahead of Brazil in the value of their agricultural exports. Germany, with an area that is about 20 times smaller than Brazil's, received more for its food exports than Brazil in 2019¹⁴ (FAO, 2021). Therefore, given Brazil's extremely favorable conditions for food production – weather, geography hydrography – allowing the country to have double, and even triple, croppings annually, the discourse about the high performance and competitiveness of the Brazilian agribusiness is hardly corroborated when this component is considered (Paulino, 2014).

4.5 “A lot of land for few Indians”

On 17 August 2019, Bolsonaro voiced a common storyline which is ingrained in many segments of the Brazilian population. “There's a lot of land for few Indians (indigenous people),” he told reporters (Iglesias & Said, 2019). Under his administration, critics about the extension of indigenous territories, extractive reserves, and environmental protection areas have become more brazen; however, they were always present in the discourse of different interest groups, as to demonstrate that country had already too many areas reserved to environmental protection and indigenous population; therefore, agricultural expansion should not be a problem.

In 1993, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said during the 48th UN General Assembly:

Here again, the dialectics of solidarity and self-interest are at work; the increased effectiveness of actions undertaken by the Brazilian Government in the Amazon region, in conformity with the full and irrevocable exercise of our sovereignty, is fundamental if we are to ensure the protection and defense of all the region's inhabitants and, in particular, those of the Brazilian indigenous protected areas, which amount to the impressive total of over 800,000 square kilometers. (Amorim, 1993, p. 689).

At the 74th UN General Assembly, in 2019, Bolsonaro stated:

Today, 14% of the Brazilian territory is marked as indigenous land, but it is necessary to understand that our native peoples are human beings, exactly like any one of us. They want and deserve to enjoy the same rights as all of us.

And these territories are huge. The Yanomami reservation alone accounts for approximately 95 thousand km², equivalent to the size of Portugal or Hungary, although only 15 thousand indigenous people live in the area. (Bolsonaro, 2019, para. 39).

In 2021, at the 76th UN General Assembly, he repeated the same storyline:

¹³ Brazil's trade flows, exports plus imports, average approximately 25 percent of the country's GDP (Spilimbergo, 2019).

¹⁴ According to FAO (2021), Brazilian food exports in 2019 totaled approximately USD 67 billion, while German totaled approximately USD 68 billion.

14% of the national territory, that is, more than 110 million hectares, an area equivalent to Germany and France together, is destined for indigenous reserves. In these regions, 600,000 Indians live in freedom and increasingly want to use their lands for agriculture and other activities (Bolsonaro, 2021, para. 36, our translation).

In fact, nearly 13 percent of the Brazilian territory is occupied by indigenous reserves (approximately 106 million hectares). However, what is left unsaid in these speeches is the fact that these territories are occupied by 250 different ethnic groups and more than 500 thousand people (IBGE, 2010). By contrast, 97 thousand large properties account for 21.5 percent of the land in the country (a total area of more than 180 million hectares) (Sparovek, et al., 2019).

According to another data source, the Agricultural Census (IBGE, 2019), 1 percent of the largest farms (nearly 51 thousand properties with more than a thousand hectares) account for 48 percent of the total area of the country estates (equivalent to more than 167 million hectares). In view of these data, a balanced account of Brazil's land distribution would show that, actually, there is a lot of land in the hands of a few landowners.

In addition to that, the country still has about 50 million hectares of "vacant or undesigned public lands", about 6.4% percent of its territory (Sparovek, et al., 2019). This is unprotected public land that has been increasingly illegally occupied with the ultimate goal to make profits through the use or sale of the illegally owned property (Stassart, Torsiano, Cardoso, & Collaço, 2021).

Finally, it is important to stress that indigenous lands represent the most environmentally protected areas in the country, they have the best-preserved areas when compared to all of the government's protected areas combined. Therefore, Brazil's indigenous peoples have been far more successful in protecting forests than the private sector and the government (Fearnside & Schiffman, 2018).

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to use discourse analysis to show how entrenched *ruralist* storylines reshaped by agribusiness have molded Brazil's foreign policy. By providing a critical assessment of its vaunted performance, we can verify that the reality that the sector claims to represent is, in fact, a discursive construction based on a misrepresentation of reality. Rhetorically manipulated, it tries to confer legitimacy to most of their controversial practices. Its trumpeted success and enormous generation of wealth is highly concentrated and intimately attached to large social and environmental impacts.

These storylines, however, do more than misrepresent facts about the Brazilian agribusiness and its environment protection network, they help construct reality, creating a world without alternatives. The agrobusiness storylines have stood out in the country's foreign policy, and they also resonate deeply with a significant part of the Brazilian people (Ioris, 2019). Therefore, the impacts of these accounts should be more deeply discussed, especially their effects on the country foreign policy.

Recently, Brazilian foreign policy discourse has been almost exclusively restricted to defending the country's agribusiness, including its biofuels, shunning any criticism of its practices, and limiting other policies' options. The country has given up protagonism in environmental negotiations - which had gradually increased since Rio-92 - in favor of an archaic and narrow agenda, which benefits only a very tiny minority.

GHG emissions and the loss of biodiversity impose a burden on other sectors of Brazil's economy, such as the industry, the transport, and the energy sector. They will need to make extra effort to compensate for deforestation emissions, in order for the country to be able to fulfill its international commitments.

Moreover, non-commitment to environmental protection can be an obstacle to the country's expansion of foreign trade, even and particularly for agriculture goods. In the long run, global warming should make agricultural production

increasingly difficult. Forests guarantee water supply and local climate regulation that, once lost, it has a direct impact on productivity. The biomes dominated by agribusiness in Brazil are the most vulnerable ones (IPCC, 2021; 2022).

Brazil is in a favorable situation to reduce emissions and to meet its reduction commitments internationally when compared to other countries: its energy mix is relatively clean, agriculture does not need further land expansion, and deforestation control has had little impact on economic growth. The future of Brazilian emissions, therefore, can be much more promising if the *ruralist* storylines are forever abandoned.

The agribusiness storylines discussed in this paper are part of a discourse that exerts a strong influence on the Brazilian foreign policy agenda, as well as on the country's public policies in general. However, other discourses are also influential. Future articles should deeply explore these other discourses (for instance, the discourse of the right to develop and its storyline of "common but differentiated responsibilities") and analyses how they have shaped the foreign policy agenda in conjunction with other public policies.

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