v. 68, p. 682-702, Jul./Dec. 2026 http://doi.org/10.5380/dma.v68i.100076 e-ISSN 2176-9109

DMA Desenvolvimento e Meio Ambiente

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Geopolitics of sustainable development: the discourse of agribusiness in the appropriation of Brazilian nature

Geopolítica do desenvolvimento sustentável: o discurso do agronegócio na apropriação da natureza brasileira

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Article received on **June 16, 2025**

Final version accepted **March 20, 2026**

Published on **November 10, 2026**

Abstract: Latin American countries continue to occupy a peripheral role as exporters of commodities, while central nations are increasing their environmental import regulations. In response, internal hegemonic actors, particularly agribusiness, begin to adopt sustainability rhetoric, illustrating the geopolitics of sustainable development. This article applies Critical Discourse Analysis to official agribusiness narratives (especially those of ABAG) to identify contradictions and unequal power relations as key elements in the private appropriation of nature. The discourse analyzed promotes a symbolic construction in which high productivity, capital accumulation, commodity exports, and sustainability are compatible. This reinterpretation of nature's appropriation disregards structural contradictions related to racism, sexism, class subordination, territorial conflicts, hunger, and food insecurity.

Keywords: agri-food systems; sustainability; political ecology of agriculture; environmental discourse.

Resumo: Uma vez que países latino-americanos perpetuam sua condição periférica de exportadores de commodities enquanto as nações do centro aumentam exigências normativas ambientais para importação, atores hegemônicos internos, em especial o agronegócio, passam a incorporar a retórica da sustentabilidade, ilustrando a geopolítica do desenvolvimento sustentável. Neste contexto, este artigo realiza uma Análise Crítica do Discurso de atores hegemônicos com base em documentos da Associação Brasileira do Agronegócio (ABAG), procurando identificar as contradições e as relações desiguais de poder como elementos constitutivos das formas de dominação e apropriação privada da natureza. O discurso analisado opera uma disputa na construção de significados nos sistemas agroalimentares ao enunciar a compatibilidade entre altos índices produtivos, acumulação privada de capitais, exportação de commodities e sustentabilidade. Ressignifica, assim, o processo de apropriação da natureza, sem problematizar contradições como racismo, machismo, subalternização de classe, conflitos territoriais e ambientais, fome e insegurança alimentar.

Palavras-chave: sistemas agroalimentares; sustentabilidade; ecologia política da agricultura; discurso ambiental.

1. Introduction

Enlightenment empiricism in seventeenth-century Europe concluded that humanity's great task was to subjugate and dominate everything and everyone outside the white, masculine minds of thinkers presumed to embody all virtues. This epistemological and political stance found an objective counterpart in the growing complexity of mercantilist economies and state structures, while the intelligentsia advanced theories, techniques, and

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technologies aimed at increasing labor productivity, culminating in the Industrial Revolution.

However, the arrogance of dominating nature through labor, itself dominated, as well as through technique and technology, failed to foresee the predatory impact this process would have on the very conditions that sustained human existence. The global conquest of the world, grounded in the capitalist mode of production, produced consequences that alarmed the renowned Club of Rome, which commissioned the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to conduct a study later published under the title *The Limits to Growth* in 1972 (Meadows et al., 1978). Through mathematical modeling, MIT researchers concluded that planet Earth could not sustain exploitation *ad aeternum*, and that such a process would ultimately bring an end to bourgeois happiness (Pierri, 2005).

The emergence of the environmental question, therefore, arose from the concern of certain capitalists with the condition and perpetuation of the world as they know it, and more specifically with the profits they derive from it. It was within this context that the concept of *sustainable development* emerged as a novel proposal capable of coordinating national environmental policies while capitalist mechanisms of production were adapted to these criteria.

Radically critical thought on the capitalist mode of production, which, since Marx had already described the first fundamental contradiction of capitalism, the class struggle, would go on to identify capital's second contradiction, namely, the environmental limits to the perpetuation of the economic system (O'Connor, 2012). This made it possible to better interpret the role of the international division of labor and the place occupied by the territories of peripheral capitalism in the appropriation of global surplus value under conditions of growing financial capital dominance.

The policy, once oriented toward indebting peripheral nations so that they might acquire developed industries and thereby accumulate comparative advantages, underwent a decisive shift beginning in the 1990s. Latin American nations, above all, came to occupy a prominent position in commodity exports, which, in Brazil specifically, reignited agrarian oligarchies that, in alliance with sectors of the commercial and rentier bourgeoisie, enabled the return of neoliberalism in its neofascist form with broad mass support.

In the specific case of agricultural commodity production, agribusiness, the set of hegemonic actors, though central to the countries of the capitalist core, has come under foreign pressure to comply with the environmental demands of its buyers. This reveals a phenomenon characteristic of what Enrique Leff (2021) calls the geopolitics of sustainable development, that is, peripheral nations are subjected to international community scrutiny to follow a kind of environmental rigor that maintains the historically established relations of appropriating nature and dominating subaltern classes.

Sectors of Brazilian agribusiness have begun to embrace a positive approach to the environmental question and to incorporate national and international standards into production chains in order to increase foreign exchange earnings, but also with the aim of entering the public debate, contesting representation among different producers, and improving their image in the eyes of urban common sense.

In this context, it is necessary to highlight the discursive and semiotic character of the mechanisms of domination employed by hegemonic actors as constitutive dimensions of systems of domination. The overall aim of this article is therefore to unveil the geopolitics of sustainable development embedded in the discourse of Brazilian agribusiness as a phenomenon that perpetuates the socio-environmental crisis of capitalism. It is hoped that this article will emphasize not only the limits of the greening of capital but also the duality between the practical and symbolic dimensions in the political struggle for the appropriation and social reappropriation of nature.

This article revisits part of the reflections developed in the doctoral dissertation of the first author (Romanini Netto, 2024), with theoretical and empirical updates, as well as a new analytical approach centered on the discursive contest over sustainability in the agri-food sector.

Methodologically, the research was conducted through documentary analysis, to which a Discourse Analysis was applied, guided by the tasks of:

a) identifying the contradictions expressed by hegemonic discourse, and

b) considering the unequal power relations in discursive production and reproduction.

The article is organized into five sections, beginning with this introduction. The following section presents a perspective on the genesis of contemporary capitalism and the definition of the concept of the geopolitics of sustainable development. Subsequently, the hegemonic actors who enunciate the discourse under study are identified. A Discourse Analysis is then carried out, examining the elements that define the geopolitics of sustainable development in agribusiness discourse. The article concludes with final considerations.

2. Contemporary capitalism and the geopolitics of sustainable development

The formation of global capitalism is intrinsically linked to the genesis of modernity forged during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In this process, the development of productive forces and the social division of labor unleashed by the Industrial Revolution is as central as the reconfiguration of the international division of labor established by colonial undertakings. The latter do not constitute a moment prior to or external to

capitalism, but rather the historical foundation of the constitution of the modern world-system organized along the center-periphery structure, as demonstrated by Wallerstein (2006) and Grosfoguel (2008).

European invasion also inaugurated the racialization of diverse native ethnicities across Africa and the Americas, forming the basis for racial domination (Quijano, 2005), with racism serving as the symbolic perpetuation of the original form of labor through which the Americas were dispossessed, namely, slavery (Césaíre, 1977). Simultaneously, colonialism spread the Western sexual division of labor, typically patriarchal in character, relegating domestic labor, the care of the family environment, the care of non-workers, and the perpetuation of the reproduction of the labor force, to women. This invisible and unpaid labor constitutes a pillar of capitalist social organization both at the center and at the periphery (Federici, 2019).

What this highlights is the structural interdependence in the formation of a world-system that is simultaneously modern, capitalist, colonial, racist, and patriarchal.

The process of capitalist accumulation, particularly as grounded in the private appropriation of land (enclosures), necessarily depends on perpetuating the expropriation of communally used territories and turning them into commodities. This process, defined in the literature as accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004), is a dominant mechanism in the international division of labor that assigns to the periphery of the capitalist system the role of primary-export nations, on the one hand, and of technology consumers, on the other. This pattern of accumulation has been defined in the literature as extractivism (Gudynas, 2011; Delgado Ramos, 2014; Aráoz, 2016; Svampa, 2019; Infante-Amate et al., 2022).

The dominance of extractivism collides with the consolidation of the environmental question. In response to environmental criticism, the United Nations (UN) established the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1983, which published in 1987 the report *Our Common Future*, presenting for the first time the idea of *sustainable development*, linking economic development and environmental preservation in an interdependent manner (Pierri, 2005).

While in Latin America business-military dictatorships faced high levels of indebtedness and political exhaustion, the conditions were being created for the implementation of the neoliberal project, marked by the Washington Consensus in 1989, characterized by the financialization of the economy and state deregulation. As a consequence, a new international division of labor took shape after the 1990s, in which central nations began to relocate industries to peripheral (Asian) nations with the aim of alleviating the capital-labor contradiction, while also coordinating the deindustrialization and reprimarization of Latin American peripheral economies by taking advantage of high *commodity* prices, a process that Maristella Svampa (2012) would call the *Commodity* Consensus.

This reprimarization signified a reorientation toward extractive activities reminiscent of the colonial model of center-periphery domination, marking the phase of neoextractivism (Aráoz, 2016; Svampa, 2019). Brazil, in particular, has consolidated itself since the early twenty-first century as one of the largest exporters of mineral and agricultural commodities in a dynamic in which foreign capital coordinates the pattern of investment and technology, associated with the permanent appropriation of land. Paradoxically, this project of subordination to financial capital, subsidized by the state, coexists with recent demands for stringent environmental targets and agendas of capital greening and sustainability (Acselrad & Michelotti, 2024; Jeziorny et al., 2024; Lins, 2025).

In this context, it is worth evaluating that sustainable development, in its genesis and discursive formulation, carries a fundamental contradiction: while it presents itself as a conciliatory solution between economic growth and environmental preservation, it is inscribed in a logic of appropriation and commodification of nature. Sustainability, in this context, would emerge as a strategy to naturalize "conservationist" exploitation, in which biodiversity is reconfigured as genetic, ecotouristic, or functional capital, concealing its deeper cultural and ecological meaning (Leff, 2021).

As Marx had already warned, the development of productive forces in the capitalist mode of production depends on the private appropriation of land, territory, and above all labor, which is nothing other than alienated labor, stripped of its vital activity and its nature (Marx, 2004). The perpetuation of capitalist accumulation, whether liberal or developmentalist, therefore reproduces the *rift* in the metabolism between society and nature, or what Marx called the social metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) (Foladori, 2001; Foster, 2005; Toledo, 2013). Radical critique of the capitalist mode of production therefore anticipated the environmental question by demonstrating that the socio-ecological crisis is inherent to capitalism.

We therefore encounter what Leff (2021) terms the *geopolitics of sustainable development*, that is, the incorporation of environmental discourse into the strategies of global capitalist expansion. In this context, the discursive character of sustainable development is revealed as a "politics of representation" that constructs identities and legitimizes power strategies for the appropriation of natural resources. By substituting direct violence with symbolic mechanisms of exploitation, sustainability becomes a device that reorganizes the relations between society, nature, and the market. This symbolic operation reaffirms the coloniality of power by transforming subjects and ecosystems into instruments of capitalist expansion (Leff, 2021).

Based on the conjuncture outlined above, it is argued here that analyzing hegemonic actors from the standpoint of their discursive construction contributes to uncovering their rhetorical capacities as a unique resource. This is because it is inscribed in the genesis of the world-system that material domination cannot be perpetuated without its symbolic counterpart, as

Césaire (1977) reveals concerning colonialism, Escobar (1998) concerning development, or Floriani (2016) concerning sustainability. Also significant is the fact that the reprimarization of economies has reinforced internal colonialism (Porto-Gonçalves, 2015), reigniting agrarian oligarchies that, in alliance with sectors of the commercial and rentier bourgeoisie, enabled the return of neoliberalism in its neofascist form with broad mass support.

Agribusiness is one of the main agents of this dynamic in Latin America, integrating itself into the geopolitics of sustainable development as a vehicle of economic modernization and environmental exploitation. By claiming sustainability, it promotes extractivist practices and concentrates power in the hands of transnational corporations, masking socio-environmental impacts with rhetoric of ecological responsibility and productive efficiency. This articulation deepens relations of subordination.

However, the incorporation of environmental discourse into the contest over agri-food systems is neither new nor exclusive to hegemonic sectors. In Latin America specifically, there is a solid tradition of contestation of the environmentally deleterious effects of capitalist development, of which Chico Mendes was one of the most prominent symbols. Since the 1980s, a series of social mobilizations organized by peasants, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendant communities have erupted, associating the defense of nature with the defense of land, territory, and a dignified life (Porto-Gonçalves, 2015; Leff, 2015).

In this context, the *agroecological movement* also emerged, as a product of NGOs, technicians, and rural social movements, consolidating discursive formations that contest the hegemony of agribusiness in the Brazilian countryside, on the one hand, and affirm alternative and sustainable forms of agriculture, on the other (Luzzi, 2007; Altieri & Toledo, 2011; González de Molina et al., 2021).

Within this framework, the discourse of sustainable development not only reflects but also reproduces the capitalist logic that subordinates the periphery to the center. By incorporating the environmental question as a tool for economic expansion, it transforms sustainability into a mechanism of control and appropriation, camouflaging the contradictions of the system and perpetuating structural inequalities. The rhetoric of agribusiness as a model of sustainable development thus consolidates itself as a key strategy for reaffirming global hegemony over Latin American territories and resources.

3. Agribusiness, hegemony, and discourse

The commodification of plant species has always been central to the economic exploitation of the territory of Pindorama, to the point of naming the nation then forming, after the reddish, highly abrasive timber, pau-brasil, thus founding the post-Cabralian sociability of Brazil. Although minerals

also occupied a central place, the Brazilian colony served as a base for the exploitation of sugarcane and later coffee. However, as Maria Yedda Linhares (1996) emphasizes, colonial Brazil did not live by sugarcane and coffee alone, nor does Brazil today live solely on soybeans, corn, and beef. This highlights that the formation of Brazilian agri-food systems is defined by its structural heterogeneity (Escher, 2020), comprising a diversity of actors, knowledge forms, and practices that, under the yoke of modern capitalist coloniality, engage in contests over the appropriation and social reappropriation of nature (Romanini Netto, 2024).

In typically colonialist fashion, the Brazilian agrarian bourgeoisie, heir to the hereditary captaincies, modernized and industrialized during the developmentalist period and intensified the process of private land appropriation (land grabbing) after the commodity boom, with Brazil consolidating itself as one of the largest exporters of agricultural products (Tixilinski, 2022; Jeziorny et al., 2024; Lins, 2025). However, what has come to be called agribusiness does not represent the whole of the Brazilian agrarian space, but rather an articulation among oligarchs, businesspeople, multinationals, and public agents with sufficient power to impose their economic and, more recently, environmental agenda.

Imported directly from the Harvard Business School, the term agribusiness, translated literally into Portuguese, would be used for the first time at the founding of the class entity that brought together the main employer organizations in May 1993, the Associação Brasileira do Agronegócio (Brazilian Agribusiness Association – ABAG) (Sauer, 2008; Pompeia, 2021). This new identity was born with the aim of reconstructing the representation of the employer sectors, which had been tarnished by the image of the backward latifundio associated with the former União Democrática Ruralista (Democratic Rural Union – UDR) (Sauer, 2008).

Agribusiness, far from representing a unified employer sector in agriculture, is constituted by internal disputes and distinct political agendas; it can nonetheless be said broadly that its actors strictly follow the determinations of financial markets and agricultural input multinationals, while also wielding broad influence over legislative and executive powers (Pompeia, 2021).

Researcher Regina Bruno (2010) synthesizes the political construction of the word agribusiness in five rhetorical schemes:

i) Agribusiness as a synonym for unity, success, and wealth generation;

ii) Agribusiness as an expression of modernity and a new development model that serves the interests and needs of all;

iii) Belief in the absence of any historical alternatives beyond agribusiness, and

iv) The principle of self-valorization and the disqualification of the other; and

v) The imperative of greater institutionality and the construction of new spaces of representation and interest mediation (Bruno, 2010).

In the context of the modernization and commodification of agriculture, Cabral et al. (2022) emphasize that hegemonic actors in agriculture reproduce narratives of the success of science and technology and of production yields, aligned with the interests of multinational corporations in the agricultural sector within a context of unequal power in the production of narratives relative to other actors.

Another aspect of the symbolic dispute waged by agribusiness lies in its encroachment on family and peasant forms of agriculture, which have become a "market niche" for multinational conglomerates and agro-industrial complexes that contest and exert pressure both materially (through innovative technologies and high productivity) and symbolically (as a fetish for the modernization of agriculture and as a culture of consumption) on ways of life that resist domination (Niederle & Wesz Junior, 2022; Severo, 2023).

It can therefore be noted that the various organizations[1] representing hegemonic actors in agriculture have permeability and influence in contesting the construction of practices and meanings in other agri-food systems. From this, two elements emerge. The first is that dominant agri-food systems do not possess consolidated symbolic systems *a priori*, or simply because they are dominant. That is, dominant actors are permanently required to reconstruct articulations in order to consolidate their dominant position *in relation to other actors* within the agri-food system, whether allied or opposed (Romanini Netto, 2024).

This process is illustrated by the very emergence of the term agribusiness as a narrative of success and vanguard, as noted by Sauer (2008) and Cabral et al. (2022). This movement can also be demonstrated through the articulations made by agribusiness organizations with processed food industry actors, debated by Pompeia and Schneider (2021), as well as through the articulations of agribusiness organizations with conservative and far-right politicians, debated by Bruno (2017).

4. Political ecology of agribusiness discourse

4.1. Methodology

This article defends a non-dichotomous but rather dual conception of the relationship between the material world and the world of ideas. This means

1 In addition to the ABAG, influential actors in the political arena include the Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (FPA, Parliamentary Front for Agriculture and Livestock, popularly known as the "bancada ruralista" in the legislative branch), the Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil (CNA, the national organizational form of the agricultural employers' union), the Conselho das Entidades do Setor Agropecuário (Agro Council, Council of Agricultural Sector Entities), the Instituto Pensar Agropecuária (IPA, bringing together think tanks in the field), and the Organização das Cooperativas do Brasil (OCB), among others (Pompeia & Schneider, 2021; Bruno, 2017).

that there is a recursiveness and reflexivity between the construction of the subject and the systems of practices and signs that exist prior to and beyond the subject, but also regarding how the subject is capable of actively (re) constructing them under certain conditions (Romanini Netto, 2024).

In peripheral, colonial, and diasporic social formations, chains of meaning are interpellated by structures of domination that produce an unequal power relation in the production of meaning, in which certain actors are subjected to processes of subordination and oppression crucial to their relational construction of meaning. In this context, both Stuart Hall (2003) and Laclau & Mouffe (2015) recover the Althusserian notion of overdetermination to explain how *structures in dominance* function. Accordingly, hegemonic discourses can be interpreted as overdetermined by colonial difference, class struggle, racism, and sexism, but also by the anthropocentrism of technological modernization and the cold logic and inhumane competitiveness of economic rationality.

As Fairclough (2012) interprets, language is an integral process in the social construction of domination. He shares with Laclau and Mouffe (2015) the perception that the formation of a *hegemonic bloc* depends on its capacity to articulate a discursive formation and affirm its condition of dominance. However, the authors agree, the dominant discursive formation invariably encounters contestatory discursive formations, which forces it to reformulate its articulations.

It can be stated that agribusiness constitutes a hegemonic discursive formation and, as it is confronted with the environmental question, is undergoing a process of rearticulation between actors and discourses, which are analyzed in this text.

Specifically, attention will be given to the materiality of the discourse produced by class organizations and/or social movements. These collective actors have the characteristic of proposing systems of representation (and therefore ideologies), possessing, to varying degrees, a capillary reach among social bases, and being responsible for articulating subjects through discursive formations. These discursive formations play the role of contesting the way in which actors construct practices and assign meaning to those practices.

Drawing on Fairclough (2012), the Discourse Analysis conducted followed, methodologically, the tasks of:

a) identifying the contradictions expressed by hegemonic discourse, and
b) considering the unequal power relations in discursive production and reproduction.

For the purposes of analytical operationalization, the point of departure was the identification of key statements present in the selected documents, particularly those related to the notions of sustainability, carbon, food security, environmental governance, and the international competitiveness

of agribusiness. These statements were analyzed in terms of the following aspects:

(i) the semantic construction of the concepts mobilized by the discourse,

(ii) the discursive strategies of legitimation, displacement, or resignification present in the texts, and

(iii) the silencing or marginalization of topics potentially contradictory to the dominant discourse.

The institutional position of the discourse enunciators and the context in which the actor and/or the discourse operated were also highlighted, making it possible to expose the articulations that consolidated the hegemonic bloc in motion. This process was carried out through documentary analysis of records from an organization representing hegemonic actors, Associação Brasileira do Agronegócio (ABAG). As a starting point, the analysis of the Proceedings of the 20th Brazilian Agribusiness Congress held in 2021 was adopted, following the model of the doctoral dissertation of the lead author (Romanini Netto, 2024). That congress not only addressed the environmental question and sustainability as its central theme, but also revealed, simultaneously, a positive approach to the environmental problem and an important document contesting meaning regarding how environmental policies will be implemented and the stance of private agents in relation to the scenario.

In this context, the present article, in addition to synthesizing the analysis carried out by Romanini Netto (2024), also complements it by providing an update of the environmental debate based on the Proceedings of the last four congresses held by ABAG (CBA, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025), composing a critical synthesis of the evolution of the debate in recent years in light of the previously stated objectives.

4.2. Discourse analysis

4.2.1. The environmental discourse of the 2021 CBA

Entitled “Our Carbon is Green”, the Proceedings of the 20th ABAG congress comprises 70 pages, of which 16 are dedicated to advertising for brands belonging to multinational companies in the agricultural inputs sector, automakers, and financial institutions. The event is organized by ABAG in collaboration with B3, the Brazilian stock exchange, which in 2017 was ranked the fifth largest capital and financial market exchange in the world (Moreira, 2017).

Divided into 16 topics, the document features the presentations of agribusiness leadership figures, from politicians to corporate CEOs. Among the topics, it includes three discussion panels: Panel 1 – Clean and Sustainable Energy; Panel 2 – Green and Competitive Brazil; Panel 3 – The Future of Agribusiness in World Trade. In addition to being the product of a partner-

ship between ABAG and B3, the event features "Master" sponsorship from eight national and multinational companies: two from the agro-industrial meat sector, five multinational companies in the inputs sector (pesticides, fertilizers, and seeds), and one publicly traded national bank.

In addition to the eight companies mentioned, the document registers, under the term Sponsorship alone, just below, eighteen (18) additional companies, among them a government agency linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a North American brokerage firm, three multinational manufacturers of trucks and agricultural machinery, one from the agro-industrial meat sector, three publicly traded banks, one multinational petrochemical company, one multinational packaging processing company, five multinational agricultural input companies, one Brazilian agricultural cooperative, and the Brazilian cooperative system.

The theme of the 2021 CBA, *Our Carbon is Green*, refers to carbon as one of the central elements of the global environmental question, namely the emission of CO_2 into the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels, among other forms of carbon (timber, charcoal, sugar, etc.), but also as a result of the intense deforestation of the past five decades, a practice that, in addition to interrupting forests' capacity to store carbon (through photosynthesis), releases CO_2 into the atmosphere by promoting the degradation of soil organic matter, a practice common to conventional agriculture as a result of tilling and harrowing. Like CO_2, other gases released into the atmosphere are amplifiers of the greenhouse effect, a major driver of climate change.

The 20th CBA took place during the 16th month of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the third year of the Bolsonaro government, a period marked by numerous aggressions against the environment and against traditional peoples and communities. One emblematic example was the coordinated action in August 2019 to set fire to areas of forest, pastureland, and invaded lands in the Amazon (Machado, 2019). The episode, known as the "Day of Fire", highlights the Bolsonaro government's disregard and the interest of its allies in expanding the agricultural frontier over the Amazon Rainforest. That same year, fire outbreaks in the region increased by 82% compared to 2018, culminating in an alarming phenomenon: the formation of a thick smoke cloud that darkened São Paulo, one of the country's largest metropolises, located approximately 2,500 kilometers from the fires (Dantas, 2019). Data indicate that, between January 2019 and January 2020, deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon grew by 74% (Fonseca et al., 2020).

In this context, the Proceedings of the 20th CBA seek to distance themselves from the negative image generated by the events mentioned, among many others. Already in the introduction, Marcello Brito, president of the ABAG Board of Directors, makes an emphatic statement: *The country's negative image abroad is solidifying. (...). You don't have to be a master in international relations to understand the gravity of this situation and the*

possible long-term impacts on products bearing the made in Brazil *brand.* (CBA, 2021, p. 8).

Representative Sérgio Souza, president of the Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (Parliamentary Agricultural Caucus – FPA), is responsible for leading the section "*Improving Agribusiness's Image*", highlighting the alignment between the FPA and ABAG in the strategy of appropriating the environmental debate.

The linking of agribusiness to sustainability has been one of the main items on the hegemonic discourse agenda. There is external pressure for Brazilian agricultural commodities to align with environmental criteria, such as the conservation of the Amazon, considered a global heritage. In this context, the dominant discourse projects the idea that leadership in the conservation of natural resources should come from the private sector. However, for this to happen, the meanings of sustainable and sustainability need to be contested, a process that dates back to ECO-92 (Pierri, 2005) and extends to RIO+20 (Floriani, 2016).

This is the context in which the concept of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) emerges. For Gilson Finkelsztain, president of B3, ESG represents a set of *financial instruments to enable the channeling of resources from the capital market* (CBA, 2021, p. 14).

The Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, and Food Supply, Teresa Cristina, appointed by the Bolsonaro government and speaker at the Sustainable Agenda Leadership section, explains: *ESG, these three letters guide business and solution models more and more each day. Combining best governance practices, caring for the environment, and having social responsibility is already part of the present. We must expand this reality* (CBA, 2021, p. 18).

Environmental, Social, and Governance lies at the heart of the geopolitics of sustainable development. Although the acronym is promoted as a model that combines responsible governance, environmental stewardship, and social responsibility, its practical application reveals a strategy centered on the commodification and financialization of sustainability. The statement by the president of B3, who reduces ESG to *financial instruments intended to facilitate the channeling of resources from the capital market* (CBA, 2021, p. 14), exposes the primacy of economic logic over the social and environmental objectives the concept is supposedly meant to prioritize.

Finally, it is worth considering that agribusiness, as a discursive formation, positions itself as the representative of the country's main agri-food system model, projecting itself to the "world" through the narrative that agribusiness feeds the planet. Alysson Paolinelli, former Minister of Agriculture during the 1970s (a period of military dictatorship and major expansion of agricultural modernization), honored at the 20th CBA event and a candidate for the Nobel Prize during that period, sets out his expectations: *This is a responsibility we feel is very great, of not losing this movement of placing Brazil in the first world in food production* (CBA, 2021, p. 23).

There is strong confidence in the hegemonic discourse that the production and circulation of food oriented toward export, marketed as commodities, is fundamental to food security, both in Brazil and globally. The CBA (2021) document illustrates this narrative well:

> *Until the 1970s, Brazil imported basic food. Then, Paolinelli took over the Ministry of Agriculture and, together with his friends from the Ministry itself, from Embrapa, and from research institutes throughout Brazil, set up a sustainable tropical technology program. In these 50 years, Brazil has transformed itself into one of the world's largest exporters of food, energy, and fibers. We export to more than 170 countries and have the largest agricultural trade surplus on the planet* (CBA, 2021, p. 22).

The concept of food security is once again associated with the country's capacity to supply commodities to the international market. Although concern for quality is mentioned by several speakers, mainly in response to consumer demand, the text does not detail how this improvement will be achieved. Instead, it emphasizes the need to optimize natural resources and align with the ESG agenda.

Despite Brazil having recorded an alarming[2] number of people in a situation of food insecurity during the period in which the 20th CBA was held (Rede Penssan, 2022), the word *hunger* appears in the document only once. Curiously, this occurs in an apparent lapse of critical awareness by the presenter Renata Maron, who states: *Regrettably, during the largest harvest of 2020/21, we also faced the greatest hunger.* (CBA, 2021, p. 7).

4.2.2. Longitudinal complementary analysis: CBA 2022–2025

In the subsequent CBAs, concern for agribusiness's image persists. Specifically, at the 2022 (pp. 22, 28) and 2023 (p. 37) CBA events, concerns regarding illegal deforestation are revisited, which bears a close relationship with carbon storage, the major protagonist of agribusiness's environmental discourse. Illegal deforestation harms the carbon storage balance with two major geopolitical consequences: it creates tension in conscious consumer markets (such as the European market), and competitive advantages in the aforementioned carbon market are lost.

Illegal deforestation is a potential example of internal dispute within agribusiness, where, on one hand, sectors perpetuate land grabbing at agricultural frontiers (Matos & Pessôa, 2014; Frederico & Almeida, 2025), while, on the other, sectors such as ABAG and B3 invest in technical and financial solutions.

Ultimately, the debate on illegal deforestation reveals, in truth, a concern with maintaining cohesive commercial ties, the same ties that deepen the peripheral condition within the capitalist system while simultaneously

2 In a more recent report, the PENSSAN Network (2024) indicates that more than 33 million Brazilians live with hunger, and more than half of the population experiences some degree of food insecurity.

rebutting criticism of the sector and recovering discursive hegemony over Brazilian agriculture. The 2025 CBA is illustrative, since the event took place after the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration and the document offers no critical analysis of American decisions, appealing solely, from the event's title to its most detailed presentations, to alliances in the private market. This can be seen in a context in which, despite China being one of the largest importers of Brazilian commodities (Escher & Wilkinson, 2019; Leite & Rodrigues, 2024), agricultural technology is derived from multinationals headquartered in Europe and the United States (Pacheco, 2023; Hettwer, 2022).

The trend of electing carbon as the protagonist of ABAG's and partners' environmental discourse is confirmed in subsequent events. From a technical standpoint, the 2022, 2023, and 2024 CBAs celebrate no-till farming and Crop-Livestock-Forest Integration (ILPF) practices that promote carbon fixation in agricultural systems. However, the discursive differentiator is to transform carbon fixation into a profitable asset, as stated by Joaquim Leite, Minister of the Environment in the Bolsonaro government: *This is the path to moving from an environmental liability to an environmental asset* (CBA, 2022, p. 11).

The main bottleneck identified in the documents concerns the metrics for evaluating carbon storage and the dispute to recognize the difference between temperate and tropical agriculture. Months before COP 30, the 2025 CBA announces:

> *With the recognition of differentiated metrics between the tropical and the temperate world, combined with integration, the supply of biofuels, the national technological revolution, capacity building, and exceptional productivity, agribusiness proves to be too significant to be overlooked.* (CBA, 2025, p. 5).

Also celebrated were certain advances regarding the financialization of environmental assets. Mention is made of CBIOs (Decarbonization Credits) (CBA, 2022, p. 10), funds (CBA, 2022, p. 26), and green bonds (CBA, 2024, p. 36) that have energized the financial market by thematizing the environmental question.

The integration of ESG criteria has emerged as a central vector for environmental certifications in the Brazilian soybean supply chain, aligning productive practices with global standards that value sustainability. Initiatives such as the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS) incorporate ESG metrics, requiring traceability, reduction of deforestation, and conservation of biomes, which raises the market value of certified assets and attracts institutional investors concerned with reputational risks. On the other hand, soybean certification and auditing does not fulfill the social function of protecting local communities, land, and water (Schilling-Vacaflor et al., 2021).

Certifications gain momentum with the European Green Deal, men-

tioned at the 22nd CBA (2023, pp. 8 and 14), especially through the EUDR (European Union Deforestation Regulation), which imposes stringent compliance requirements, such as proof of absence of deforestation after 31/12/2020 and georeferenced traceability for exports to the EU (Instituto Centro de Vida [ICV], 2024).

David and Camana (2023) found that environmental governance in soybean certification has generally been driven primarily by voluntary corporate arrangements, in which each company defines its own sustainability goals and criteria. This fragmentation generates a cacophony of norms that, although presented as technically neutral, express private interests and conceal the structural limits of the agro-export model.

Regarding the issue of food security, the narrative extends into subsequent congresses and can be illustrated by an excerpt from the speech of Ricardo Santin, president of the Associação Brasileira de Proteína Animal (Brazilian Animal Protein Association – ABPA), at the 23rd CBA (2024):

> *There can be no borders for food. In this new world order, the government needs to be strong, positioning us and seeking agreements. Brazil is competitive, it has water, soil, climate, sunshine, and a population with a vocation for producing food. There are billions of people without access to food. In the medium and long term, we will be even more important in the supply of proteins, which is what the world is asking for.* (CBA, 2024, p. 22).

This narrative is associated with the perspective of global supply of agricultural commodities, perpetuating the absence of debate on food insecurity and hunger within Brazilian territory.

4.2.3. Synthesis of the discourse analysis

The discourse of Brazilian agribusiness reveals a central contradiction: while projecting an image of productive efficiency and global leadership in food security, it ignores the internal realities of hunger and food insecurity affecting millions of Brazilians. The narrative of "feeding the world" through commodity exports privileges the logic of the international market while disregarding the local impact of this model, both in social and environmental terms. The omission of clear strategies for improving the quality of agricultural production, combined with the focus on the ESG agenda as a generic solution, reinforces the impression that the discourse serves more as a symbolic legitimation of agribusiness on the global stage than as a response to the concrete needs of food security and socio-environmental justice in the country.

It should be highlighted that, despite the thematic shifts and more sophisticated technical-environmental vocabulary in recent CBAs, a structural contradiction persists between the sustainability discourse and the maintenance of an agri-food model centered on monoculture, intensive use of pesticides, defense of private property, and systematic omission of

socio-environmental conflicts in the countryside. This discursive continuity reinforces the thesis that the sector seeks to insert itself hegemonically into the environmental debate through a rhetoric of innovation and governance that masks the social and ecological impacts of its activities.

It can be concluded that the environmental discourse produced by ABAG and its partners tends toward the financialization of sustainability targets, with carbon emission reduction being one of the most significant, as an incentive for sustainable practices. From a geopolitical standpoint, this demonstrates, explicitly from the last quotation, the sector's objective of gaining commercial advantage from tropical biodiversity.

On the other hand, this reveals a project of intensifying inequalities through the exclusion of the vast majority of smallholders who are unable to access financial markets, as well as through the exclusion of recognized actors responsible for maintaining most forest fragments, namely indigenous peoples and traditional communities (Oviedo & Doblas, 2022; Lu et al., 2010; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2023).

5. Final considerations

The discourse analysis reveals the symbolic and semiotic character of the contest over the social appropriation of nature. This is because the discursive formations examined play a strategic role: through their rhetoric, they articulate different actors with the aim of consolidating a cohesive historical bloc. This process, which occurs simultaneously, enables not only the representation of these actors but also the conquest of power in the political arena.

This article contributes to the field of political ecology and critical discourse studies by offering an updated empirical analysis of the discursive strategy of hegemonic actors in the Brazilian agri-food system. By articulating Critical Discourse Analysis with the category of the geopolitics of sustainable development, a perspective is proposed that integrates political economy, semiotics, and disputes over representation, in dialogue with current debates on the topic (Pompeia & Schneider, 2021).

It was possible to highlight that ABAG and its partners, the authors of the hegemonic discursive formation analyzed, follow trends in the global geopolitical debate on the environmental question, echoing terms consolidated in the core countries of capitalism, such as the ESG, which seek to reconcile the same pattern of accumulation and private capital circulation with cutting-edge techniques, technologies, and rhetoric in the field of sustainability.

The hegemonic discourse reveals its alignment with dominant structures, particularly through the absence of cultural differences within its rhetoric. In this way, it becomes a silent accomplice to the apparatuses of

class, gender, racial, and colonial domination, as well as to the objectification of nature, even while incorporating the environmental question.

It was found that discourses opposing illegal deforestation and advocating for the protection of the Amazon, among others, constitute a strategy of image repair employed by dominant actors before the international community. This factor reinforces the role of the geopolitics of central capitalist countries in advancing interests related to the conservation of the natural resources of peripheral countries.

The ABAG and its partners, therefore, position themselves as a vanguard among hegemonic actors by championing a positive approach to the environmental question. This leadership manifests itself in the attempt to articulate a discourse that reconciles high agricultural productivity, the accumulation and circulation of capital, and commodity exports with the idea of sustainability. By assuming this position, ABAG seeks to consolidate a cohesive bloc that shapes the narrative on the use of natural resources, legitimizing a development model that would, in theory, preserve the environment without compromising the economic interests of the sector. However, this approach does not imply that all hegemonic actors in agri-food systems share this vision (Pompeia, 2021). The discourse analyzed not only contests the meanings of sustainability, but also resignifies the very process of appropriating nature, though not in a uniform way.

The positive approach to the environmental question, as well as to food security (Pompeia & Schneider, 2021), constitutes an arena of contestation with subaltern actors in agri-food systems. Rural social movements, non-governmental organizations, universities, and other actors join in denouncing the predatory and unequal consequences of the model of agricultural production imposed by agribusiness. As an example, the Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia (National Agroecology Articulation – ANA), in dialogue with indigenous peoples, traditional communities, and rural and urban social movements, projects a counter-hegemonic discourse aimed at affirming the subaltern existence of other ways of practicing agriculture and demonstrating that it is possible to produce healthy food under other forms of socio-environmental relations (Romanini Netto, 2024).

It is therefore possible to consider the environmental question an important political arena of contestation among agri-food systems and, above all, among the organizations that seek to represent the leading actors within those systems. The essentially discursive and semiotic character of this contestation has been highlighted. Ultimately, what is at stake is the power struggle among distinct modes of the society-nature relationship and, consequently, among the groups that claim the right to appropriate non-human nature and to determine the ways in which human groups will establish this relationship.

Acknowledgments

We thank the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development – CNPq) for funding this research in the form of a scholarship.

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