



The swaying of flames in sugarcane fields: entrepreneurs and public authorities on the São Paulo agroenvironmental protocol agenda

O oscilar das chamas nos canaviais: empresariado e poder público na agenda do protocolo agroambiental paulista

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ABSTRACT: This article intends to elaborate an interpretation of the positions of the São Paulo State Secretariat for the Environment and of the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry Association (UNICA) concerning the classification of burnings in sugarcane fields, elaborated during the construction of the Protocolo Agroambiental Paulista (Agroenvironmental Protocol of the state of São Paulo sugar and ethanol sector). This protocol, signed in 2007, aims to adjust the sugar and ethanol sector environmental conduct, focusing, to a large extent, on gradually eliminating the practice of burning sugarcane straw. Starting from documentary research and interviews conducted with representatives of the state authorities and the representative body of the sector, we argue that the strategies taken by such agents allowed the protocol to function as a means able to guide the debate on burnings. This function hinders the creation of new legal prohibitions on this practice and empties the critiques aimed at sugarcane production.

Keywords: agroenvironmental protocol; public authorities; sugar and ethanol sector; pre-harvesting burning of sugarcane straw.

RESUMO: Este artigo objetiva tecer uma interpretação sobre o posicionamento da Secretaria do Meio Ambiente do Estado de São Paulo, bem como da União da Indústria de Cana-de-Açúcar (UNICA) acerca da classificação da queima nos canaviais, elaborada durante a construção do Protocolo Agroambiental Paulista. Firmado em 2007, esse protocolo visa ao “ajustamento de conduta” em termos ambientais do setor sucroalcooleiro, voltado, em grande medida, à eliminação gradativa da prática da queima da palha da cana-de-açúcar. Partindo da pesquisa documental e entrevistas realizadas com representantes da burocracia estatal e dessa instância

representativa do setor, argumentamos que as estratégias assumidas por tais agentes permitiram ao Protocolo funcionar como um veículo para pautar o debate das queimadas, capaz de inviabilizar a criação de novas leis proibitivas dessa prática e esvaziar as críticas voltadas à produção canavieira.

Palavras-chave: protocolo agroambiental; poder público; setor sucroalcooleiro; queima da palha da cana-de-açúcar.

1. Introduction

Despite the advance in mechanization in the last decade, which promotes raw sugarcane harvesting without burning, the use of fire still remains a conflict in suspension in the state of São Paulo sugarcane reality. Not only is it practiced, but also divides positions, which fuels the disputes within the government bureaucratic spheres.

A recent piece of news announces that the State of São Paulo Office of the Prosecutor General (OPG; PGE in Portuguese) presented an appeal pending in the Federal Court, which advocates the burning of sugarcane straw as being “not potentially harmful” to human health or to the environment (Valente, 2021). This observation goes in the opposite direction of the discussions already conducted in the legal ambit and enunciated by Law nº 11241/2002, which provides on the elimination of the Burnings in the sugarcane fields, until then in force in the state (São Paulo, 2002).

The OPG representative reiterates that the Secretariats for the Environment¹ and that of Agriculture and Food Supply already count on “a strict procedure for authorizing the controlled burning of the sugarcane straw”, yet it does not provide

on the need for elaborating an EIA/Rima [study on environmental impacts] by the entrepreneur” (Valente, 2021, n.p).

This statement denotes the technical authority of the secretariats regarding these authorizations. However, by allowing that burning still occurs, the strict procedure paradoxically and eventually legitimizes that it is not classified as potentially harmful.

The authorization for burning is secured by the aforementioned Law nº 11241/2002, which provides on sugarcane production, as well as by a former regulation, state Law nº 10547/2000, known as the “Law on Burning” (Goldemberg, 2002; Jardim, 2002; Gonçalves, 2005), governing other agricultural, pastoral and forest practices supported by the use of fire (São Paulo, 2000). The two laws state that it is the responsibility of the Secretariat for the Environment (SMA-SP) to provide these authorizations² – the same secretariat that, as a counterpart, accounts for managing the Projeto Estratégico Etanol Verde (Green Ethanol Strategic Project)³ and for actions deriving from it, such as the Agroenvironmental Protocol of the São Paulo Sugar and Ethanol sector, aiming at the sustainability of the sugarcane production.

¹ It is currently called Secretariat of Infrastructure and the Environment.

² As from state Decree nº 47700, of March 11, 2003, the State of São Paulo Environmental Company (CETESB) is in charge of issuing the authorizations.

³ The Green Ethanol SEP was established in 2007, seeking to stimulate sustainable sugar and ethanol production. It integrates the 21 Strategic Environmental Projects, created by the Secretariat for the Environment, which aim to guide the environmental policy of the state of São Paulo (SMA, 2007).

Among these actions, from this protocol we could verify a greater effort by the SMA-SP to mediate the interests of society, of the Government and of the sugar and ethanol sector concerning the conflicting debate on the elimination of the sugarcane fields burnings. Especially considering the position of this secretariat during the formulation and the conduction of the protocol we here purpose to discuss how its technical – and political – authority strategically contributes to make it a means capable of leading the debate on burnings. In this sense, we argue that the protocol produces traps that ensure correlative advantages not only to the secretariat, but also to the sugar and ethanol sector.

To elaborate this foreword, we resorted to a theoretical framework that emphasizes the analyses by Pierre Bourdieu (2006; 2010; 2020) regarding the authority, symbolic power and classification, deployed for better understanding the position of the agents and the strategies supporting the formulation of the Agroenvironmental Protocol. Seeking to advance on the (un)foreseen effects brought about by the signature of the protocol, we resorted to interacting with the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski, Ève Chiapello, Claudette Lafaye and Laurent Thévenot (Lafaye & Thévenot, 1993; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2020; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020).

In methodological terms, the article is supported on the analyses of documents on the creation and celebration of the Agroenvironmental Protocol. We researched documents produced by the government of the state of São Paulo – especially by the Secretariat for the Environment – and by the corporate entities from the sugar and ethanol sector during

the years in which the Protocol was elaborated and implemented (2007 to 2017)⁴. In the first case, we consulted records, minutes and reports available at the sites of the State of São Paulo Environmental Company (CETESB) and of the Secretariats for the Environment and of Agriculture and Food Supply. We also had access to technical information and records of meetings, located in the physical collection of the Secretariat for the Environment. As regards the entities, we analyzed sustainability reports and a variety of materials, such as news and bulletins, available on-line at the sites of the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry and Bioenergy Association (UNICA), representative body of the sugar and ethanol sector in the Mid-South, and of Orplana (Organization of Cane Producers Associations in Brazil).

Qualitative interviews were also conducted with representatives of the Secretariat for the Environment of the state of São Paulo and of UNICA. It is worth highlighting that the choice of the agents was deliberate, considering their positions in the social space studied. The interviews, conducted between 2015 and 2017, followed scripts that privileged the participation and the position of these agents in the elaboration and in the conduction of the Agroenvironmental Protocol. From these guidelines, we also purposed to investigate the agenda for discussing the burning of sugarcane at SMA-SP; the construction of the environmental agenda of the sugar and ethanol sector; UNICA and SMA-SP joint work; as well as the motivations that led to creating the protocol.

The remainder of the text is divided into four other topics. In the first, we highlight the motiva-

⁴ The period investigated ranges from the signature of the Protocol, in 2007, to the expiration of the force of its second and last renewal, signed in 2015.

tions and interests that outline the leadership of the SMA-SP in the construction of the proposal for an “adjustment of conduct” of the sugar and ethanol sector. We next analyze how his proposal was received by UNICA, questioning the change in attitude of the sector faced with the burnings issue. We reserved the third section to the discussion of the traps emerging at and after the signature of the Agroenvironmental Protocol, approaching the sparks that still flare from that agreement. We lastly provide the concluding remarks that direct us to the swaying of flames in the São Paulo sugarcane fields.

2. Amidst the smoke: the political construction of the Agroenvironmental Protocol of the São Paulo sugar and ethanol sector

The whole world is talking about global warming, and the sugarcane sector is setting sugarcane fields on fire ... – Ex-Secretary for the Environment. Interview granted on Oct. 27, 2015.

The Agroenvironmental Protocol of the São Paulo sugar and ethanol sector consists of a regulation signed in 2007 between the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry Association (UNICA) and the government of the state of São Paulo, represented by its Secretariats of Agriculture and Food Supply and that for the Environment. The regulation integrates the Green Ethanol Strategic Environmental Project, which aims to develop actions to stimulate the “sustainable” production of sugar, of ethanol and of bioenergy (SMA, 2007).

The initiative of its elaboration combines the geopolitical interest in aligning the São Paulo sugarcane production to the global concern regarding greenhouse gas emissions, following the debates from the Conference of the Parties in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COPs). As a result of COP-3 in 1997, the celebration of the Kyoto Protocol⁵ posed the challenge of reducing GHG emissions as from 2005, by having the industrialized countries to meet the quantitative goals (Souza & Corazza, 2017), assigning the agencies and the environmental bodies the responsibility of creating and monitoring policies to refrain GHG emissions.

Although the proposal of ethanol as a renewable fuel gained momentum in those discussions, it still presented a controversy due to the recurrence of fires in the sugarcane fields. “Negative environmental externalities” would result from this fire, causing the liberation of gases and polluting particles, deriving from carbon dioxide (CO₂), carbon monoxide (CO) and ozone (O₃) (Paixão & Fonseca, 2011, p. 172).

Immersed in this debate, Francisco Graziano Neto takes on the concerns on burnings along his political trajectory. The authority ensured by the positions taken in two secretariats, as well as his relationship with other government agents, allows the ex-secretary to direct his technical expertise to other spaces, such as the legislative ambit, as exposed in the segment as follows.

I am an agronomist; I know this subject, etc. So I said “Look, this thing is dawdling away. We could anticipate the deadline”. There was a law that esta-

⁵ For a more in-depth reading of the elaboration and conduction of the climate regime proposed by the Kyoto Protocol, see Souza and Corazza (2017).

blished the deadline. That law was an extension of a previous legislation. When I was at the Secretariat of Agriculture – I was the state secretary of agriculture when Mário Covas was the governor – it was when, by a decree by the governor, proposed by me, we regulated the burning process in the state of São Paulo, in a certain sense. It was when we established what a mechanizable area was and what a non-mechanizable one was – and this is important in the Protocol due to the deadline, right? So, if it was not mechanizable, it had to have a longer deadline... We conceived that for the first time [...] This was then taken to the state legislature and it became a law, and this law was extended, serving the interest of the mill owners who influenced the representatives, probably, and they extended the deadline. So, if I am not mistaken, the end of the harvest was for 2017 [2021]. Then I went and took it to Serra: “Oh, this is too far, we have to do something”. He said “Let’s modify the law”. So I proposed to him: “And if, instead of changing the law, we enter into a negotiation with the sector, a kind of adjustment of conduct?”. He said: “This is not going to work!”. I said, “Well, can I try?”. He allowed me to go and talk. “It is not going to work, these guys are very influent”. But I had the international agenda in my mind, especially regarding the climate change issue... Acompanhando – Ex-secretary for the Environment. Interview granted on Oct. 27, 2015.

The conflicting institutional scenario, not restricted to the period portrayed in the agent’s speech, tends to oscillate between drawing back and extending the deadline of the burnings in the sugarcane fields. Among these meanders, Law nº 11241/2002 institutes the banning of the practice for 2021 in the mechanizable areas, and 2031, in the

non-mechanizable ones⁶. Amidst this scenario, the Agroenvironmental Protocol, despite not replacing the deadlines, allows new ones for 2014 and 2017, respectively.

This anticipation movement provided by the protocol captures one of the targets most disputed in the sugarcane production and eventually indicates “displacement” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2020) to the criteria of socio-environmental concerns be it on the part of Secretariat for the Environment as on the part of the sector itself. As regards the secretariat, a good reception of this proposal would allow bringing out its efficiency as an environmental agency, in leading the conduction of the debate formerly carried out in the legislative ambit.

Heading the SMA-SP, Francisco Graziano Neto formulates strategies to convince the *influente* sugar and ethanol sector of anticipating the deadlines and incorporating the environmental issue in its agenda. Among such strategies, unlike revoking the law, of mandatory character, the proposal of a negotiation could be a viable outcome for a better acceptance on the part of UNICA.

The Agroenvironmental Protocol could therefore be considered a new sign of communication, aiming at interacting with the sugar and ethanol sector. Hence, the acceptance of the proposal for an “adjustment of conduct” would be equally facilitated if anchored on the understanding of the economic rhetoric, better assimilated by the corporate sector. For Martins (2015, p. 106), this new sign,

⁶ The ex-secretary highlights his contributions to the formulation of Decree nº 42056 of 1997, instituting the classification of the mechanizable and non-mechanizable areas which is retaken by the subsequent legislations and even by the Protocol. A few years before the decree was published, the mechanical cutting of raw sugarcane started, without burning, and it was necessary to propose viable deadlines to the sector so that the technological transition of the cutting was conducted, in order to replace the manual cutting that required previous burning. This classification of areas, in turn, as from the secretary’s technical knowledge as an agronomist, took into account the declivity of the land – a factor that could hinder the entrance of the harvesting machines in the plantations.

which combines economic rhetoric with technical knowledge, would ensure legitimacy for being conditioned “to making itself known by means of economic enunciations”.

It is in this sense, the burnings issue is highlighted by the SMA-SP as an environmental barrier that had to be broken down to yield greater economic benefits to the sector. The protocol thus captures a common point between the political and economic interests of UNICA and of the SMA-SP that, externally, were quite dispersed.

In view of that, if, on the one hand, the Agro-environmental Protocol ensures a response from the State before the socio-environmental degradations favored by the sugar and ethanol sector; on the other hand, it purposes the expansion of symbolic and economic gains for the fuel. Hence, motivated by this common point, according to Luiz Ricardo Viegas de Carvalho, responsible for the Green Ethanol SEP, the representatives of UNICA demonstrate to be willing to *somehow turn this page* of degradations that used to go along with sugarcane production.

[...] there was a disposition, this is important to highlight, there was a very positive disposition by the sector. The sector leaderships, I could say so, the technicians, the entrepreneurs, there was a disposition to somehow turn this page. Even because they were suffering with that. The very product is... Not only ethanol, but also sugar, at some moments this discussion on the work, on the environmental issue was tainting, and by far, the image of the sector. And this, in one way or another, there was a predisposition by the corporations and by the entrepreneurs in seeking this solution, and UNICA headed this. I could thus say that it was a true partner and got very decisively involved in that quest for a solution – Person in charge of the Green

Ethanol Strategic Environmental Project. Interview granted on March 31, 2016.

This section evidences that the discussion on burnings is neither restricted to the elaboration of the Agroenvironmental Protocol, nor to the interests of the political and economic agents. In the day-by-day experience, the smoke and the soot – or the *little charcoal* – enhanced other aspects that, albeit dispersed, when jointly involving a series of agents and sectors, had an expressive weight to stress the degrading potential of sugarcane production over the decades.

There was already some history, like that, of complaints by the population, by NGOs, or workers' movements on account of the burning. [...] Let us think of the manual sugarcane cutting... It is grueling work, there was much news about workers really dying in the sugarcane field, health conditions by the population. Those complaints... Some researches indicated cases of cancer due to the burnings issue. It is really trouble for the population, independently of respiratory issues and everything else, the simple fact of having your laundry getting dirty, your backyard dirty, having to sweep that little charcoal that disintegrates... This steadily increased so much and some public-interest civil actions started to emerge to ban the burning. They were more isolated things, but they were gaining momentum.

Therefore, [the SMA] sat down with the productive sector, with the sugarcane mills and with the sugarcane suppliers to see what could be done. This also considering the expectations of the Prosecutor's Office that accepted the complaints of NGOs, of the population itself to try and make this expansion of sugarcane come true more sustainably – Environmental specialist - SMA/SP. Interview granted on Jan. 14, 2016.

In this segment, Carolina Mattos, environmental specialist, indicates social critiques to aspects regarding public health, working conditions and human dignity, inserted in the burnings issue, denouncing a gap between the real state of things and the desirable one.

However, the centrality of the SMA-SP in this formulation assumes the “real” from a specific classificatory logic. By reducing such critiques to an environmental demand and proposing a specific resolution through a “change in posture” by the sector also in those terms, the secretariat contributes to make other layers of this “real” invisible. In this sense, this classifying logic moves away from other nominations attributed to the burnings, resulting from the society experience (Martins, 2015) – such as their relationship with the overexploitation of the workforce. The “desirable”, in this sense, loses the contours about the specificities of the conflicts inserted in the agricultural practice.

What could be done to deal with the expansion of sugarcane was then agreed upon by means of technical criteria that considered the burnings, besides other environmental demands, as bound to the modern economic exchanges. Among the other demands, the ex-secretary for the Environment stresses that part of his concerns were to add measures regarding water use and the preservation of riparian forests, for example – which also meant to respond to critiques directed to sugarcane production and ended by strengthening the proposal of “sustainability” (Sabadin, 2020).

In this reading, the critiques are presented as points of moral support for elaborating the Agroenvironmental Protocol. This is because they directed the vision of the secretariat to what hindered the sustainability related to sugarcane production. In

other words, they helped create legal provisions (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2020) that, when equally incorporated by the sugar and ethanol sector, showed to be relevant to ensure its expansion.

In this sense, the protocol was in charge of both creating an ideal consensus on the evidences shared as regards the burnings, and also propose a technical solution that, based on economic criteria, would be capable of holding back the set of socio-environmental demands. A similar way is pointed out by Lima (2011) when assessing the environmental policies in Brazil. In his reading, these policies advance in a contradictory and tentative way, yet without eliminating political and economic conflicts, or environmental degradation. In the case studied herein, besides not necessarily holding back the sugarcane expansion, the protocol still grants the Secretariat for the Environment the authority to conduct this debate.

3. Putting out the flames: how UNICA received the Agroenvironmental Protocol

[...] I am trying to think, convey to you what the thought was at that time; I do not want to criticize today what I used to think then. I want to look back into then, how we used to think then. We from the sector thought that the straw burning issue was irrelevant. I used to think that way. That the miller thought that was one thing, but I thought that! And we, the technical people, the guys that conducted the studies, we were not convinced that it was an evil. It was an evil. But first, for the purposes of cleaning the carbon matrix, of fuel, it had no weight. The burning of the sugarcane straw weighed very little as an effect on global warming, on the increase of carbon in the atmosphere. It was very ridiculous. And it would happen anyway. Be it for the straw that remains in the field and rots

away and, therefore, keeps emitting just like burning, be it if I collected that straw and processed it in the boiler. [...] Thus, the problem, and I play a bit of a ridiculous role in that... the short-sightedness of our vision, because it was actually the outskirts of the cities that were within the sugarcane area that saw their laundry soiled with soot. And the argument we used then was like that, with that crudeness: it was not a serious problem— Ex-CEO of UNICA. Interview granted on Oct.10, 2016.

The statement by Eduardo de Carvalho, ex-CEO of UNICA, elucidates a disagreement with the position taken on by the Secretariat for the Environment regarding the burnings in the sugar fields. In that agent's viewpoint, the practice *had no weight* on the discussions on global warming, being counterposed to the initial motivations for elaborating the Agroenvironmental Protocol, highlighted by Francisco Graziano Neto. The environmental debate was known by UNICA, but it sounded as something distant and detached from the sugarcane reality.

The proposal of an “adjustment of conduct” was not thus accepted for recognizing the environmental impacts of the burnings, considered by the technical team of the representative body as *irrelevant*. This vision was also shared among the millers that, in the UNICA ex-CEO's reading, would not have the technical responsibility for taking on a different posture, just like him, who was leading that instance.

Historically, the maneuvers of the sugar and ethanol sector to repeal laws and decrees forbidding the burnings reflect not only its economic, but also its political influence on the state of São Paulo (Andrade Jr., 2016). Halting that practice thus starts to compose the range of concerns of the sector when the environmental issue is faced as an economic lever – when those who lived in the *outskirts of*

the city, who had their *laundry soiled by soot* were seen as potential consumers of the domestic ethanol market.

It was therefore necessary to leave the *short-sightedness of thought* behind, both as regarded the view on those in the *suburbs* and the resistance to acknowledging the burnings issue as a relevant aspect. The incorporation of the environmental issue emerged as a solution to refrain that *short-sightedness*, and that attitude could be seen as a possibility in the strategies for improving the image of the sector, of which the Agroenvironmental Protocol was an integral part.

In that context, a previous step had already been taken by Secretariat for the Environment, which classified the critiques on the burnings as “environmental” demands, as presented in the previous section. Hence, the sector just had to come closer to the resolution of those demands to reach a favorable position in that conflicting debate, permitting to deflate the critiques that soiled its image.

Amidst this concern with the public opinion and with seducing the public, we had to wipe out the idea of the wicked miller, of the traditional miller... the millers depicted in our history books [...] We had to seduce, we had to change that image, there could no longer be the miller in a white linen suit puffing at a cigar, while workers harvested the sugarcane with their bare hands, with sickles, which is a crazy job – Ex-CEO of UNICA. Interview granted on Oct.10, 2016.

In the text above, the agent stresses the concerns with the change in the millers image, seeking to distance it from the representations built over time about these characters. This position is also aligned with the movements of the Brazilian agribusiness of resorting to the “muddled boots of the old lan-

downers” (Chã, 2018, p. 69), for being recognized as promoters of high technology. In this reading, *we could no longer* nurture the colonizing posture of the mill-plantation master, even if the logic of accumulation was not definitely altered.

From the technical viewpoint of this representative body, the impacts of the burnings followed with the same classification, not constituting a *serious problem*. Therefore, the authority of the SMA-SP was questioned, as well as a series of scientific studies that had been contradicting that idea (Marinho & Kirchhoff, 1991; Ribeiro, 2008; Saiani & Perosa, 2016). Despite the disagreements regarding that classification, it was necessary to find an advantage for the change in posture asked for to be justified among the millers’ peers. It is then that this movement of approaching the SMA-SP starts to be seen by UNICA as a breach to support giving up on the *shortsightedness*.

For the Secretariat for the Environment, proving the harmful effects of the burnings to the sector was not at play. In turn, the secretariat sought to convince the sector to sign the “adjustment of conduct” as from a jointly constructed proposal. It was not hence foreseen that the agreement signed would eliminate diverging visions, but rather that it would be able to create another one, which could level the interests involved in the same practice.

Due to the exposed, joining the representatives of the sugar and ethanol sector and those of the SMA-SP to elaborate and to sign the Agroenvironmental Protocol makes a compromise in the sense attributed by Boltanski and Thévenot, in which

[...] people enter an agreement to promote a composition, that is, to halt controversy, without resolving it, by resorting to a proving process in a unique world. The situation of compromising remains a composite [which would be a nuisance in principle], but the conflict is avoided. The beings that care in different worlds are kept present without their identification being a cause for dispute. Yet, besides these characteristics, to identify a situation of compromise, it does not suffice to verify in it the presence of diverging objects. It is also necessary to ensure that its importance has been pointed out and that they be not treated by the participants as mere “trivialities”, the presence of which the observer will barely notice (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020, p. 411 – highlighted by the authors). [free translation]

The protocol would thus be a composition of diverging visions, elaborated with the purpose of strengthening an agreement. By being defined as a “technical and institutional cooperation” (São Paulo, 2007, p. 1), it foresaw the distribution of the responsibilities as regards the elaboration of measures to face the environmental issue. We can therefore relate the discursive production of the protocol with the moral values of justification associated to the ecological imperatives involved in the current debate on “common good” (Lafaye & Thévenot, 1993)⁷.

The tactics founded on this issue, in turn, support the construction of the protocol and contribute for this cooperation to guide the actions of both sides in favor of what was discursively instituted as this “common good”. This time, the development of sustainability in the sugarcane production and,

⁷ The reference to the notion of “common good” in this approach interacts with the analytical effort of Boltanski and Thévenot (2020) to classify magnitudes of justification recurrent in contexts of disagreement and social dispute. In this interaction, Lafaye and Thévenot (1993) suggest constituting an ecological imperative for justifying the practices, increasingly mobilized as a resource by the agents involved in specific dispute situations.

consequently, of ethanol justify the “adjustment of conduct” initiative, while also responding, to a great extent, to the arguments against sugarcane production.

We thus verify that the “change in posture” taken on by UNICA says more about the possibilities that the “new image” could provide in terms of material and symbolic gains than, in fact, the technical reevaluation of the agricultural practice. Effectively, that change represents an arbitrary incorporation of the environmental issue, considering that its full incorporation would be incompatible with the very regime of accumulation (Romeiro, 1998).

Consequently, when reflecting on the importance of UNICA as an economic agent capable of resolving the environmental demands pointed out, the compromise actually hides the reality of the economic power relationships involved in the social conflict regarding the burnings issue.

Therefore, the deflation of the criticism against sugarcane production constitutes one of the advances provided by that compromise, cause the representatives of the sector to be convinced to approve the proposal for an “adjustment of conduct”. This approval thus also had to be made possible by the millers and sugarcane suppliers.

4. The sparks: signing the agreement on the Agroenvironmental Protocol

What was the Protocol? The Protocol was fundamentally an anticipation of the obligations to reduce straw burning already provided in the 2002 legislation, and was, in fact, a voluntary anticipation. A fundamental characteristic that we agreed upon is that it would be

voluntary, and this would grant a badge to those who had adhered to the protocol and abided by the rules provided in it, of phasing out manual harvesting, which did not seem a possible action. In fact, it was thanks to this free will in adhering to the Protocol that I managed to have this approved within UNICA. Without that, there was no way to approve it. If it were mandatory, as the law was, but the law provided a longer deadline... In essence, it was all a game, nothing but a game to accelerate that and for us to conquer the public opinion – Ex-CEO of UNICA. Interview granted on October 10, 2016.

The game mentioned by Eduardo de Carvalho uses a strategic framework of negotiation capable of ensuring the legitimacy of the Agroenvironmental Protocol within the representative body of the sector. The intention then was to “pave the compromise” for both parts, constructing “an understanding about the adequate terms, in seeking a formulation acceptable by everyone” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2020, p. 416). In such a framework, as a counterpart, some implications emerged and allowed converging in the problematization of the economic (and also political) effectiveness of the “adjustment of conduct”, as we seek to discuss in this section.

Here, a pact is established regarding the voluntariness of the agreement, charging the sugarcane millers and suppliers with opting or not for signing it. The protocol, therefore, did not aim to invalidate the gradual reduction proposed by the legislation in force. With that, maintaining a *longer deadline* could also serve as a leeway for the necessary adequacies in the sector.

The absence of an “external” demand, of *mandatory* character *and* with legal power, also expanded the chances for the sector to formulate

its own environmental agenda. Those who did not sign would have to obey what was previously provided by the law, whereas those who did assumed to comply with other technical directives going beyond the new deadlines.

The anticipation of deadlines, as we previously evidenced, refers to the “displacement” – a change in posture – as regards the burnings. The latter, at least discursively, jump from an agricultural practice that ensures the productivity in the sugarcane fields to something that had to be fought against in favor of the “environment” and of society – in favor of the “common good”.

As a result, that displacement serves to leverage the technological conversion of sugarcane cutting, placing itself in the core of the resolutions of the socio-environmental critiques. Mechanization would allow harvesting raw sugarcane, without burning; moreover, it would do away with manual labor in that function. Hence, as from this conversion, it was possible to solve two hindrances to sugarcane production: the socio-environmental impacts of fire and the denunciation of overexploitation of the sugarcane cutters workforce (Sabadin, 2017).

We could argue that the technological conversion is motivated by socio-environmental reasons. However, as proposed by Romeiro (1998), these reasons would be closely related to those of a first economic order. By eliminating those hindrances, the conversion succeeds in dissociation the image of the degradations in the sector, representing a substantial step towards conquering the *public opinion*.

As regards the sugar and ethanol sector, an incentive to erase that image is brought about after the signature of the Agroenvironmental Protocol, as previously evidenced. As remarked by the ex-CEO of UNICA in the statement opening this section, the

badge would account for working as a symbolic expression of its “adjustment of conduct”, paving the way to the desired image.

In this case, the term *badge* takes on at least two classes of words. In practice, they are not presented in a dissociated fashion and refer to dimensions of a same object: the Green Ethanol Certification. A first classification is expressed as a noun, falling back to the materiality of issuing the certificate, from which the Secretariat for the Environment proves the adequacies of the signers. In that segment, the *badge* operates as something to be conquered due to what was previously defined by the SMA-SP as “good environmental practices”.

If a sugarcane mill, or an association [of sugarcane suppliers] wanted to adhere to the protocol, what should it do? The first thing was to manifest the intention. They sent us a letter, saying that they wanted to adhere to the Agroenvironmental Protocol, giving some basic information and compromising with delivering an action plan, telling us how they were going to meet those directives within six months. They then sent the action plan, which was analyzed... Missing items – they also had to forward the deadlines determined – if nothing was missing, they also received their first certificate. And then, each year they had to, and still have to, update their information, to show how they were meeting that – Environmental specialist – SMA-SP. Interview granted on Jan. 14, 2016.

As illustrated by Carolina Matos’s speech, we observe that the efforts of the Secretariat for the Environment goes back to assessing action plans provided by the signers and to emitting Green Ethanol Certification, not being charged with following up the compliance with the adequacies. Its authority thus appears amalgamated with the discursive ambit of guiding the “change in posture”, whereas the

verification of this compliance is transferred to the signers themselves.

Differently from the action plans, which undergoes the approval of the secretariat, this verification is carried out in agreement solely with the interests of the signers faced with the technical criteria previously validated. Conquering the *badge* is thus more closely related to the assumed in the making of the action plan than necessarily in meeting it. Hence, as for the authority of the secretariat, the response of the sector is likewise amalgamated with the discursive ambit.

Not detached from this ambit, the second classification of the term *badge* (*distintivo*, in Portuguese, which also means *distinctive*) is operated, presented as an attribute. This classification allows us to think of the symbolic effects provided and ensured by “becoming distinct”. The incorporation of the environmental issue by these economic agents therefore shows itself as a competitive advantage not only among peers, but also in the *public opinion*, sensitized by the environmental demands (Jollivet & Pavé, 2003).

So the entrepreneurs said this, “Gosh! This stuff can bring market advantages”. An entrepreneur just thinks of that, right? What advantage do I get by doing that? Hell, advantage, advantage, I don’t know, that you are going to expand your market. You are an environmentally adjusted corporation, with an environmental system and all – Ex-secretary for the Environment. Interview granted on Oct. 27, 2015.

From the emission of this *badge* and within this tangle of strategies, the *public opinion*, a potential consumer of ethanol, would have further references to assimilate the production of the sector as *environmentally adjusted* and the conquest of

the market would be attained, as pointed out by the ex-CEO of UNICA.

As a consequence, the posture taken on by the Secretariat for the Environment contributed to build this reality based on the “new image”, aiming to distance itself from the critiques of socio-environmental degradations. Its authorized vision is distributed among concentrating the assessment of abiding by the directives and redistributing the results from the partnership with the sector by means of this *badge* (*distinctiveness*) and of the elaboration of reports with the main advances of the sector.

In these movements, the secretariat eventually justifies a capitalist profit process in terms of the “common good” (Gameiro & Martins, 2014). Its authority collaborates with the construction of this image in the sense that it plays both a role of naming what the target would be of a change in posture by the sector and also of legitimizing it. The name, as we previously presented, results from grouping the critiques dispersed around the burnings issue in a same classification and, consequently, in a same resolution supported by technique.

Notwithstanding the classification of the critiques operating as an objective instrument (Bourdieu, 2020) of the secretariat, also faced with the debate in the state legislative ambit, it eventually favors the sugarcane corporations in the same ambit. This said, the creation of a new law that could perhaps anticipate the deadlines introduced by Law n° 11241 of 2002 is also halted.

The Agroenvironmental Protocol, supported by the Green Ethanol Certification, can therefore be faced as a passport to ensure the economic goal of granting a greater visibility to the sector and, as a consequence, to the fuel. It can furthermore allow a strategic position both for the Secretariat

for the Environment and of the sugar and ethanol sector regarding the debate on the burnings issue in the state.

5. Concluding remarks

The image of a swaying flame allows us to draw a portrait of the conduction of the burnings agenda in the state of São Paulo, which is the foundation of the discussion examined in this article. Following a first movement, we are led to observe the dispute about detaining the authority to guide the debate held between the legislative ambit and the sugar and ethanol sector. By elaborating the proposal of an adjustment of conduct, the Secretariat for the Environment intervenes in this debate, emerging as a new strategy.

The São Paulo Agroenvironmental Protocol, supported on the technical and institutional cooperation established between the parts, is thus capable of attracting the political and economic interests of the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry Association. The “change in posture” of this representative body of the sector, guided and legitimized by the authority of the SMA-SP, bends towards putting out the burnings in the sugarcane fields. Actually, the celebration of the protocol allows an apparent stability to this conflict in suspension.

In order to examine the sparks flared in this and from this cooperation, we sought support in the Sociologies of Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski, Claudette Lafaye, Ève Chiapello and Laurent Thévenot. Avoiding an orthodox reading of the authors, in an interaction with Bourdieu, we propose to interpret the disputes on the classification of the burnings, entered into between the government and

the sugar and ethanol sector. Moreover, Boltanski and the other authors help us understand how, from this conflicting field, it was possible to resort to strategies and justifications that intertwine to build an agreement – this apparent stability that hopes for the “common good”.

We question this stability by unravelling the strategic framework supported by the formulation and conduction of the protocol, reaching its political and economic effectiveness in bringing about the debate on burnings. Its signature allowed a weakening of the critiques directed to the sugarcane production, as well as to highlight the strategic position of the Secretariat for the Environment and of UNICA in this debate. What could lead to extinguishing the flames conversely tends to another swaying.

The new sparks from this agreement can still be noticed. In 2017, another proposal for an “adjustment of conduct” emerges, aiming at the continuity of the operation started in 2007. The *Greener Ethanol Protocol* (São Paulo, 2017) may indicate that the first had not been “green” enough to counter the flames forming in the sugarcane fields.

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