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Between institutional reform and building popular movements: The political articulation of agroecology in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Agroecology is increasingly seen to contain solutions that can be used for wider societal transformation. While debates have mainly focused on reformist versus revolutionary strategies, less attention has been paid to how such strategies connect to peasant demands and how they can be combined for agroecological transformation. In this article we study transformation by the agroecology movement in Brazil through the theoretical lens of political articulation. We show that peasants' local demands for land, alternative farming and local markets were mobilised in an institutional politics to gain policy support and in a populist politics to create movements that pose a systemic challenge to authority. We then argue that the political viability of wider societal transformation lies in the ability to create movements and organisations that politicise peasants and embrace local demands. We conclude that attention should not only be paid to individual strategies and their immediate effects but also on how diverse politics combine, to build the material and symbolic capacity of the movement and their potential for transformation over the long run.

1. Introduction

Agroecology is increasingly promoted by researchers and policy makers to transform agriculture and food systems (Elzen et al., 2017; FAO 2009). It is thought to be better able to address demands for better livelihoods while at the same time also providing societal benefits such as clean water, improved soils, increased biodiversity, social cohesion, and equity. Agroecology emerged in resistance to the Green Revolution and as an alternative for industrial farming in the 1970s (Gliessman 2014, Mendez et al., 2013). Recently, agroecology has been promoted as a strategy for societal transformation, by international organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (HLPE 2019; FAO 2018), national governments such as France and Brazil (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Schmitt 2016; Niederle et al., 2019), NGO's such as OXFAM (Action Aid 2018; OXFAM Solidarité 2014), and multiple research institutes (Côte et al., 2018; IPES-Food 2016) and social movements (Friends of the Earth, 2018; Nyeleni, 2015; La Via Campesina, 2015).

Agroecology has been termed a science, a practice and a movement (Wezel 2011). Originally, the term was coined by agronomists to denote an ecological alternative to the more chemically and mechanically oriented, industrial approach to agriculture (Gliessman 2014). Later on, the term was also used by development workers to differentiate local ecological practices from those of the Green Revolution (Mendez et al., 2013). Peasant movements and other social movements expanded the term to also denote a broader struggle against the modernisation and neo-liberalisation of agriculture and food systems. This broadening of the meaning of agroecology is also reflected in the scientific literature on agroecology which, in the past decade, has expanded from its initial focus on farming to the transformation of entire food systems, including markets and institutions (Gliessman 2013).

Many researchers and policy makers propose a reformist approach to foster transformation towards agroecological agriculture and food systems (Titonell, 2021; Wezel et al. 2020; Nicholls and Altieri 2018; Brescia 2017). This means that they argue for a strong engagement between agroecology and mainstream institutions (including education, agricultural research and extension and government) to enhance institutional support for the construction of agroecological farming practices and for the emplacement of policies that enable them. On the other side of the debate are scholars in political agroecology who argue that the

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engagement with powerful, institutional agents such as large NGOs, research institutes, government organisations and/or businesses risks undoing agroecology from its political content – thereby weakening its capacity to realise structural change, making it vulnerable to co-optation and dependent on the goodwill of politicians (Rivera-Ferre 2018; Giraldo and Rosset 2017; Levidow et al., 2014). This would not only reduce agroecology to a technical innovation for the fine-tuning of industrial agriculture, but also disconnect agroecology from local peasant demands and the structural patterns of inequality in which they are situated, including the distribution of land, the control over markets, and the democratic process within the state itself – patterns which continue to favour agri-business (Holt-Giménez et al., 2021, González de Molina, 2013; Anderson et al., 2019, Petersen 2012). These scholars therefore propose a more radical – or revolutionary - approach to transformation that focuses on the formation of broader food movements and challenging structural patterns that favour agri-business (Giraldo and McCune 2019, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011).

While the above debates have led to considerable insights on possible strategies and their risks, it is less clear how reformist and revolutionary approaches become politically viable or capable of realising transformation (see González de Molina et al., 2020 and Petersen 2013 for important exceptions). Specifically, what is lacking in the literature is a description of how agroecological initiatives can support or usher in societal transformation. Part of that is to understand how agroecology is scaled from the local level to the national and global level, i.e. how local demands and initiatives connect to similar demands and initiatives at the national and global level. In addition, further exploration is needed to understand how both reformist and radical strategies or politics contribute to agroecological transformation.

In political science, the question of how local demands reach politics at higher levels can be addressed via the concept political articulation (Griggs and Howarth 2008; Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The study of political articulation suggests that political power can emanate from articulating social demands in one of two ways. Either demands are articulated to powerful, institutional agents in the form of individual requests, also known as institutional politics, or social demands are articulated in political claims by bundling (and equating) them together in a forceful confrontation to powerholders and the institutional order they represent (populist politics). By focusing on social demands and politics, studies on political articulation have shown when frustrations of the social demands that exist within a community grow into a local struggle and when they do not (Leguizamon 2020; Griggs and Howarth 2008). They also have shed light on the different (and shifting) roles that social movements play and the political dynamics they engage in with governments; be it more collaborative and geared towards the joint creation of policies or be it more oppositional and directed at challenging power (Griggs and Howarth 2008). Finally, studies on political articulation have illustrated how very diverse and potentially oppositional groups may nonetheless come together in popular movements that seek to address a broad range of systemic injustices, among others (Muck 2020, Otto and Böhm, 2006).

In this article, we study sustainable transformation and agroecology through the theoretical lens of political articulation. The objective is to understand how agroecology connects local demands to political demands at the national level through the articulation of demands via different political dynamics. Our study focuses on the agroecology movement in Brazil – a movement which has pursued both institutional and populist politics over time. Below, we first elaborate of the concept of articulation and the methodology of this study, after which we show that in Brazil, peasants' local demands for land, alternative farming and local markets were mobilised in an institutional politics to gain policy support and in a populist politics to create movements that pose systemic challenge to authority. We then argue that the political viability of scaling lies in its ability to create movements and organisations that politicise peasants and embrace local demands. We conclude that attention should not only be paid to individual strategies and their immediate effects but also on how diverse politics combine, to build the material and symbolic capacity of the movement and their potential for transformation over the long run.

2. Transformation and the political concept of articulation

The political concept of articulation allows for an understanding of transformation as the mobilisation of local demands and their translation into different political dynamics at the national level. Building on the theoretical approach developed by Ernesto Laclau (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985), political discourse theory (PDT) of the Essex school describes articulation in terms of signifiers (e.g. symbols, words, sounds) that relationally connect with one another to fix meaning in particular ways (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Howarth 2000). According to PDT, the way in which meaning is fixed is what guides the course of social action and what orders reality as we know it.[1] However, meaning is never fully fixed as there are always alternative ways in which signifiers are related to each other, i.e. they can always be articulated *differently*. Political action then takes place in that space of "unfixity", when grievances and frustrations are articulated into local demands that disturb dominant discourses and when these demands are further articulated into institutional and/or populist politics that contest and change the dominant institutional order[2] (Laclau 2005; Griggs and Howarth 2008).

Social demands originate from grievances and frustrations. While Laclau and the Essex school do not give an elaborate understanding of grievances and frustrations, this has been provided by scholars that are part of the so called 'affective turn' in the social sciences[3] (e.g. Davies, 2012; Haraway 1993; Deleuze and Guattari 1983). These scholars understand grievances as bodily sensations that overflow and thereby hold the potential to disturb the way meaning has been fixed. Such "overflowing sensations" may result from external disruptions, such as changes in government policy, or from repetitive practice, for example when a particular activity leads to physical exhaustion, mental fatigue or the inability to pursue other wishes (Woodward and Lea 2010; Deleuze and Guattari 1983). Thus, social demands can originate in many places and in different ways. A good example is when soil degradation disturbs industrial agricultural practices from being productive and profitable. When this occurs, reality no longer corresponds to the way meaning has been fixed (i.e. the idea that industrial agriculture is the most productive mode of agriculture), which in turn opens discourse to alternative ideas about agriculture. However, Leguizamon (2020) also argues that these

[1] In PDT, discourse is seen as the structured totality that follows from the articulations of signifiers. Power and authority emerge from a system of meaning that comes to be seen as natural and logical and consolidates into a dominant or hegemonic discourse. However, the meaning of discourses is never fully fixed: a symbol or signifier is open to interpretation and may mean multiple things at the same time as it is articulated in different ways. Power and authority that follow a hegemonic discourse therefore are never absolute either and may be challenged through new ways of articulating meaning.

[2] Institutions are understood as consolidated rules, norms, identities, and societal organisations that follow from a sedimented – in other words "fixed" – discourse. The dominant institutional order, then, reflects a discourse whose meaning prevails over other discourses and articulations of meaning. From this perspective, politics or the political consists of contestation and decision making in and through meaning.

[3] By linking the notion of articulation to a more elaborate understanding of grievances and frustrations we address some of the critique on Laclau's theoretical approach as being decontextualised, ahistorical and paying little attention to materiality (e.g. Borriello & Jäger 2021). Grievances and frustrations emphasise local relations and encounters in the past and present. They also open the possibility for transformative action not only in the form of institutional and populist politics but also as the material construction of farming and territory. While this falls outside the scope of this article, they have been described in earlier work on the Zona da Mata and Brazil that align with this article (e.g. Van den Berg 2018; Van den Berg et al., 2021).

types of grievances only become transformative when they turn into local demands that politicise and that problematise existing meaning and the relations that uphold them. She shows how the state and agri-business in Argentina equated large scale, chemical intensive soy production to progress and how the lack of politicisation of grievances about the negative environmental and health impacts of the soy-agro-industrial complex have resulted in making the problem invisible. As argued by Grossberg in an interview of Stuart Hall (1986), transformative articulations need to not just express grievances, but also to draw on meaning that is engrained within the community, even when their link to the problem at hand is not obvious or even necessary. Botelho et al. (2016) offer a good example, when they show that the problematisation of industrial agriculture in the Zona da Mata in Brazil was strongly linked to religious ideas that exist among local peasant communities.

The articulation of local demands and how they are presented to existing authorities or systems of power can take place via two types of political logics: institutional or populist politics (Laclau 2005, Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Institutional politics follows the logic of difference through which demands turn into requests that are dealt with individually (per demand) and that do not disturb the existing institutional order. In an institutional politics, demands are put forward in a piecemeal or punctual fashion and are addressed by powerholders without altering the status quo. This type of demands does not fundamentally challenge the institutional system; rather, it seeks solutions through adaptations of existing institutions through concessions and negotiation. An example of this is when sharecroppers request their landlord for a larger share of the harvest. Omi and Winant (2015) warn that institutional politics can be absorbed or co-opted by powerholders. They illustrate how demands for emancipation and for wealth redistribution by the Black movement in the United States were rearticulated by the federal government into ideas of incorporation and formal (but not substantive) equality, in an effort to demobilise and contain the movement. Those rearticulated demands were in turn addressed through moderate reforms.

Populist politics follow the logic of equivalence through which different demands are linked to one another, to come together as a claim that challenges the existing institutional system. This involves the articulation of a master (or empty) signifier that expresses universal ideas of justice with which subjects can identify (Laclau 2005). The combination of demands involves constructing a collective identity such as 'a people' or 'a community' which is placed in opposition to authority. Populist politics thus profess to speak in the name of the people and seek to form a shared set of values, beliefs and symbols which can advance the interests of such collective subjects. Demands are articulated in such a way that they are opposed to the institutional order and current authority. This creates a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the people and authority - which in turn forms the basis to challenge authority (Laclau 2005).

Institutional politics can change into populist politics. As shown by Griggs and Howarth (2008), this can occur when institutional requests are not met, and the sense of grievance hardens. In their study, an unsuccessful struggle of local inhabitants against planned expansion of the Stansted airport in the U.K. grew into to a more universal struggle aimed at countering airport expansion and air travel in the South of England. Otto and Böhm (2006) illustrate how a turn towards more populist politics can connect diverse groups and broaden movements beyond categories such as class. Their study shows how a movement against privatisation of water in Bolivia broadened from traditional unions to include farmers, urban consumers and environmental organisations. In this process, master signifiers are progressively emptied of ideological content as new demands and identities are attached to them, and serve as points of symbolic identification for a range of groups and subjects with divergent identities and interests.

The capacity of populist politics to unite diverse, otherwise fragmented groups, has led several activists and scholars (e.g. Laclau 2005; McKean 2016, Aslanidis, 2017) to propose popular movements as a vehicle for democratisation and social inclusion.[4] According to Mouffe (2018) this involves the creation of democratic equivalents, defined as "a chain of equivalence between the different democratic struggles to recognise the specificity of the demand … not unite all demands into one single and homogeneous movement … [but] establish ways in which, for instance, the feminist or the anti-racist movement could work together … Our struggles are not exactly the same but are going to be linked in such a way that, for instance, the demands of women will not be met at the expense of blacks or immigrants" (Mouffe 2018: 56 in Muck 2020). The view of populist politics as a democratic project has been important in shaping major political developments, particularly Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, as well for the analysis of social movements in Latin America, including Brazil (Naves and Reis 2017), Bolivia (Otto and Böhm 2006), Venezuela (Stavrakakis et al., 2016) and Latin America at large (Muck 2020, Laclau, 1985).

3. Case description and methodology

Our analysis focuses on politics and transformation by the agroecology movement in Brazil. In Brazil, what is known as 'alternative agriculture' preceded the introduction of agroecology. Starting in the 1980s, alternative agriculture emerged in resistance and as an alternative to the Green Revolution. Alternative agriculture was used to refer to indigenous as well as to new practices of farming, marketing and education. Many of these practices were promoted and developed by local collaborations between peasants, researchers, local NGOs and peasant organisations, of which many exist throughout Brazil (Schmitt 2016). The term agroecology gave conceptual rigor to these practices, as also happened in other Latin American countries (Altieri and Toledo 2011). In Brazil, the strong engagement between agroecology and local peasants led the agroecology movement to embrace a range of issues that are often not considered to be part of agroecology in other regions and continents. This includes the conflict between peasants and landlords and the contamination of people and animals by pesticide application.

In 1983, various regional agroecology initiatives in Brazil join hands to form the Project of Alternative Technologies network (Rede PTA). In 2002 this network begins to operate at the national level and is reconfigured in the National Articulation on Agroecology (ANA). ANA moreover began to incorporate not only NGOs but also other agrarian movements and organisations (Bensadon 2016; Schmitt 2016). During

[4] Laclau's notion populist politics was inspired by developments in Latin America. In Latin America, three contrasting waves of populism have been distinguished. In what has been dubbed the classic era (1940s and 1950s), populist leaders such as Perón (Argentina) and Vargas (Brazil) mobilised excluded groups for left-of-centre social reforms. In a second wave of populism (1980s and 1990s), leaders such as Fujimori (Peru) and Collor de Mello (Brazil) did not implement leftish but neo-liberal reforms. In a third wave of populism (since the 2000s) leaders such as Correa (Ecuador), Morales (Bolivia) and Chavez (Venezuela) have fostered major institutional reforms that seek to diminish the power of established elites and to incorporate excluded sectors. These contrasting developments have sparked strong debates over the meaning of populism and its relation to authoritarianism and democracy (see Laclau 1977 and Kaltwasser et al., 2017 for a more elaborate review). Two prominent approaches to populism that have come forth from a Latin American perspective are those by the Mexican scholar Enrique Dussel and by the Argentinian scholar Ernesto Laclau (see Ciccariello-Maher 2020 for an elaborate comparison). Dussel grounds his analysis in the people and context of Latin America, arguing that populism is tied to authoritarianism and therefore never was or will be of 'the people' (Dussel 2013). Laclau formulates a universal logic of populism as constituted by the establishment of an equivalential chain of different demands, which are in varying degrees present in all political activity. As equivalential chains challenge authority and bring together demands from different groups, Laclau argues that democratic politics are always populist, (see also Gandesha 2018). Even if it may continue to have some element of authoritarianism, populist politics can push for democratic reforms.

this period, many efforts by the movement were geared towards the formation of policies for agroecology. From 2002 onwards, ANA increasingly engaged with progressive social movements that were not primarily agrarian. Over time, one can witness an intensification of engagements between local and national agroecology movements and municipal, state and national agents (Bensadon 2016, Niederle et al., 2019). In this article, we present Brazil as an exemplary case of how agroecology mobilises local demands and, via different politics, connects them to political demands and ideas at the national level. With almost 40 years, Brazil hosts one of the oldest agroecology movements in the world, and as a result the way the movement engages with politics and agents at different levels has been well established. At the national level our research follows the emergence of ANA, which consists of representatives of local and state level movements including those from the states of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, and from the Amazon region. It also consists of national organisations including the Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG), National Federation of Workers in Family Farming (FETRAF), The Landless Workers Movement (MST), Movement of Small-Scale Farmers (MPA), Movement of Women Workers (MMTR) and the Movement of Peasant Women (MMC). At the local level our research follows the development of agroecology in the region of Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais, which is one of Brazil's most active local movements, and well connected to its national counterpart (Schmitt 2016). The movement in the Zona da Mata consists of peasants, peasant groups and organisations, the Centre for Alternative Technologies (CTA), and researchers from the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV) (Cardoso et al., 2001, Cardoso and Mendes, 2015). Our analysis in the Zona da Mata focuses on three municipalities: Araponga, Divino and Espera Feliz.

We adopted a qualitative approach to data collection that allowed us to capture how political engagements between different actors take place (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Data was collected in the period between 2016 and 2018, through extensive fieldwork by the first author. The first author allied himself to researchers from the UFV, which gave him access to various leaders in the movement as well as to their constituencies and activities. He participated in public gatherings, closed and open meetings, and other activities organised by the movement at the local and national level. He also conducted in-depth interviews with movement leaders and constituencies.

The data used for this research consists of notes from participant observation, transcribed interviews and documents. Participant observation consisted of participating and helping with the organisation of ten gatherings where strategic discussions were held between different actors, including peasant organisations, NGO's, researchers, policy makers and representatives from local and national movement constituencies. These gatherings include public events, meetings to prepare for these events and meetings by various working groups. This allowed the first author to observe how engagements between different actors take place and how these engagements shape different politics. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty people, who were selected on the basis of their involvement in local and national movement activities. A balance in age, gender and social status was sought when selecting interviewees. With regards to gender thirteen interviewees were women and seven men. With regard to age: two were in their twenties, six in their thirties, seven in their forties and five were over fifty. And with regard to societal position: two were researchers, ten were active in peasant organisations, four were NGO staff and five were active in Black, Indigenous or urban movements. Documents that were analysed included reports from meetings and scientific publications on policy in Brazil. Interviews and documents were selected to obtain a picture of the engagement of different local and national organisations and movements with one another and with societal and governmental institutions.

To get an understanding of how agroecology mobilises local demands and, via different politics, connects them to political demands and ideas at the national level, the collected data was subjected to several rounds of analysis through coding. We placed special attention on social demands and how these connect to local grievances and frustrations, and to institutional and populist politics. First, existing local demands that challenge the Green Revolution were identified and analysed for how they link to power relations and past occurrences that have led to grievances and frustrations among peasants. An example is the demand for more sustainable practices, which emerged from occurrences where peasants experienced severe land degradation, and which led to the problematisation of peasants' relation with agribusiness practices. Second, we focused on how local demands are brought to the national level, via institutional or populist politics. The analysis captured and identified institutional and populist politics by looking at how and through what engagements social demands are translated into requests or claims. Demands for sustainable practices were, for instance, turned into requests for policies that support agroforestry through engagements with policy makers. They were also articulated into claims through engagements with other movements that challenge the governments' favouring of agri-business. To explore the significance of the findings for societal transformation and scaling, we contrasted the results of the analysis with the literature on agroecology, specifically on how it engages with reformist and revolutionary strategies for transformation.

4. Articulating agroecology in Brazil

4.1. Grievances and frustrations

In the Zona da Mata, local peasants' grievances and frustrations over sharecropping, decreasing income and pesticide contamination played a key role in shaping the politics of the agroecology movement at the national level. They were articulated into local demands for land, markets and ecological farming, which have become core themes in agroecology in Brazil. These grievances all stem from occurrences in peasants' everyday lives.

Grievances over sharecropping emerged from abuse by landlords. In sharecropping arrangements farmers do not own the land but rent it in exchange for part of the harvest. In the Zona da Mata this often concerns the cultivation of coffee - of which half is given to the landlord (Cardoso and Mendes, 2015). However, landlords often gave less than the share of the harvest that was agreed upon, demanded that sharecroppers take on extra tasks such as housekeeping and often insisted that coffee be sold via them rather than directly. Also, sharecroppers were often not allowed to decide what, how and when to plant. This also led to grievances and frustrations - for instance of having to work in the rain or for not being allowed to have a vegetable garden.

Grievances over decreasing incomes emerged with decreasing coffee prices and increases in the price of chemical fertilisers and of food that farmers buy in the stores. As a result of these occurrences farmers had to work harder, had less time to do things outside of work, and had a bad prospect for the future. Grievances emerged not only among sharecroppers but also among peasants who owned a small plot of land:

> "At the moment, farmers are being massacred, my God. The work it takes for you to produce just to pay off your inputs! And by the time you sell there is no good price. […] Nothing is left! You even have to take from your own pocket. So it is very difficult." (Farmer Araponga)

Finally, grievances over pesticide contamination appeared when pesticide contamination led to illness and deaths among people and animals. Pesticides that are applied in the pastures, coffee plantations and maize fields also contaminate the air, drinking water and the surrounding environment.

> "We see how many people under 30 lost their lives, died. Young people who have a tumour. A brain tumour, a tumour in the liver, a tumour in the stomach, a tumour in the lungs. All because of [..] poison. I have seen people become sick, very sick. […] With animals

it is the same thing […] There was a day when many birds suddenly fell dead on the field. Not small but big birds […] But also many armadillos died. Many small animals as well. Fireflies, butterflies, crickets, many. All disappeared. Also, many species of birds, they all died." (Farmer Divino).

Grievances about sharecropping, decreasing income and pesticide contamination turned into social demands during different types of encounters. Some of these encounters were held at the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEB). The CEB's were advanced by the left wing of the Catholic Church, which promoted the Marxist-inspired doctrine of Liberation Theology from the 1980s onwards (Boff and Boff 1986; Betto 1985). Municipalities in the Zona da Mata hosted several hundred CEB groups. Other encounters took place at the Pastoral da Juventude Rural which has constituencies in many municipalities and organise trainings for rural youth that are also based on Liberation Theology (Goris and Van den Berg, 2019). Yet another type of encounter were the intercâmbios organised by researchers from the Federal University of Viçosa and peasant organisations (Zanelli et al., 2015). The intercâmbios make use of critical pedagogies, many inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire.

During the encounters described above, grievances were linked to particular social relations and articulated into social demands. Grievances over sharecropping were linked to farmers' relations with landlords, which came to be seen as unfair:

"With the work [by the CEB's] things got a little more intense because there were many people who worked as sharecroppers. And from the moment that these people became aware of injustice they started to demand a little more from landlords. How so? A simple example. Imagine I worked as a sharecropper on a property with a landlord who demands we work so-and-so many days a week on his property. Sometimes he would pay and sometimes he wouldn't […]. This forced us to join hands and have an organization where more people would fight to defend our rights." (Former Union Leader Araponga).

Grievances over farmers' diminishing income came to be linked to farmers' relation to commodity markets. These markets also came to be seen as unfair as they did not value more sustainable production:

"The market, the coffee business. I think it is a very sad thing in our region. If you sell coffee it is a commodity. When you deliver it, the buyer doesn't even want to know where the coffee came from. What it has. There is only one price. So, it doesn't stimulate people to look for quality, to work for quality. […] There should be a difference between coffee grown with and without pesticides." (farmer at intercâmbio in Espera Feliz)

Grievances over pesticide contamination linked farmers and pesticide salesmen, large coffee middlemen and others who promoted industrial agricultural practices.

Grievances about sharecropping, decreasing income and pesticide contamination were not only linked to actors who were seen to cause them, but also activated relations for the construction of alternatives. While grievances for land were articulated in social demands for better sharecropping arrangements, in the municipality of Araponga they also activated relations of solidarity amongst farmers to jointly purchase land (see also Van den Berg et al., 2018a and Campos 2014). Similarly, grievances about decreasing income were not only articulated in demands for better prices but also activated farmers, researchers and NGOs to construct local markets. Finally, grievances about pesticide contamination were articulated in demands to ban agrotoxins but also activated farmers' relations with micro-organisms, trees and weeds to establish alternative farming practices (see also Van den Berg et al., 2018b). When constructing alternative practices other frustrations emerged such as the lack of policy support and obstacles in legislation, which were articulated in demands to support alternatives. As such grievances were articulated in demands that challenged existing relations as well as in demands to support alternatives.

4.2. Institutional politics

Three types of groups who performed institutional politics were of particular importance for the agroecology movement: regional groups, knowledge groups and policy groups. These groups not only target different areas that are considered to be important for the advancement of agroecology, but they also facilitate and offer spaces for the engagement between local and national realties (see also Niederle et al., 2019; Schmitt 2016; Bensadon 2016; Petersen et al., 2013). As part of these institutional politics, local demands for land, markets and ecological farming were articulated in the form of requests towards authorities and other powerholders, following a differential logic as part of institutional politics.

Regional groups can be found across Brazil, and often consist of farmers, peasant organisations, researchers and NGOs. In Zona da Mata, regional groups are supported by local peasant organisations, the CTA and agroecologists from the Federal University of Viçosa. Representatives from regional groups also participate in national groups supported by ANA (Bendason 2014). In these groups specific requests are articulated, including requests for particular schemes to obtain credit, certification, or rural extension (Silva et al., 2014). Such requests follow the formation of groups working on particular themes that include land, peasant rights, seeds, rural extension, certification, markets, agroforestry and women.

The requests these groups articulated emerged through a thorough process of articulating demands from different regions and organisations. An example is the request for the formal recognition of indigenous seeds:

"There were some groups engaged with the issue of seeds - the preservation and multiplication of indigenous seeds. The people from the Northeast are working with seed banks, because of the specific situation in the semi-arid. […] In the South, and even here [in the Mideast], we work with seed production. […] All these experiences were facing institutional barriers. You were not allowed to register these seeds, not able to sell them. So the seeds working group was created […] which had the role of examining existing legislation and think of proposals for change." (Member of the ANA seeds working group).

Another request that came out of these working groups was for institutional rules that support uptake of agroecological produce in different markets:

"We took different experiences as our starting point. The South for instance is more advanced in terms of food processing plants. The Northeast is stronger in open markets. So we tried to insert different experiences, also from the people in the Amazon and the Mideast. […] And with important results such as the creation of the Food Acquisition Policy." (Member of the ANA markets working group).

Knowledge groups emerged during meetings and encounters held by the Associação Brasileira de Agroecologia (ABA), an association of professionals working on agroecology (Schmitt 2016). During these meetings and encounters, often organised around different themes, local demands were translated into research and policy requests that supported agroecology. Thematic knowledge groups include those on agrotoxins and genetically modified organisms; the peasantry and food sovereignty; agroecological knowledge; culture and communication; education and agroecology; gender; youth and health. Projects obtained by ABA often built on these working groups. An example is the Project "Núcleos e Rede de Núcleos de Estudos em Agroecologia das universidades públicas brasileiras" (Nucleus and networks of nuclei of studies in agroecology of Brazilian public universities). This project mobilised regional as well as knowledge groups through meetings where

experiences of peasants and other people that work on-the-ground are discussed, systematized and translated into policy requests. Also, existing policies, including those that support agroecology, are evaluated, studied and reformulated, so that they better address local demands.

Policy groups are found in state and national councils (Schmitt 2016). Representatives from ANA, ABA and their working groups take seat in various national and state level councils, including the National Council of Food Security and Sovereignty (CONSEA), the national and state councils of Sustainable Rural Development (CEDRS and CNDRS) and the Brazilian Agricultural Research Institute (EMBRAPA). Requests from working groups, direct engagement with policy makers and participation in government-civil society councils led to the articulation of various public policies (Niederle et al., 2019). For example, the Food Acquisition Policy (PAA) enables public institutes to purchase directly from family farmers, and the National School Feeding Law (PNAE) requires schools to source at least 30% of their food directly from local family farmers. Likewise, the National Policy for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (PNATER) enables farmer organisations and smaller NGOs to access funding for rural extension projects; the Minimum Price Guarantee for Sociobiodiversity Policy (PGPM-Bio) guarantees a minimum price for products that are gathered from forests, are supportive of nature conservation, and have a high cultural value; the Policy for Living With the Semi-arid (Programa de Convivência com o Semiárido) supports practices that allow people to live and produce under conditions with little rainfall; and the Amazonian SANEAR Policy supports practices to secure water for extractivist populations in the Amazon. In 2012 many of these policies were brought together in the National Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production (PNAPO).

While these policies booked considerable successes in reducing hunger, mitigating the effects of droughts, and increase sales to public institutions, they did not meet all social demands related to access to land, access to markets, or pesticide contamination:

> "You can't have agroecology without democratisation of access to land. You first need to regulate Quilombola and Indigenous territories, communal lands for pasture, hunting and gathering. […] When we formulated the national policy on agroecology and organic production, we put forward the issue of land and regulation of territories. But it is here where we had least result, because then you are messing with the structure. It is a structure that is very difficult to change." (Member of the executive committee of ANA)

The quote shows that not all requests were met via institutional politics. Many peasants still did not have access to land, markets and policy resources, as the distribution thereof continued to favour agribusiness. Moreover, certain local demands, e.g. access to land that followed grievance over work conditions, are not easily articulated into individual requests to begin with. This led to continued grievances and renewed frustrations – frustrations which only deepened with the impeachment of Workers Party's President Dilma Rouseff and the takeover of the presidency by Michel Temer (2016) and subsequently by far-right Jair Bolsonaro (2019) who threatens to dismantle many agroecological policies and who triggered a surge in violence against Indigenous people, landless farmers and environmentalists (ANA 2020; BBC 2020). Heightened frustrations and the closing of channels for the participation of civil society by the new regimes led the agroecology movement to shift from an emphasis on institutional politics to a populist one.

4.3. Populist politics

In addition to articulating social demands through institutional politics, social demands were also articulated through a logic of equivalence as part of populist politics. Populist politics were of particular importance in the formation of movements that hold diverse groups together. Three interconnected movements that can be distinguished are local agroecology movements, a political agrarian movement and a popular national movement. These movements respectively incorporate an increasingly broader group of actors and demands and give shape to three distinct modes of politics.

Local agroecology movements equate demands related to the peasantry to those of ecological farming. Demands from local researchers and local NGOs are articulated with demands from peasants and local peasant organisations. Researchers and NGOs demanded forms of agriculture based on more ecological methods and technologies. During encounters between researchers, NGO staff and peasants, these demands were articulated to peasants' and peasant organisations' demands for land and markets - thereby expanding the meaning of agroecology from a technical issue towards a social concern. In the Zona da Mata the equation of these demands led to the formation of a local agroecology movement, constituted by the Centre of Alternative Technologies of the Zona da Mata (CTA-ZM), researchers from the Federal University of Viçosa and various local peasant organisations and groups (Cardoso et al., 2001). Similar movements are found in other regions in Brazil, including the Borborema region in Paraiba and the Serra Gaúcha region in Rio Grande do Sul (Schmitt 2016). These movements also played a role in the non-confrontational and institutional politics described in the previous sections.

In the construction of an agrarian political movement, demands from various local agroecology movements are articulated on the national level with demands from other agrarian social movements that have their own constituencies:

> "There was a change in the focus of agroecology. In the beginning the focus was on technologies. Later it was expanded to include the whole agroecosystem […] Then there was a debate in the agroecology movement at the national level on the need to further amplify these experiences [..] beyond the farm level […] to include other dimensions of socio-environmental conflict." (former member of the executive committee of ANA)

These social movements have different, partly overlapping, demands (Brendason 2016). The Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG)) for instance demanded an end of violence against rural workers, healthy working conditions without the use of pesticides, and fair wages. They also demanded an agrarian reform and that agricultural extension be delinked from large-scale, capital-intensive agriculture. The National Federation of Workers in Family Farming (FETRAF) demanded an end to deforestation and land grabbing from marginalised farmers and producers such as rubber tappers by large rural estates, as well as the recognition of their knowledge and ways of life. The Landless Workers Movement (MST) demanded agrarian reform. The Movement of Small-Scale Farmers (MPA) pushed for popular democracy and food sovereignty. Women movements such as the Movement of Women Workers (MMTR), the Movement of Peasant Women (MMC) and the Brazilian branch of the World Womens March, demanded recognition of women's productive work (for instance in the garden, orchard and at home) as well as freedom from oppression from forms of agri-business that only valorise commodity production.

The different demands of the movements described above were articulated at various encounters. The most prominent of these were the National Agroecology Encounters (ENA) held in 2002, 2006, 2014 and 2018 and preparatory regional encounters that precede or supersede the national encounters and which include the Regional Agroecology Encounters (ERA) and the Agroecology Caravans. As argued by Petersen and Almeida (2004), these encounters focused not on discussing differences between movements, but facilitated the construction of common identities that allowed differences to exist. In the construction of a common, agroecological identity, a common adversary of these diverse social demands is also created, namely agribusiness:

"Agri-business brings death. A package of poison, violation of human rights and social and environmental injustice. Agroecology creates life, a very abundant life for humans but also for animals and plants."

(Delegate from woman peasants movement Pernambuco).

Through the articulation of the demands of the different agrarian social movements and the rejection of agribusiness, a claim was made for the equal distribution of land, control over markets, the recognition of the rights of peasant and rural workers, and for the abolishment of pesticides and GMO's (ENA 2018). The articulation of demands also led to the formation of a national, agrarian political movement. This movement alternates between populist and institutional politics; the latter can be found in the working groups of ANA, amongst others (see section 4.2).

In the construction of a popular movement, social demands are articulated with demands from other movements that work outside (or beyond) agriculture. These include demands from movements of Indigenous people, Quilombolas, workers' unions, community leaders, the LGBT community, women, Black people, youth, progressive church groups, cultural groups and movements of teachers, homeless people, public health workers and environmental justice:

> "So, this is the debate that we are having now. [..] Before, the coordination of ANA had this idea of bringing movements inside ANA - the Landless Workers Movement, the Movement for Collective Health. […] Now we are realizing that it is not coming to us. We also have to take agroecology to debates about public health, agrarian reform. […]. We need to put more effort in being together in movements, in our territories. […] We have to change our logic. Instead of waiting for people to come to ANA, which is up there, ANA has to go out there and engage in dialogues down here. (Member of the executive committee of ANA)

By articulating demands with non-agrarian movements, the notion of a people is constructed that includes Black, peasants, women, workers, Indigenous people and the LGBT community. Agroecology features as the ways of doing of the people, which are based on horizontal relations among people and between people and nature:

"Agroecology has always been part of being Black – of Black people. Our way of living, of doing, of relating to others and to nature, was an agroecological way." (Delegate from the Black women movement of Pernambuco).

"We have a solution: not exploiting and destroying our forests, our rivers. And yes: of living with them -as we already do." (Delegate from Urucu Indigenous movement in Itaituba).

The interests of the people are posed in direct opposition not only to agribusiness in particular, but to capitalism and Brazil's economic and political elite in general – i.e. those who are held responsible for land grabbing, deforestation, large dams, mining, rural estates and the poisoning of the environment. This is for instance illustrated in the political letter that was read at the end of the fourth National Agroecology Encounter in 2018:

"We denounce the violence and authoritarianism of the latifundio, of the monocrops, of mining, of hydroelectric plants and other big capital projects that exploit nature in a predatory way for the production of commodities, primary products or goods commercialised in international market value chains. We also denounce the systematic political, economic and ideological support given by the Brazilian state to these projects that benefit a parasitic minority, that feeds off a development model and a food system that is socially exclusive and that compromises collective health." (ENA 2018).

Articulating demands at local and national agroecology encounters, a popular movement was forged that aims for structural change and towards a society that is democratic and that recognises peoples' ways of living and doing.

5. Agroecological transformation and articulation

Our analysis focused on the political articulation of the agroecology movement in Brazil. It shows how processes of transformation take shape through the articulation of grievances into local demands and the further articulation of these demands to form supportive policies and to broaden the movement. In the literature on agroecology reformist and revolutionary strategies of transformation are debated (Rosset et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2019; McCune and Sánchez, 2019; Martinez-Torres and Rosset, 2014; Val et al., 2019). In this section we discuss our findings in the light of these debates and reflect on how different politics were combined in the Brazilian case.

Reformist strategies, based on institutional politics, led to the creation of policies that support agroecology. In Brazil this occurred in working groups, and by way of direct alignment with the demands of powerholders and participation in state-civil society decision-making structures through which local demands were articulated into requests for specific national policies and research. Our analysis illustrates that processes of politicisation and horizontal organisation play a central role in rooting institutional politics in peasants' reality. Politicisation occurred through the articulation of peasants' grievances into local demands, which problematized their relations with, landlords, commodity markets and modern technologies. This led to the articulation of an institutional politics that address these power relations and to policy and research responses that support alternatives. The horizontal organisation of the movement enabled local demands to move to higher levels of politics. The various spaces of institutional engagement were in part constituted by and directly connected to the movements local constituencies.

Revolutionary strategies, which operate on the basis of a populist politics, were articulated between peasant organisations, researchers and NGOs, and agrarian and non-agrarian social movements, at different levels. Our analysis shows that populist articulation was paired with the formation of popular movements and with the articulation of claims that challenge the distribution of land, markets and policy resources that systemically favours agribusiness. This is in agreement with political agroecologists who argue that a broader food movement is more capable of posing a structural challenge to the current agri-food system (González de Molina et al., 2020, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). However, our analysis also demonstrates that the challenges posed by the food movements alone were not powerful enough to change the dominant discourse. In Brazil this lack of power was addressed with the broadening of the movement and the articulation of demands with rural workers, Indigenous people, Blacks, feminists, the LBTG community, and environmental activists. Accordingly, the issue of the movement broadened from food and agriculture towards democracy, diversity and difference, in a politics that challenges the neo-liberal state and large business at large. Although this process is still ongoing and the effects are yet unclear, the large number of people that are mobilised suggest that there is a heightened potential for radical transformation.

Institutional and populist politics were combined in space and in time, they took place side-by-side. Many scholars have expressed concerns that institutional politics may lead to the co-optation of agroecology (Rivera-Ferre 2018; Giraldo and Rosset 2017; Levidow et al., 2014). In Brazil, while emphasis shifted from institutional to populist politics in the latter years, both have always been present. During the Administration led by Lula Da Silva (2003–2010), emphasis was placed on institutional politics to access policy resources for the movement. When political circumstances became less favourable under the Administrations led by Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro, attention shifted to a populist politics. Institutional politics (through for example the PAA and PNAE) provides material resources to strengthen the movement through buildings, coordinators and know-how but also by creating territories that are to some degree protected and autonomous from authoritarian and neo-liberal regimes (see also Van den Berg et al., 2021; Grisa et al., 2017; Mendonça 2015). Populist politics creates symbolic resources that hold the movement together, including shared values, a joint notion of a people and a common enemy. It also creates a broader narrative for transformative change. Combined, populist and institutional politics were thus found to build the capacity of the

movement and its potential for transformation over the longer term. With this heightened capacity and narrative, the movement fixed the meaning and political significance of agroecology, thereby reducing the risk of co-optation. In agreement with Patterson et al. (2017), such a narrative also helps to orient incremental (policy) efforts for more radical transformation. These findings support the work by González de Molina et al. (2020: 25) and Petersen (2013: 101) who argue that agroecological transformation entails undergoing a process of "metamorphosis" which encompasses change through both institutional and populist strategies.

6. Conclusion

This article shows how processes of transformation take shape through the political articulation of agroecology in Brazil. It shows that grievances stemming from abusive sharecropping arrangements, decreasing income and pesticide contamination were articulated in local demands for land, markets and sustainable farming practices. These local demands were further articulated in an institutional politics to acquire policy support as well as in a popular politics to create movements that challenge agribusiness' control over land, markets and policy resources.

The article also demonstrates the theoretical value of a Laclau-inspired approach to understanding the politics of transformation, particularly when combined with a more elaborate conceptualisation of grievances. Using the notion of political articulation, we were able to highlight that there is not necessarily the type of politics that matters for transformation, be it more reformist or revolutionary, but that the ability to embrace and articulate peasant grievances into demands is as or even more important. In other words, the processes of politicisation (see also Giraldo and Rosset 2017), which identify and problematise the social relations against which local demands are articulated are first and foremost relevant to usher in societal change, and transformation. It addition, our analysis points to the importance of the organisational ability of agroecology to connect local to national realities. In Brazil, agroecology is organised into local, regional, state and national level constituencies, with ample spaces for moving and making connections between different levels. This allows grievances to become articulated in national political claims. Grievances and local demands were not only important in shaping national political claims, but were also connected to, and shaped transformation at the level of practice and territory - processes which have been described elsewhere (see Van den Berg et al., 2021, Van den Berg et al. 2018).

The concept of articulation has made us able to show that not only the immediate effects of strategies count, but also the longer term building of the capacity of movements. In line with González de Molina et al. (2020), we argue we should be moving beyond dichotomised debates on revolutionary versus reformist strategies, towards an understanding of how elements from diverse strategies fruitfully combine in different contexts. For the case of Brazil, elements considered to be reformist were important for progressively building support for agroecological practices and markets, and elements considered revolutionary for unifying the movements and strengthening its potential for transformation. In Brazil, the strategic emphasis of the movement changed over time, but the building of the movement and territory always remained intact, leading agroecology to grow to the extent that neither the state nor other social movements could ignore it (see also Van den Berg et al., 2021; Charão-Marques 2017, Niederle et al., 2019). This shows that whether change is revolutionary or not is thus not situated in the type of political strategy, but in the extent to which these strategies support the construction of a radical movement and of agroecological territories.

To conclude, we want to highlight the importance of politics in transformation and express support for the political turn in agroecology (Anderson et al., 2019, González de Molina et al., 2020; Val et al., 2019; Giraldo and McCune 2019). Many agroecologists have argued for the instalment of policies that support agroecological farming practices (e.g. Nicholls and Altieri 2018) or that engage with the capacity of peasants to solve problems themselves through alterations in the labour and production process (e.g. Van der Ploeg 2021). We show that politics are not only important in addressing issues of production, but also in capturing democratic struggles that intersect, go beyond and potentially align with production, including those by Indigenous people, Blacks, environmentalists, feminists and the LBTGQ community.

Authorship statement

The first author prepared the first drafts and collected the empirical data upon which it is based. This person was the primary responsible for the conceptualisation of the research as well for data curation, the formal analysis, methodological design, investigation and writing of the original draft. Research conducted for the article was part of a PhD at Wageningen University, funded by INREF. Project administration was carried out by the author together with the Wageningen University and the Federal University of Vicosa. The article is co-authored by two co-promotors, and two researchers stationed in Brazil. The co-promotors contributed with supervision, review and editing of the text. The researchers stationed in Brazil contributed with review and editing of the text.

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