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## Resistance in the metropolitan countryside - The case of the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement

Resistencia en el campo metropolitano: el caso del asentamiento rural Engenho Novo

Resistências no rural metropolitano - O caso do Assentamento Fazenda Engenho Novo

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Received on: August 28, 2025

Accepted for publication on: September 28, 2025

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement, in São Gonçalo, Rio de Janeiro, as a territory of resistance and reinvention of rurality in a metropolitan context. The result of collective struggles against land grabbing and real estate speculation, the settlement faces challenges such as the invisibility of rural areas by public authorities, water scarcity, and urban pressure. The research, which uses qualitative methods (interviews, participant observation), highlights the multifunctionality of family farming, which combines agroecological production, environmental preservation, and collective strategies such as cooperatives and fairs. The work of the Rural Workers' Union and the Residents' Association was crucial to territorialization, strengthening identities and resistance. The work highlights the hybridization of the metropolitan rural area, where traditional and urban practices intertwine, challenging dichotomies and proposing socio-environmental alternatives to exclusionary metropolitanization.

**Keywords:** Settlement; metropolitan rurality; family farming.

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### Resumen

Este estudio analiza el Asentamiento Rural Engenho Novo, en São Gonçalo, Río de Janeiro, como un territorio de resistencia y reinención de la ruralidad en un contexto metropolitano. Fruto de las luchas colectivas contra el acaparamiento de tierras y la especulación inmobiliaria, el asentamiento enfrenta desafíos como la invisibilidad de las zonas rurales por parte de las autoridades públicas, la escasez de agua y la presión urbana. La investigación, que utiliza métodos cualitativos (entrevistas, observación participante), destaca la multifuncionalidad de la agricultura familiar, que combina la producción agroecológica, la preservación del medio ambiente y estrategias colectivas como cooperativas y ferias. El trabajo del Sindicato de Trabajadores Rurales y la Asociación de Vecinos fue crucial para la territorialización, el fortalecimiento de las identidades y la resistencia. El trabajo destaca la hibridación del área rural metropolitana, donde se entrelazan las prácticas tradicionales y urbanas, desafiando dicotomías y proponiendo alternativas socioambientales a la metropolización excluyente.

**Palabras clave:** Neoextractivismo; energía eólica; Región del Alto Sertão de Bahía.

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### Resumo

O estudo analisa o Assentamento Fazenda Engenho Novo, em São Gonçalo (RJ), como um território de resistência e reinvenção da ruralidade em contexto metropolitano. Fruto de lutas coletivas contra a grilagem e a especulação imobiliária, o assentamento enfrenta desafios como a invisibilização das zonas rurais pelo poder público, a escassez hídrica e a pressão urbana. A pesquisa, conta com métodos qualitativos (entrevistas, observação participante), destaca a multifuncionalidade da agricultura familiar, que combina produção agroecológica, preservação ambiental e estratégias coletivas como cooperativismo e feiras. A atuação do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais e da Associação de Moradores foi crucial para a territorialização, fortalecendo identidades e resistências. O trabalho evidencia a hibridização do rural metropolitano, onde práticas tradicionais e urbanas se entrelaçam, desafiando dicotomias e propondo alternativas socioambientais frente à metropolização excludente.

**Palavras-chave:** Assentamento; ruralidade metropolitana; agricultura familiar.

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### Introduction

The Fazenda Engenho Novo Settlement, located in the municipality of São Gonçalo (RJ), presents itself as a territory of resistance and reinvention in the context of metropolitanization. The result of collective action, the settlement is a direct result of struggles for land and territory in a space that has historically suffered and continues to suffer pressure. The formation of the Settlement, marked

by the process of "Muvuca," as the residents themselves call it, reveals the conflicting dynamics of territorialization in a municipality that has historically neglected its rural dimension. This process of conquering and maintaining territory is permeated by constant threats: real estate speculation, pressure for urban land uses, the advancement of irregular subdivisions, and the very lack of official recognition of São Gonçalo's rural areas. The settlers' struggle, therefore, is not only for land as a material resource, but for the affirmation of a rural identity within the metropolitan space. The struggle for land and permanence in the territory reaffirms the settlement as a political space par excellence—a space where the struggle for ways of living, producing, and inhabiting the metropolitan countryside is manifested. In a scenario marked by socio-spatial fragmentation and the multiple exclusions generated by metropolitanization, the farmers of the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement continue to demonstrate, through their daily practices, that rurality not only persists but also reinvents itself amidst the dynamics of the metropolis.

In the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement, the work of the São Gonçalo Rural Workers' Union, as well as the role of its Association, was fundamental to the process of territorialization and the construction of a collective identity among the settlers. More than just articulating struggles for land and settler rights, social actors mobilize practices that reinforce the settlement's permanence and vitality. Over the years, the union and association have established themselves as essential mediators between farmers and the government, promoting policies for settlers and valuing family farming as a legitimate and dignified way of life in a highly urbanized municipality.

Since its inception, building networks and organizations of settled producers has proven to be a key driver for the dynamization of family farming and the creation of new forms of production and consumption, both locally and regionally. Faced with challenges posed by the absence of government support, settled farmers

have invested in collective strategies that seek to strengthen alternative production practices, such as agroecology and the manufacture of artisanal products. The São Gonçalo Family Farming Fair, a result of the engagement of settlers, provides a symbolic and material space for the circulation of products that carry not only economic value but also social, cultural, and environmental significance, strengthening the bonds between producers and consumers.

Collective organization around agroecological and artisanal production also promotes a redefinition of the territory itself, as it values sustainable practices and local biodiversity. These networks, while supporting the socioeconomic reproduction of settled families, also contribute to the construction of short circuits of production and consumption, which strengthen local economies, generate new territorialities, and create opportunities in the face of exclusionary dynamics. Thus, in the rural metropolitan area of São Gonçalo, we observe the emergence of hybrid forms of production and consumption that blur the boundaries between rural and urban and affirm the transformative power of family farming.

In this context of tensions, the settlement emerges as a "crossroads," in the sense proposed by Luiz Rufino, a crossroads where multiple temporalities, practices, and knowledge intertwine to build new life possibilities. The territory of the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement is, therefore, simultaneously a lived, resisted, and resignified space, where the rural is not a mere remnant of the past, but an active space for social transformation and the production of alternatives in the face of the adversities imposed by the dynamics of metropolitanization.

Finally, I explain that this work stems from my master's thesis, "The Socioproductive Dynamics of Family Farmers in the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement," where I used a qualitative approach to understand the experiences and strategies of family farmers in a rural metropolitan context. Data collection combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary research. Between March and October 2024, visits were conducted to the settlement

and to the Family Farming Fair (FAF), where 15 farmers were interviewed. The conversations addressed topics such as socioeconomic reproduction strategies, pluriactivity, the challenges of inheritance, and relationships with urban space.

### **Resistance in the metropolitan countryside**

In regions such as Metropolitan Rio de Janeiro, the coexistence of urbanized areas and rural spaces generates complex dynamics marked by possibilities for redefinition, what Monte-Mor calls "Other settlement logics" (1994).

The municipality of São Gonçalo, within this context, has experienced a trajectory of urban expansion that, although it has significantly reduced the presence of agricultural activities over time, still maintains active rural territories, such as the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement. The rural area, far from being a remnant of the past, has proven to be a dynamic and multifunctional space, capable of adapting and resisting the pressures of metropolitanization.

As the only rural settlement in the municipality, its existence highlights the complexity of what has been conventionally called the metropolitan rural area. This concept, used in the research, questions the traditional dichotomy between countryside and city, recognizing the interpenetration between rural and urban spaces, where agricultural practices persist and are transformed amid the expansion of the metropolis. In the case of the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement, this fusion manifests itself in the coexistence of agricultural practices with new socioeconomic dynamics driven by proximity to the city.

The settlement thus becomes a hybrid territory, where rurality resists but also reinvents itself in the face of urban pressures. This process reminded me of Rufino's (2019) concept of "cruzo," which defines spaces and experiences marked by mixtures, tensions, and articulations between different logics and temporalities. The "cruzo" represents a crossroads, where distinct influences meet and rearrange themselves into new forms of existence. In the context of the Engenho Novo Farm

Settlement, the "cruzo" helps to recognize certain "trickery" of family farmers, who throughout the territorialization process mobilized knowledge that straddles different temporalities to adapt to the conditions of the metropolitan space, making the settlement a space of "ginga," of constant negotiation and reinvention. This phenomenon is called "metropolitan rural," a concept that recognizes the interpenetration of these spaces, where agricultural practices coexist with urban logic, creating hybrid territories. The theoretical discussion on the topic involves different perspectives. On the one hand, there are arguments that the advance of capitalism and urbanization would lead to the total absorption of the rural by the urban, as advocated by Lefebvre (1999), who speaks of the "complete urbanization of society." On the other hand, critics point out that this view underestimates the resilience of rural communities, which adapt and resist, maintaining their particularities even amid metropolitan expansion. Family farming, for example, demonstrates the capacity to reorganize itself, incorporating new dynamics without losing its identity.

The land conflict in the region, prior to expropriation by ITERJ, was named "Muvuca" by Alfredo, a resident of the settlement. This name resonates with the very essence of the metropolitan rural world that was presented to me. The metropolitan rural world is, in fact, a true *muvuca*: a space of encounters and intersections, where diverse elements overlap and intertwine. Thus, we can think of the settlement from this perspective—as a *muvuca*, an ambiguous territory with fluid boundaries, where the distinction between inside and outside dissolves and everything connects.

The Engenho Novo Farm Settlement, located in the municipality of São Gonçalo, in the Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Region (RMRJ), is an example of the complex interplay between historical processes, land conflicts, and the resistance of rural communities in a metropolitan context. Its historical and social context dates back to the 19th century, when the region was dominated by large rural properties

dedicated to monocultures of sugarcane, coffee, and fruits such as oranges and guavas. The Engenho Novo Farm, owned by the Baron of São Gonçalo, Belarmino Ricardo de Siqueira, was one of these large estates, where the exploitation of slave labor was the basis of production. The Baron's will, for example, mentions the existence of 111 enslaved people on the farm, highlighting its economic and social importance in the region.

With the monoculture crisis of the 20th century, many of these farms fell into decline. The Engenho Novo Farm was no exception. After the Baron's death, the property underwent successive ownership changes, being leased or farmed by different families, such as the Serrado family, who introduced citrus cultivation. However, starting in the 1970s, the farm was sold to a new owner, Deusdérito Belmonte Netto, who abandoned agricultural activities and began illegally harvesting citrus fruits, causing serious environmental damage and conflicts with the former rural workers who still lived there.

The period between the 1980s and 1990s was marked by intense land conflicts, known locally as "Muvuca." This term, coined by the residents themselves, refers to the chaos and violence that characterized the dispute over land. Former sharecroppers and tenant farmers, many of them descendants of enslaved people, were pressured to abandon their land or sell it for paltry sums. Accounts from residents, such as that of farmer Alfredo Pinheiro da Silva, highlight the resilience of these families, who faced threats, cattle raids, and even the destruction of their homes by land grabbers. In this context, the Rural Workers' Union of São Gonçalo (STR-SG), founded in 1963, played a crucial role in organizing the farmers and fighting for expropriation of the farm. The collective mobilization resulted in state intervention, and in 1992, the Rio de Janeiro State Land and Cartography Institute (ITERJ) expropriated the Engenho Novo Farm in the public interest, transforming it into a rural settlement. In 1995, 143 families were officially settled, receiving lots for cultivation and housing.

Territorialization is a fundamental process for understanding settlement, as it reflects how settlers relate to space, transforming it into territory through relationships, identity, and labor. While space is the preexisting physical foundation, territory emerges when social groups shape it through their practices, creating material and symbolic bonds. This dynamic is especially visible in rural settlements like the Engenho Novo Farm, where the struggle for land transcends the productive aspect, involving the construction of collective identities and resistance to urban and political pressures. In summary, the process of territorialization in the settlement studied involved three interconnected axes: the dispute over land, the construction of a collective identity, and the maintenance of symbols that reinforce belonging to the territory. These elements not only ensure the social reproduction of family farmers but also reveal the complexity of rurality in metropolitan areas. The challenges faced by settlers reflect the tension between preserving rural identity and metropolitan pressure, highlighting the need for public policies that recognize and strengthen family farming as an essential part of the territory.

In the rural metropolitan area, real estate speculation and urban expansion threaten the stability of the settlement, with land invasions, illegal construction, and even the presence of criminal gangs, which increase violence in the region. The institutional invisibility of rural areas in São Gonçalo is also an obstacle: since the 1960s, the municipality has denied the existence of rural areas, prioritizing urban revenue collection and facilitating land grabbing. Despite recent laws attempting to reclassify these areas, policies for family farming are still insufficient, lacking investment in infrastructure or access to markets.

Family farming in the settlement can be understood multidimensionally, considering that this activity encompasses various social forms and functions. In addition to the diversification of productive activities, elements such as the preservation of landscapes, ecosystems, and agroecosystems are increasingly

recognized as the multiple roles performed by family farmers, reinforcing their relevance to society. In the case of the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement, family farming plays an important role in the transformation of rural areas through the adoption of ecological practices such as green manure, crop rotation, intercropping, etc.

The region where the Engenho Novo Farm Settlement is located has been a territory that has been exploited predatorily throughout history, especially during the sugarcane and orange cycles, resulting in soil degradation and a reduction in its productive capacity. Monocultures, and consequently, illegal areole harvesting, indiscriminate vegetation removal, and the lack of conservation practices were the main contributors to soil degradation in the settlement area. This scenario, resulting from the intensive exploitation of natural resources until the mid-20th century, exemplifies the persistence of "colonial living" (Ferdinand, 2019). Low soil productivity is a direct consequence of these historical practices, just as the advanced stage of pollution of the Aldeia River, the settlement's main watercourse, continues to impact the lives of farmers today (Passos et al, 2010). In 2010, indicators of the difficulties faced by farmers were directly related to environmental issues, such as soil degradation, water supply (due to drying up of rivers), and pest attacks on crops. These challenges were accompanied by structural problems and, later, socioeconomic difficulties.

The socio-environmental assessment carried out 17 years after the settlement's creation (Passos et al, idem) identified 43% of the mapped lots as having forested areas. This percentage, according to farmers, is associated with the work of preserving fauna and flora. In the research in question, farmers appeared to be laymen when it comes to environmental education, but their agency in preserving these spaces through various ecological practices is evident.

According to the 2017 Agricultural Census, São Gonçalo had 734 hectares of natural forests, in addition to 1,449 hectares designated for permanent preservation or legal reserves. Planted forests occupied a smaller area, at only 7 hectares. Regarding agroforestry systems, there were 36 hectares of cultivated land with forest species, also used for crops and livestock grazing.

Although some farmers use pesticides in the settlement, most of the sites mapped by subsequent research (Azevedo, 2015; Santos, 2020; Costa, 2020) demonstrate that settlers have adopted various sustainable agricultural practices to address soil degradation, and some maintain areas of Legal Reserve. Other examples of settler involvement include the preservation and legal protection of newly discovered springs within the settlement (Costa, 2020). According to a farmer in the settlement, residents use these water sources for farming and livestock farming, often hiding certain springs from outsiders, fearing they will be targeted or exploited.

In the early years after the settlement's creation, the use of animal manure as soil fertilizer was common, while chemical fertilizers were used to a lesser extent. Data indicate that only 12% of the lots used chemical fertilizers, while natural fertilizers were present in 75% of the sample (Passos et al, 2010). In 2015, Azevedo observed the use of green manure and the use of organic waste for composting. The author emphasizes that green manure, with the use of certain plant species, helped with soil recovery and nitrogen fixation, eliminating the need for chemical fertilizers. Furthermore, the use of organic waste, such as fruit, vegetable, and egg peels, for composting contributed to enriching the soil with nutrients, avoiding improper disposal of these materials.

The set of actions carried out by farmers again highlights the multifunctionality of agriculture. In addition to encompassing the diversification of economic activities and practices aimed at preserving biodiversity, the

socioeconomic dynamics promoted by these initiatives generate significant transformations in rural areas, even contributing to the reconfiguration of the local landscape. This demonstrates that even though the restructuring of rural areas, especially in the context of metropolitan rural areas, is a process marked by ruptures and continuities, metropolitan rural areas undergo profound transformations while still maintaining characteristics intrinsic to their rural character. However, their dynamics attract new actors and activities, making these spaces valued for their diverse social, cultural, environmental, and landscape aspects.

Family farming has enormous potential to restructure metropolitan rural areas, especially when considering the experience of settlements. These experiences, in addition to promoting food production, propose valuable ways of inhabiting rural spaces, focusing on managing and building more harmonious relationships between humans and nature, considering that these farmers act as protectors of these territories.

In a metropolitan context, the discussion of "urban-peasant utopias" proposed by Monte-Mor (1994) offers a thought-provoking perspective for reflecting on rural settlements in these regions as privileged spaces for considering other settlement logics. This approach becomes especially relevant in the context of extensive urbanization and the environmental crisis.

Monte-Mor (2006) argues that traditional concerns centered on industrial production and collective reproduction have given way to a growing attention to "nature." This shift reflects the expansion of the environmental debate, which has gained prominence due to the pressures imposed by the global ecological crisis. The author advocates the need for a paradigm shift toward a cosmopolitical perspective that recognizes the rights of nature and integrates it as a fundamental part of urban management. In other words, a cosmopolitics that goes beyond human interests and includes all beings and elements of nature.

Experiences like that of the settlement demonstrate how, through the actions of settlers, these spaces can prove dynamic and capable of reinventing themselves, even in the face of profound crises and transformations in the metropolitan context. This territory paves the way for us to rethink urban spaces in greater harmony with nature and with the notion of rurality.

The centrality of nature present in these spaces actively considers non-human elements in their logic, offering a model that distances us, to some extent, from anthropocentric logic. This approach can contribute to addressing the challenges created by metropolization at different scales.

### **Final Considerations**

The Engenho Novo Farm Settlement confronts us with the challenges and possibilities of rurality in metropolitan contexts. The dilemma of the constant threat of urban encroachment on rural territory highlights a two-faceted tension: on the one hand, real estate expansion and the speculative logic of the metropolis; on the other, the persistence of ways of life and production linked to family farming.

The research reveals how the advance of urbanization puts at risk not only agricultural activities, but an entire ecosystem of social relations, knowledge, and practices developed over generations. The pressure for irregular subdivisions, land grabbing, and the very political invisibility of rural areas in municipal planning demonstrate how metropolitan development tends to treat these areas as residual spaces, destined to be absorbed by the urban sprawl. However, the case of Engenho Novo demonstrates that this is not an inevitable equation; through strategies, farmers have been building concrete alternatives for resistance. Their practices not only keep agricultural production alive but also offer responses to the environmental crisis—whether through preservation, soil restoration, or biodiversity conservation.

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Data availability:  
Research data is available in the body of the article.

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