The promise and peril of the state in neoliberal times: implications for the critical environmental education movement in Brazil

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Neoliberal ideology has made an impact on environmental education (EE) policies and practices in Brazil. The EE in Family Agriculture Program, of national scope and administered by the Ministry of the Environment, seeks to promote sustainable development in rural areas, specifically through strategies focused on adult education and non-formal education aimed at small producers (family agriculture). This program reveals profound ideological contradictions between the critical and transformative rhetoric of public policy and the actual program structures and practices administered by the state in a dependent economy, which primarily serve to reinforce a capitalist mode of production marked by high environmental impact and deeply stratified class relations. In the neoliberal era, states intending to protect the environment through critical EE strategies suffer serious limitations due to their role as stewards of a globalized economy based on the supply of raw materials, high-impact land-use, and a cheap labor force.

**Keywords:** critical environmental education; sustainable development; family agriculture; neoliberalism; education policy; policy analysis; Brazil

**Introduction**

Brazil is an example of a nation that has advanced a national environmental education (EE) program designed around the precepts of critical EE, in explicit opposition to the now dominant paradigm of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) propagated by UNESCO (Lima 2009). According to many observers, Brazil’s EE discourse reflected in official documents, including EE policy and legislation, has been less influenced by the economic and technocentric approach of the dominant ESD paradigm, generally placing greater emphasis on the social and ethical dimensions of the environment, and more explicitly calling for strengthening critical pedagogical practices (Sauvé, Brunelle, and Berryman 2005). Yet, what can also be observed in Brazil is the co-optation of environmental discourse by big business and the ways in which the governance apparatus is mobilized to benefit domestic and transnational corporate interests, often in the form of public–private partnerships. This points to the perils that lie ahead for a critical EE movement facing the...
headwinds of a neoliberal climate in Brazil, where the state must grapple with powerful economic actors acting under the universal banner of sustainability.

In this article, we look at how neoliberal ideology has influenced EE practices in Brazil, focusing on the role of the state in mobilizing non-formal educational programs at the national level to promote rural sustainable development in family agriculture. Our analysis is based on Inny Accioly’s (2013) recent case study of the EE in Family Agriculture Program (Programa de Educação Ambiental na Agricultura Familiar [PEAAF], administered by the Ministry of the Environment, or MMA). This state-driven environmental educational initiative is important to examine because of its political–pedagogical implications, considering the way this program was affected by new environmental legislation forged by the close relationship between the agribusiness sector and Environment Committees of Congress. PEAAF highlights the role of the state and its complex dynamics with civil society when considering the effects of neoliberal ideology on EE. This analysis suggests that within Brazilian EE there are profound ideological contradictions between the transformative rhetoric of EE legislation and public policy, on the one hand, and the actual EE program structures and practices administered by the state on the other, which primarily serves to reinforce a capitalist mode of production highlighted by intensive land-use development and highly stratified class relations.

Neoliberalism, dependency theory, and the role of the state

Sustainable development presents an interesting phenomenon with which to examine the links between neoliberal ideology and EE, and the role of the state in either facilitating or interrupting these links. To address this matter, we engage the neoliberal turn in political-economic orthodoxy following David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade’ (2005, 2). Neoliberalism in this sense is marked by an ideology that promotes this institutional framework as the most just and efficient organizing principle for the allocation of scarce resources for the welfare of society as a whole. Furthermore, in the realm of neoliberal governance mechanisms, the state has the role of setting up ‘an institutional framework appropriate to such practices’ (2). It is within this neoliberal institutional framework that we seek to understand the role of the state in promoting EE initiatives designed to foster sustainable development in the Brazilian rural sector. The focus of our analysis is on how state-driven EE initiatives, and associated processes of environmental legislation geared toward sustainable rural development in the Brazilian countryside, have absorbed and recently manifested key elements of neoliberalism.

The Marxist theoretical reference point of dependency theory (Fernandes 1972) is helpful here to highlight how this topic should be understood through the matrix of a global capitalist system. The maintenance of the capitalist mode of production has historically served to reproduce class inequalities both within nations and between nations across the north–south (core-periphery) divide. Accordingly, in the integration of national economies to global markets, we observe the transfer of surplus from dependent, the so-called ‘Third World’ nations to the elite in the core regions of the world economy, both in the form of profits as well as interests on debt (Harvey 2005; Amaral and Carcanholo 2009). The generation of this surplus in
Peripheral economies is due more to the hyper-exploitation of the labor force than to highly advanced levels of technology in production processes (Marini and Martins 2008). Therefore, to understand state-driven EE policies and practices aimed toward rural areas in Brazil it is necessary to situate the ‘environmental question’ within this nation’s role as a dependent and semi Peripheral economy, whose rural labor force is hyper-exploited within the globally stratified division of labor. As such, we must treat the ‘environmental question’ as a profound social issue in which the exploitation of land and natural resources is inextricably linked to the exploitation of human labor and conflicts over access to land.

Harvey reminds us, furthermore, that the extraction of tribute from developing nations, associated with the international division of labor, is an ‘old imperial practice,’ but it has been pronounced in neoliberal times and has ‘proven very helpful to the restoration of class power, particularly in the world’s main financial centres’ (2005, 74). This perspective places class conflict at the center of the environmental problematic, and makes the role of the state an important variable to examine in attempts to understand the contested nature of public EE initiatives. Along these lines, an important characteristic of neoliberalism that concerns us in our analysis is the objective to bring about the restoration (if not the initial formation) of class power. Neoliberalism according to Harvey is ‘a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites’ (2005, 19). Our preoccupation is with how state-driven EE projects aimed at fostering sustainable development in the Brazilian countryside are mobilized to serve this purpose.

The role of the state is of central concern in this matter. Our approach to this question employs Gramsci’s concept of the ‘extended state,’ which forms the conceptual basis upon which our interpretation of national political dynamics of education rests – and the dynamic upon which the PEAAF is inserted. The ‘extended’ state is composed of the conjunction of civil and political society with transnational articulations in the formation of policy. The polity of the state responsible for repression and coercion is entangled with elements of civil society that implicate the cultural–ideological mechanisms producing and maintaining hegemony (Buci-Glucksmann 1980). The ‘extended state’ in Gramsci’s perspective is traversed by class conflict, forming a dialectical relationship between reproduction and transformation, the result of which cannot be predetermined. The struggle for ideological and cultural apparatus of hegemony is always a process of contestation. We must recognize that the struggle of the working class for control over public educational institutions and practices administered by the state puts pressure so that public resources may contribute to the formation and organization of this class according to its own interests. Yet, it is also true that the dominant class, having much more access to and control over the means of mass communication (and other institutions of cultural and ideological control), results in bourgeois class interests being absorbed harmoniously into the interests of the working class, constituting altogether the common interests of the national polity. The apparatus of hegemony for the ruling class is a powerful consensus builder, and public education initiatives form an important component of this apparatus.

Similarly, the state as a site of power struggle where both domination and resistance may take place is an established idea in critical studies of education (Carnoy and Levin 1985; Apple, Kenway, and Singh 2005). Through public educational institutions and practices, the state becomes not simply an arm of the ruling class,
but ‘an arena of conflict over the production of knowledge, ideology, and employment, a place where social movements try to meet their needs and business attempts to reproduce its hegemony’ (1985, 50). In other words, both dominant and subjugated classes are going to try, and are variably able to, shape public education according to their needs. We argue that PEAAF, as a political–pedagogical project, reflects struggles over conceptions of agriculture, environment, and education waged in the arena of class conflict. Our primary interest is in understanding the internal contradictions of an EE project purported to be critical and participatory promoted by the state operating within the neoliberal framework of environmental governance.

**Historical context of critical EE in Brazil**

Although Brazilian EE has roots in conservationist legislations that go as far back as the nineteenth century, most observers see the beginning of its institutionalization at the federal level take place in 1973, when the military government established the Special Secretariat for the Environment (Carvalho 2008). For this reason, the character of Brazilian EE ideals in the present day need to be understood within the historical context of the extensive social movements for democratic change that took place during the transition from military to civilian rule, a time culminating in the mid-1980s known as *Abertura Política*. Prior to this transition, EE in Brazil emphasized outdoor education, the teaching of ecology, and the preservation of natural areas when this did not interfere with the development agenda of a military regime more keen on appeasing global conservationist pressures than on responding to budding domestic environmental movements (Acslerad 2008). The political transformations of the 1980s, by empowering civil society, democratizing the state, and opening the public sphere to much wider participation by the citizenry, are a key factor explaining why EE in Brazil ultimately rooted its ethos in critical traditions.

On the heels of the *Abertura Política*, the growth of EE as a social and political project of national dimensions was driven by the state and civil society through extensive policy formulation. The legislative foundation for the strengthening of a national EE movement was established with the new constitution of 1988, of which article 225 states: ‘All citizens have the right to an environment in ecological equilibrium, as a public good for common use and essential to a healthy quality of life, thus upon the state and the people the duty to defend it and preserve it for present and future generations’ (our translation, Brasil 2003). Remarkably for a constitution, the mandate goes into much detail as to the role of the government: ‘to uphold this right, it is incumbent upon the state to promote EE in all levels of schooling and the conscientization of the public for environmental preservation’ (our translation, Brasil 2003). The constitutional mandate making the promotion and delivery of EE a responsibility of public authorities was a major victory for social movements that preceded this milestone. It led to a state-driven national system of EE provision that established its presence from the federal to municipal levels. This process included input from wide-ranging stakeholders in the private, public, and non-profits sectors across society, as well as from numerous regional and thematic networks of environmental educators, activists, and academics (Sánchez 2010).

The vision put forth by the *Carta Brasileira para Educação Ambiental* (Brazilian Charter for EE), produced by the networked EE movement that was also prominently engaged in Eco-92, delineated the vision and principles for a national EE program. This foundational document highlighted the importance of fostering
critical thinking for local and planetary consciousness; of acknowledging the ideological nature (not-neutral) of such education; of educating for active citizenship; of adopting holistic perspectives that affirm the necessity of interdisciplinarity for an adequate understanding of human–nature relationships; of social solidarity, respect for human rights, democratization, and multiculturalism; and of promoting wide political participation in the design and implementation of EE systems. Notably, overcoming the authoritarian legacy of the military regime, the *Carta Brasileira* called for ‘the participation of communities directly and indirectly affected by environmental issues, in all instances, in the decision-making process regarding policies that shape EE initiatives’ (our translation, MEC 1992).

The academy played a major role in the political effervescence of the times, laying a critical epistemological foundation for the mobilization of both civil society and the state around EE. Owing largely to popular education movements and the Freirean legacy of praxis and dialogical methods that emerged within a Latin American Marxist paradigm, the Brazilian EE movement took shape through an integrated socio-ecological approach to the environmental question, with a profound emancipatory perspective on human–nature relations, and strong concern for fundamental social transformation (Loureiro 2004). Identifying its critical epistemological roots, Carvalho (2008) contends that Brazilian EE ideals focus on nature not just as a question of natural resources, but also of cultural diversity, diverse livelihoods, identity and cultural rights, citizenship, and fundamentally as a matter of social justice.

In the present day, state-driven EE initiatives have continued this tradition, generally flying the banner of critical EE. The notion of EE leading to the formation of citizen-subjects capable of critically reading socio-environmental realities and mobilizing collectively to intervene in transformative ways to overcome social injustice is quite central and well established in official environmental and pedagogical discourse sanctioned by the state (Loureiro 2008). It is this common overarching identity and tradition that allows the Brazilian EE field to resist the framework put forth by the UN Decade of ESD. From the Brazilian EE viewpoint, DESD is seen as a hegemonic construct attuned to the interests of northern high-income nations through its technocentrism, continued market orientation, and unshakable focus on universalized notions of progress normed according to standards of Western modernity that ignore cultural, socio-political, and biophysical diversity of other nations (Lima 2009).

This imagined overarching identity breaks down when we observe the field more carefully, as the evolution of Brazilian EE movement in the twenty years after the *Carta Brasileira* reveals divergent theoretical/methodological strands. Two prominent lineages should be mentioned here. One emphasized a Marxist approach to the role of the state and centrality of the public sphere in redressing the social asymmetries of power and environmental injustices that are inherent to the capitalist political-economic system. This school of thought was mainly represented by the work of Jose Silva Quintas within IBAMA (the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) and led to a model of EE known as *public environmental management education* (Quintas 2004). This model constitutes some of the earliest work on critical EE mobilized from within the state in Brazil, and Quintas’ legacy can be found within the widespread institutionalization of this model within the legal framework for environmental licensing and regulation of industrial activity.

Another prominent lineage distanced itself from an orthodox Marxist reading of society, influenced instead by the post-structuralist Marxist dialectics of the
Frankfurt school and also inspired by Edgar Morin, Leonardo Boff, and others critically concerned with justice within a framework of complexity theory. The concept of Ecopedagogy, advanced by Moacir Gadotti and colleagues from the Paulo Freire Institute in São Paulo, was an early coalescence of these new inspirations, and was influential within a larger network of EE activists and academics that played key roles in Eco-92, the formulation of the *Treaty on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility*, and the subsequent Earth Charter movement (Gadotti 1998; Kahn 2008). This school of thought remains very influential in the present day administrations of the General Coordinating Body of the National EE Policy (known as *OG-PNEA*) within in the Ministry of Education, and the EE Directorship of the Ministry of the Environment* in Brasilia.

The variations in these two camps are based on different interpretations of Freirean political and pedagogical principles vis-a-vis Marxist conflict paradigms and post-foundational critical theories, even if they all locate themselves firmly within the broader camp of critical traditions. It appears that the banner of *critical* EE in Brazil is being flown as a catch-all category for conceptual and theoretical EE packages that actually diverge epistemologically and ideologically in important ways. This is most striking when noting the degree to which different strands of EE address (or do not address) the socio-ecological dialectics of Marxist thought through questions of power and social conflict (Trein 2012). The epistemological divergences that lie underneath the surface of the diverse critical tradition are causing ideological cleavages within the movement, and there is an emerging literature in the Brazilian academy attempting to map these divergences and understand its implications for practice (Layrargues 2012).

The theoretical divergences found in the lineages of Brazilian EE have methodological implications that translate into important differences on the ground. It is with this issue in mind that we present a case study of an EE program run out of the Ministry of the Environment, categorized as critical in theory but ultimately pragmatic and non-critical in practice when exercised through a state penetrated by the currents of neoliberalism. After all, Brazil is far from immune to neoliberal trends, so how do we reconcile the critical, emancipatory vision for EE with Brazil’s reality as a peripheral (or semi-peripheral) economy, supplier of raw materials and cheap surplus labor for the centers of capital? Despite the transformative promise of the Brazilian EE movement, the co-optation of environmental discourse by big business, the ways in which the governance apparatus is mobilized across sectors to benefit corporate interests, and the institutionalization of EE through public–private partnerships often guided more by market-driven logics of neoliberal ideology than by grassroots struggles for social justice, all point to the perils that lie ahead for the critical EE movement in Brazil. The following section examines specific instances in which neoliberalism is making substantive inroads into Brazilian EE initiatives, paying particular attention to the state’s relationship to the agribusiness sector.

**EE in Family Agriculture Program: neoliberalism, the state, and ‘civil society’**

The Environmental Education Program in Family Agriculture (PEAFAF), created and administered by the Environmental Education Directorate (DEA) of the Ministry of the Environment (MMA), seeks to foster sustainable practices in family agriculture and to promote sustainable natural resource management in rural areas, specifically through strategies focused on adult education and non-formal education. Among this
program’s central objectives, we find: (1) Contribute to rural sustainable development; (2) Support environmental regularization of rural properties in the family agriculture sector; and (3) Foster critical and participatory educational processes that promote education, capacity-building, communication, and social mobilization. Principles of social and environmental justice, democratic and participatory management, and plurality are prominent in the program’s official literature. Among its directives, the program seeks to promote critical reflections on urban–rural and local–global relationships within the spirit of co-responsibility and solidarity. In these ways, PEAAF reflects the principles of critical EE espoused by the national EE agenda.

This program, we should note, was created through the Ministry of the Environment in response to ongoing demands by rural social movements, which consistently put forth the critique that EE provided by the public educational apparatus was weak or non-existent in rural areas. In Brazil, as we have explained above, the responsibility of the state to provide EE exists as a constitutional mandate. PEAAF was thus originally a social demand to address the real socio-environmental problems suffered by rural groups whose livelihoods consisted of small family agriculture (i.e. genetically modified crops, agro-toxins, megaprojects such as large highways or hydroelectric dams, etc.). In practice, however, the design and institutionalization of the program have been influenced by the neoliberal climate structuring the development of the Brazilian rural sector.

We focus the following critical examination of PEAAF and associated concerns on three examples that highlight how neoliberal ideology is guiding Brazilian state-driven EE initiatives: (a) The national EE context within which PEAAF is situated, where public–private partnerships and the corporate financing of environmental education administered by the state has become the norm; (b) the influence of the agribusiness sector in environmental legislation through campaign financing; and (c) the co-optation of principles of ‘popular’ participation that have resulted in pragmatic and non-critical forms of EE pedagogy being put into practice. In each of these examples, we find ways that the state, in the process of mobilizing EE programs, is actively involved in the reproduction of capitalist modes of production and deeply stratified class relations.

Corporate EE financing through public–private partnerships

We start with the national context of state-driven EE strategies implemented by the Ministry of the Environment, namely the National Environmental Education Program (PRONEA), within which PEAAF is inserted. Upon analysis of official literature produced by the Ministry about activities undertaken in PRONEA, we observed a recurrent referencing of partnerships between the Ministry and entities of ‘civil society’, a large part of which were representatives of the corporate sector. This is particularly the case with regard to financing and operationalization of EE programs, which points to the dearth of public resources allocated for this purpose at the national level. The development of national EE by way of these partnerships also points to the affinity that EE projects promoted by the Ministry have with the interests of the class that controls the means of production.

A striking example of a partnership between the MMA and the private sector, specifically in the EE of small rural producers, is the case of Bunge, a multinational corporation. The close relationship of the Bunge group with state and local
governments is explained on its website. As a result of this partnership, in 2007, they produced a booklet called ‘Environmental Responsibility in Agricultural Production’. This business conglomerate operates globally along the entire chain of food production, selling fertilizers to farmers and in turn buying their crops, then storing, moving, and processing them. Within the chain of production and distribution of Bunge, Brazil occupies the role of exporter of agricultural products, oilseed processor and flour mills. The activities of Bunge in Brazil are intensive with regard to the use of ‘natural resources’. While ‘supportive’ of local farmers, any damage caused to the environment resulting from agricultural activities sponsored by the company would be the responsibility of individual farmers and not of Bunge; yet activities causing extensive environmental impacts are crucial to Bunge’s bottom line. At the same time, Bunge sponsors and conducts courses, lectures and elaborate brochures on how to preserve nature and be ‘environmentally responsible.’

If we can argue, as Wood has (2005), that the problem is not this or that corporation, but the actual capitalist system – with its economic compulsions for expansion – we can then conclude that the detrimental effects of this system cannot be eliminated by merely taming global corporations or making them more ‘ethical’, ‘responsible’ or ‘socially conscious.’ Not even the most benign or ‘responsible’ corporation can escape the automatic compulsions of capitalism to pursue the bottom line, for it has to follow the laws of the market and its responsibilities to shareholders in order to survive. This means inevitably putting profits above all other considerations, with its attendant destructive social and environmental consequences. Our interpretation of public–private partnerships suggests that the insistence of these groups to invest in EE assumes the purpose of disseminating values that legitimize corporate interests.

From this perspective, public–private partnerships in the financing of public EE initiatives exposes the ideological synergy between the state and the corporate sector, and give materiality to Gramsci’s notion of an extended state where market-driven actors constitute a powerful segment of civil society. Harvey argues that such partnerships lie at the heart of neoliberalization, which sees a marked ‘shift from government (state power on its own) to governance (a broader configuration of state and key elements in civil society)’ (2005, 77). Neoliberal governance poses some difficult questions for public EE initiatives. What happens to information that is not of interest to the maintenance of corporate activity – i.e. information that may question or delegitimize the corporation’s activities or hurt its credibility as a steward of the environment or promoter of the social good? Might EE projects financed and operationalized by the corporate sector, yet carrying the seal of the state, be contributing to the legitimization of continued capitalist accumulation – in other words, reinforcing social structures and economic activities that lead to continued environmental destruction and exploitation of the working classes? These questions reveal the profound contradictions that exist when neoliberal environmental governance meets public EE initiatives, where tensions arise between the public good and private interests.

**Implications of campaign financing and the new Forest Code on EE**

Tensions between the public good and private interests that may affect EE in the rural sector are also evident in electoral campaign financing and recent modifications to environmental legislation. Since 2009, when the creation of PEAAF was initiated
by the Ministry, the process has been intimately connected to the tumultuous legislative process that led to the new Forest Code of 2012 (now-former federal law no. 4,771 of 1965). It is no coincidence that PEAAF, despite being debated and reformulated since 2009, is officially launched just a few days after the conflictive new Forest Code was approved in congress. As a result, PEAAF would now have to be based on the drastically different definitions and regulations encoded in the new environmental law.

The relevance of the new law to EE revolves around the importance of environmental codes of land tenure regularization, without which the participation in national and international markets is severely constrained for rural producers. EE, rural technical assistance, and training for rural producers had always been key components of this regularization process, which was generally aimed at family agriculture sector as ‘special beneficiaries’ of public assistance. As a result, the environmental component in the process of land tenure regularization had a fundamentally educational character prior to the new Forest Code.

The new Forest Code fundamentally changed this relationship between small rural producers and land tenure regularization that was so important to maintaining access to land. Environmental regulation of land tenure in the new law excludes most educational and training/professional development activities and is rather centered around managerial/administrative requirements such as the Rural Environmental Registry and the Environmental Reserve Quotas, which constitute ‘a nominal land title representative of an area with existing primary or secondary (recovering) forest’ to be recorded in ‘commodity exchanges’ or in systems of registration and financial liquidation of assets. The new Forest Code transforms the process of recuperating degraded areas into a monetized process with speculative value in a market, in turn making ‘environmental regularization’ expressed purely in financial and mercantilist values. In other words, in the new legislation, environmental regulation ceases to be an educational matter and becomes primarily a financial question. As Harvey affirmed succinctly, ‘Neoliberalization has meant, in short, the financialization of everything’ (2005, 33). From our perspective, EE in the rural sector in Brazil has not escaped this phenomenon.

Connecting back to Bunge, according to the educational booklet on environmental responsibility referenced above, ‘Environmental regularization is the first step to have a chance to compete in the market …’ The booklet goes on to describe the increasing number of requirements on production standards imposed by internal and external markets. In the context of the ‘monopolization of territories’ (Oliveira 2012), environmental regularization is mobilized as another form of coercion by commercial enterprises and industrial processing upon rural producers. To the extent that rural sustainable development is framed by environmental regularization laws designed to increase competitiveness in a global capitalist economy, we see PEAAF as an educational program molding family agriculture into a model of production more useful to capital.

The influence of agribusiness in the Brazilian process of environmental legislation exemplifies acutely the penetration of neoliberal ideology in ways that ultimately impacts practices of EE in the rural sector (Accioly and Sánchez 2012). By agribusiness, we refer not just to landowners, but rather to the complex industrialized agricultural sector in Latin America subordinated to the interests of financial capital (de Mendonça 2010). Members of ABAG (Brazilian Agribusiness Association) in fact include several banks, telecommunications companies, companies
involved in the chemical industry and others. The extended state is again visible here in the way it establishes relationships with the corporate sector. This is a salient point when the latter finances the electoral campaigns of parliamentarians who, once elected, comply with a political agenda tightly synchronized with corporate interests, leading to key modifications in environmental legislation in ways that benefit the profit motive. As Harvey makes clear of neoliberal governance strategies, ‘businesses and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors but even acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)’ (2005, 77).

In Brazil, we see a perfect illustration of neoliberal governance through the articulations between agribusiness and the state in legislative processes (Accioly and Sánchez 2012).

**Participation and pedagogical discourse in PEAAF**

Given the larger policy and legislative context provided so far, what do we make of the ‘critical, participatory, and dialogical educational processes’ claimed in the PEAAF literature? In EE promoted by MMA and geared toward family agriculture, its primarily technical and pragmatic character can be observed, emphasizing the clarification of environmental legislations, the framing of the small agriculturalist into programs of environmental regularization of small rural properties, and the diffusion of ‘successful initiatives’ through the promotion of public-private ‘partnerships’ financed by the corporate sector. This type of EE, which neglects to debate the socio-environmental impacts of large-scale development projects, (such as PAC, Programa Acelerado de Crescimento, or Accelerated Program for Growth), or the concrete modifications promoted by the reform of the Forest Code, is limited in its capacity to promote the critical reading of socio-environmental reality. What has remained out of the agenda in PEAAF is addressing the necessary context of class conflict, which presents itself in such pronounced fashion in the Brazilian countryside.

Participation, as conceptualized by PEAAF, has taken on different meanings along the process of designing and implementing the program. Initially, rural workers participated in negotiations around the program through meetings between staff members of the EE Department of the Ministry and rural workers’ unions and social movements. The initial negotiations, where unions and social movements led a process of establishing criteria and resources for the mitigation of socio-environmental impacts resulting from the large-scale federal development projects, gave way to workshops where environmental issues were treated generically and decontextualized from local realities. Unions and social movements did not participate in setting the agenda of the workshops. They were not given prior access to the workshop programming once the agenda was set and had no recourse to changing the chosen topics for debate. Time for debate and discussion, in any case, was limited, with lectures and presentations by environmental technicians and other specialists predominating. As a result, the entities representing the interests of the rural working class gradually stopped participating in key decision-making meetings.

By self-referencing as a critical and participatory educational program, PEAAF re-signifies the concept of participation, so that what is prioritized is ‘participation’ by way of attendance of isolated individuals with no explicit ideological affiliations, without concrete decision-making powers, and fragmented into numerous
groups – as opposed to the more substantive participation of the organized and oppressed masses, with concrete and unified agendas. In light of these observations, the notion of ‘critical, participatory, and dialogical educational processes’ claimed in the PEAAF literature risks becoming merely an educational slogan (Scheffler 1960).

From our point of view, the discourse around ‘critical, participatory, and dialogical’ processes is intended to foster social adhesion, generating trust of the dominant model of development from society as a whole, and forging consensus around principles of sustainable development. This may be a form of consensus that reflects little of the ideals of the Freirean educational movements from which the ideas of critical, participatory, and dialogical education originates.

Along these lines, we see the promotion of a pedagogical practice that reduces environmental problems to mere technical–operational challenges, where environmental challenges are identified generically as a problem of human vs. nature, rather than as an outcome of specific power struggles between groups in society. In a macro-classification of the political–ideological tendencies found within the field of Brazilian EE (Layrargues and da Costa Lima 2011), the EE program described in this case could be categorized as ‘pragmatic’ (vs. ‘critical’). According to Layrargues, in pragmatic EE initiatives, a lack of critical reflection derives from ‘a belief in the neutrality of science and technology, which results in a superficial and apolitical perception of social relations and their interactions with the environment’ (2012, 405). In this approach, class conflict is hidden as the social function of education is subordinated to the demands of capital, in effect demobilizing labor and strengthening the position of capital in the rural sector. In the Brazilian countryside, this is illustrated by the weakening of the traditional rural producer’s lifestyle and livelihood, historically based on family agriculture practices. By stimulating the partnerships between the small producer and rural corporate enterprises, PEAAF strengthens the point of view of globalized agribusiness that is fundamentally geared toward the exportation of cash crops for global trade. In these partnerships between ‘unequals’, the problem of land conflicts and concentration of land among the few, which lies partly at the heart of an economic system with devastating social and environmental consequences, is left unaddressed.

**Conclusion**

The type of EE promoted by the Brazilian state, in the case of PEAAF, exemplifies a public educational program that originated as a victory of rural social movements, but became subsumed and co-opted by the dominant ideology and practices of neoliberal governance. In this instance of state intervention, solutions to a socio-environmental crisis that is the outcome of conflict between labor and capital are presented by pragmatic partnerships between these social forces. Promoting these partnerships between labor and capital in spite of ongoing land conflicts and environmental destruction reproduces an ideology that presupposes the end of class struggle and the demise of rural social movements. By masking class conflict deeply structured into the rural productive sector, and fostering the subordination of the working class to the interests of capital represented by globalized corporate agribusiness, PEAAF reinforces the ideology of consensus maintaining hegemony in a capitalist system. Instead of addressing social and environmental problems critically, so as to find locally based solutions to mitigate these impacts, the EE program ends up perpetuating the model of economic production that is at the root of social struggles
and environmental devastation. This environmental ideology, framed by sustainability discourse mobilized in EE programs, is paradoxically both ecological and anti-ecological.

Juxtaposing the critical and transformative rhetoric of a state-driven EE program against the state’s deep articulations with agribusiness in practice, we thus observe in a dependent economy (Fernandes 1972) a dramatic contradiction between the public defense and destruction of nature – environmentalism and anti-environmentalism acting as a complement of one another. More precisely: states seeking to protect the environment through critical EE strategies suffer serious limitations in the context of their own condition as stewards of a neoliberal economy based on the supply of raw materials, intensive land-use, and cheap labor force. The state in Brazil is still a platform with the potential to mobilize an alternative development paradigm according to the demands of social movements, but in the era of neoliberalization, it has been effectively used to advance the interests of capital and promote investments in unsustainable economic practices. In sum, the state needs to be understood as a contested space, displaying both promise and peril for critical EE practices in Brazil. Centrally in this contradiction, we find the mobilization of sustainability discourse as a vehicle for high-impact land-use development, and ultimately for the strengthening of dominant class power, in the era of globalized neoliberalism.

Notes
1. *Abertura política* refers to the process of democratization that took place between 1974 and 1985, when a long transition took place from military rule to the democratic 6th Republic.
2. *Coordenadoria-Geral de Educação Ambiental do Ministerio da Educação CG-EA/MEC.*
3. *Diretoria de Educação Ambiental do Ministerio do Meio Ambiente DEA/MMA.*

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References


