



Debating food production at dinner time: Mainstream audiences are invited to debate the ethics of agricultural practices in Brazil

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In the rural areas of Brazil, a farmer runs his agricultural empire with a fierce hand: he exploits his workers and the land to their limits. Lack of sustainable land management leads to the pollution of rivers, changes in rain patterns, and exhaustion of the soil. The vast amount of land that he owns was acquired through dispossession and violence towards indigenous people and peasants. And as his empire grew, so did his political power, which grants him free access to politicians and public officials. This profile could have depicted hundreds of real characters in the history of Brazilian rural development. However, it refers specifically to Coronel Afrânio de Sá Ribeiro, a fictional character in the telenovela *Velho Chico*,

1997). The topic of agriculture is not new in a country that is the third largest exporter of agricultural products in the world (WTO, 2015). Some telenovelas have also been set in the rural environment such as *Rei do Gado* (1996) and *Renascer* (1993). What is new is that the Coronel's power is being challenged by ideas that came from abroad. Sustainability, natural recovery of water bodies, and social justice to rural workers are the ideas brought by the character's grandson Miguel, who returns to his family's hometown after studying agricultural sciences in France, creating a conflict between the old and new ways of managing the land.



Figure 1: The character Coronel Afrânio, representing the traditional and oppressive coronelism, will be challenged with ideas linked to sustainability by his grandson

Photo Credit: Paraiba.com.br and *Velho Chico* Team

a highly-rated soap opera which is run by media giant Rede Globo. Telenovelas have been an important cultural and social component in Brazilian society (Fernandes,

The story, which runs at prime time, delivers an important message to millions of viewers. Sustainability and social equity in the rural environment have finally

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matured into ideas that can be presented to the mainstream audience in a developing country. To understand the importance of this change, it is necessary to consider the impact that such TV programs have in Brazil. The country lacks leisure activities for the low income population. Furthermore, high crime rates lead people to prefer to stay at home, and deficient schooling and literacy limit alternative activities such as reading books and magazines. As a consequence, 95.6% of residences have a TV set (IBGE, 2011). The development of a national television system was stimulated by the government during the military dictatorship, which needed to create a sense of union in a country of continental proportions with profound cultural differences (Hamburger, 1998). Much of the Brazilian identity, therefore, was formed by telenovelas – which are programs that aim at showing examples of the Brazilian way of life and creating shared cultural values. The audience has been led to believe that when they sit in front of their TV sets every night, they are seeing a representation of an idealized Brazilian family. The Brazilian telenovelas are different from their Spanish speaking counterparts because they are meant to be realistic and contemporary, and to create discussions about topics that are polemic, such as sexual identity, racism, corruption, etc. (Lopes, 2003).

Telenovelas have dealt with important changes in political, social and cultural trends; however, they have not created these changes, but followed them after they were perceived as promising trends (Lopes, 2003). This can be applied to the mentality in rural development. The synopsis of *Velho Chico* was pitched and rejected twice, both in 2009 and in 2012, for being “too political”, according to news reports on online magazines (Portal IG, 2012). However, in 2016, it was put into production, proving that the idea of sustainable development and social equity in agriculture has matured to the point that it can be endorsed and presented to a large audience.

The story depicts an old, common practice called “Coronelismo” that was prevalent from the colonial period until the 1930s, and even still exists in remote areas of Brazil. The land owners are called “Coronéis” (Colonel, in English), a nickname dating back to the time when land owners bought titles. The Coroneis has influence over public officials by means of electoral fraud and corruption, and is not tamed by the state because he is deeply associated with it. This practice shaped the distribution of land, leading to the concentration of land in the hands of a few traditional families, as well as social inequality and impoverishment of peasant families (LEAL, 2012). Coroneis Afrânio, the main character of *Velho Chico*, often claims to have one of the largest fortunes in Brazil.

The new ideas raised by the 2016 production include

the valorization of cooperatives and peasant families, respect for natural crop cycles, renewal of water sources with the use of native vegetation, ceasing the use of pesticides, and the end of irrigation systems that divert the courses of rivers. The title of the story, *Velho Chico*, refers to the main river that runs through Northeastern Brazil, officially named the São Francisco. Throughout the story, the characters often make remarks about changes in the river, such as that it is not as deep as in the previous decades and that it is not possible to fish there anymore. The farmer’s grandson, Miguel, quickly identifies the predatory agricultural practices of his grandfather as the main culprit for the worsening water conditions, and calls for an immediate change in practices. The Coroneis acknowledges that many changes have occurred since the construction of a dam nearby, which altered the river’s flow, but also guaranteed some of his political power. This suggests that connections exist between large infrastructure projects, environmental degradation, and the strengthening of local elites.

Coroneis Afrânio shows no concern for land management, and rarely interferes in the actual work of farming. Instead, he approves the most profitable practices and divides his time between trying to enlarge his fortune and securing more political power through violence, corruption, and empty populist discourses. He is shocked when his grandson wants to implement new practices. Rather than attempt to make as much money as possible, the young man cares about protection of the environment and the well-being of the locals.

This plot depicts a few important discussions that have surfaced and are in direct contrast to Brazil’s prevalent practices and culture: questioning the origin of landowners’ fortunes, the right of peasants to receive a fair share of their produce, the importance of social movements, sustainability over productivity, and the long-term consequences of poor environmental management. Previously, there was little questioning by locals of the devastating effects that this form of land management has for income distribution. Some of the most impoverished people live in the rural areas, where sanitation, health, education, and access to electricity remain a challenge, despite the 21.46% contribution of agriculture to overall GDP (Cepea, CAN and IBGE, 2016). Instead, rich individuals were perceived as more competent or deserving than the rest of the population, or as people that could provide the basic necessities, such as medication and protection (LEAL, 2012).

Velho Chico established 2016 as the year that matters of sustainable use of land and water resources finally left the confines of academia in Brazil and reached a mainstream audience, which is primarily urban. According to



the 2010 Census, 83.34% of the Brazilian population lives in urban areas, and is therefore unfamiliar with the realities of the rural environment (IBGE, 2010). It is still too early to determine if the issues raised by the telenovela have called the attention of the audience to the products they consume on a daily basis and agricultural policies. Yet, the telenovela suggests that we have reached a maturation point in the discussion, and represents a bet made by one of the largest media broadcasters in the world that there will be a trend of more sustainable agricultural practices in the future. The discussion is especially valid considering that there are still new, large properties displacing areas that until recently were solely native vegetation (Colussi, 2015). The expansion of a new agricultural frontier during a time where the old, predatory practices are being revisited offers the possibility to create different patterns in agricultural and social development. However, it requires new forms of relationships between the state, landowners, and workers in order to avoid the kinds of past associations that have led to corruption, drought, impoverishment, and poor management practices in the Northeast region of Brazil.

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