

Land-grabbing mafias and dispossession in the Brazilian Amazon: rural–urban land speculation and deforestation in the Santarém region

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways that illegal land grabbing has taken place in contemporary Brazil since 2003. The findings suggest that much more attention needs to be paid to the various forms of violent illegalities behind the creation of land control, in both urban and rural contexts. The role of land mafias as a key political-economic sector creating capital through land speculation should be investigated further, as it seems to matter even more than *de jure* land rights. The article studies how, where, and why land mafias – often an amalgamation of rural elites, police, and governmental and judicial powerholders – have surged. It uses longitudinal ethnography to explore the widespread expulsion of people from their land in the Brazilian Amazon after the 2003 installation of a Cargill soybean export mill. This has led to the radical transformation of vast forest and urban areas, destroying the lives of humans and other-than-humans.

1. Introduction

The debate on different forms of dispossession around the world suggests several similarities but also differences depending on the context, political system, polity, actors, and sectors involved (Edelman et al., 2013; Kröger, 2020). In some places there are so-called regimes of dispossession, with a strong state role, in collusion with national or multinational capital, or both. However, less explored is the role played by land mafias, which form a consequential driver of land dispossession (Dunlap & Correa-Arce, 2022; Levien, 2021). In these contexts, it is particularly helpful to observe the different ways in which claims of legality – legal documents and acceptance of the mafia's actions as legal – are used to shore up the violent dispossessory actions that give *de facto* land access. Herein, I use the case of the Brazilian Amazon's Santarém region to explore how what could be called land mafias – composed of landholding elites, politicians, and parts of state and semi-state institutions (like the police and notary office owners) – cause and rely on dispossession to amass land claims, exert control, wield power, and accumulate capital for their ingroup. This is a process whereby elites and state actors are placed outside the formal law and can carry out land grabbing despite laws forbidding it. The article relies on long-term and ethnographically oriented field research, participant observation and interviews in the region in 2005, 2007, 2011,

2018, 2019, and 2023, each visit lasting weeks or months, totaling over one year. I will discuss the illegalities of both urban and rural land grabbing, due to their close linkages and physical proximity in this setting of vast, fast growing soybean plantation and urban land speculation-based expansion over forests and smallholdings. This answers the call by Hecht et al. (2021) for more studies that do not separate the rural and the urban in the Amazon but consider the critical importance of urban-rural dynamics for understanding Amazonian processes such as dispossessionary deforestation.

I argue that what I call regionally dominant political economic systems (RDPEs) can explain why, where, and how land grabbing occurs. The analytical premise in my work on RDPEs is that political economies can form systems that define the use of territory. Some sectors – political economies (in my view, economic sectors are always embedded in politics) – can become dominant in certain regions. These systems are varieties of capitalism that can be seen as RDPEs, which, when extractivist or deforesting, are inextricably linked to the key processes driving the loss of natural environments. In Brazil the soybean/corn monoculture complex is an RDPE as these plantations directly dominate over 45 million hectares of land. It should be noted that these plantations do not represent an RDPE in all parts of Brazil but are a clear example an RDPE in the northern parts of Mato Grosso, along the BR-163 Highway. There are overlaps between different RDPEs and in other parts of the country – like the Amazon – other types of RDPEs are in power. In some regions *garimpo* (gold mining) is the dominant sector established as or trying to become an RDPE, for example the *narcogarimpo* (the mixing of illegal gold mining with drug gangs) establishment attempts in Roraima on Yanomami lands.

Santarém and several other regions land grabbing mafias are interlinked with ranching. It is so difficult to separate cattle capitalism and land grabbing – as most land grabbers are elite landholders – that this system could be thought of as ranching-grabbing rather than simply land grabbing. This ranching-grabbing can be seen as the most territorially expansive type of land grabbing in Brazil, with 160 million hectares in pastureland. I focus on a particular slice of this RDPE – the speculating, violent, land-grabbing part, which operates akin to a mafia. This land mafia can be seen as an actor, and a sector that is embedded to other sectors and linked with other RDPEs. In many places, property creation and price speculation are the key driving forces of political economy in the Amazon; thus, land mafias can be seen as the pinnacle and key sector of the extractivist RDPE. I argue that if an RDPE has taken hold of a particular polity and territory, it can play a dominant role in defining how the land is used in that territory. Santarém Rural Trade Union (STTR) President, Ivete Bastos, explained to me in December 2023, that the biggest illegal land grabbers ‘made possible soybeans and the expansion of ranching’. I focus in particular on land mafias, since the land grabbing they carry out can be seen as the key sector or system driving dispossession and deforestation. From this theoretical premise, I aim to provide an explanation of the deeper, systemic causes of deforesting land grabbing.

Figure 1 shows the Eastern bank of the Tapajós River, which is clearly differentiated from the Western bank by its heightened clear-cut areas (mostly for soybeans and cattle ranches, but also urban expansions). A comparison between the multiple-use conservation areas and the deforested areas highlights the extent and power of the RDPE operating in the region.

First, I theorize land mafias as a particular political-economic sector that has expanded over the course of Brazil’s history. Second, I analyse why land mafias are surging and how these mafias have been able to grab land, using the Santarém region as a case study. Third, I highlight the crucial role of violence and illegalities as methods of land grabbing, which is accompanied by an analysis of the dynamics of resistance to counter those methods. I explain how the Amazonian urban-rural setting has made land grabbing more profitable, which has led to increased mafia power. The conclusions

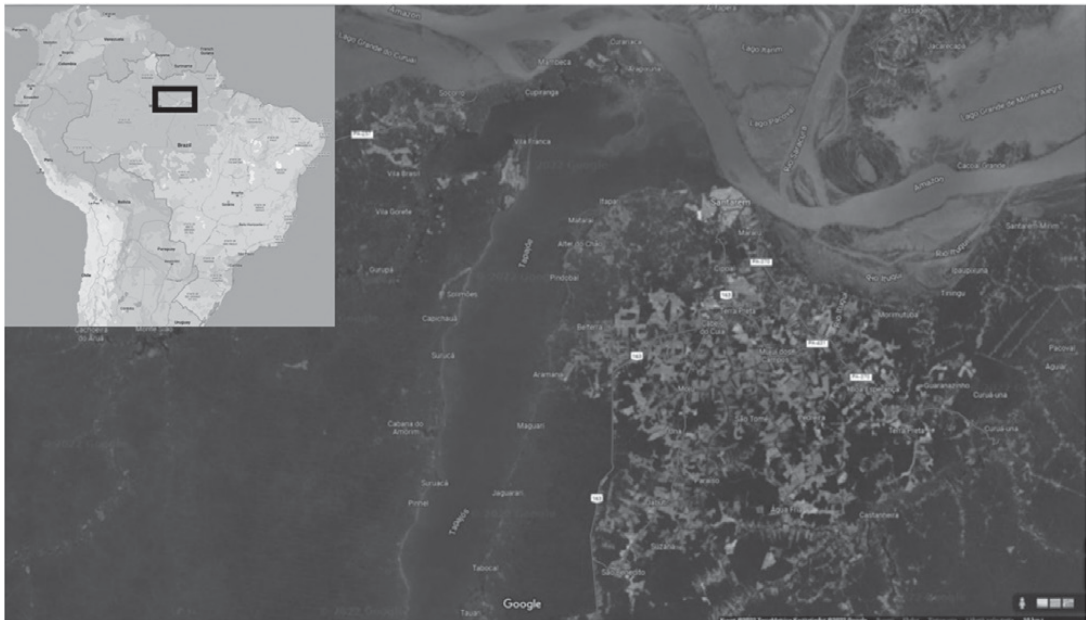


Figure 1. Map of the Santarém region, Pará state, Brazilian Amazon. Google maps, September 8, 2022.

provide answers and draw global comparisons to the key questions raised in the article, including: How is dispossession carried out and why? What forms does it take, including forms of coercion?

2. Theorizing land mafias as a political-economic sector in Brazil

In the Brazilian context, in comparison with Asian and African studies on land grabbing, much more violence routinely occurs, such as the use of hired gunmen (Ferrante et al., 2021). Second, the large-scale illegal grabbing of public lands, their subsequent lotting and sale distinguishes the process in Brazil from the legally agreed, long-term concessions and state-mediated corporate land deals that are more prominent elsewhere (Edelman et al., 2013; Neef et al., 2023). It should be noted that there is a mix of land-grabbing approaches in Brazil as this corporate style grab can also occur. Third, there are concrete land-grabbing, mafia-style actors in Brazil, who are local but who also have federal connections and are often led by prominent politicians – which stands in contrast, for example, to the Indonesian grabbing process, where locals also use the term ‘land mafia’, but which lacks clear social actors (Li, 2018). In Indonesia, the most common land mafia practice is the falsification of documents,¹ which is also common in Brazil, but also involves one of the highest rates of murder and violence in the world, carried out by *pistoleiros* hired by large and organized rural operators. Fourth, while some irregular land grabs have been annulled or overturned due to a combination of factors, including, the strenuous work of rural activists, human rights lawyers and prosecutors, these cases are rare and the processes slow due to the conservative character, corruption, or inefficiency of many courts. Typically, courts are not bought outright by grabbers, which is the case in many post-Soviet Union land-grabbing contexts (Visser et al., 2013), but rather in Brazil more covert forms of persuasion, bribery, and coercion are used. Federal judges each have approximately 12,000 cases and this overburdening makes justice slow.

Fifth, the Brazilian land-grabbing practice and mafias have global significance and specific importance as research topics due to their close links with Amazon deforestation, a reason why Human Rights Watch (2019) produced a major report titled *Rainforest Mafias*. Research in other parts of Brazil shows how particularly in the key commodity and resource frontiers (see Kröger & Nygren, 2020), such as MATOPIBA in the Northeastern Cerrado, unconstitutional legal and institutional measures favour illegal land grabbers at the cost of traditional rural communities with institutional land rights (AATR, 2021). The Lawyers' Association in Defence of Rural Workers in the state of Bahia (AATR) (2021) is the most important land rights advocacy group of rural workers' lawyers in Brazil and it argues that these unconstitutional legal dispositives should be revoked to overcome the lopsided legal processes whereby the de facto execution of laws perversely guarantees judicial security to land grabbers, speculators, and other deforesting and violent investors. The power and importance of these violent groups increased during the Bolsonaro regime (2019–2022), during which the state's failure to investigate crimes increased dramatically, and protection for activists against land grabbers was dropped, as many barbaric and illegal activities were allowed and promoted. However, the processes of violent land grabbing by mafia-type actors described in this article started well before the Bolsonaro regime and was ongoing during earlier regimes. I argue this is because Brazil has a consolidated political economic system of illegal land grabbing, which has withstood government changes.

Besides these differences, there are also quite a few similarities between Brazil and other contexts. Generally, land mafias actions across contexts are planned and systematic criminal activities involving a group of people that seek to illegally control land that does not belong to them. Land mafia is a well-known term across differing global contexts, which warrants its usage to define the process and groups in Brazil. Related concepts, such as criminal network, gangs, or rings, might be used in some cases for land mafias, especially after they have been exposed. However, these terms are typically used to refer to drug traffickers and other forms of organized crime, which are clearly outside the bounds of the law, while 'mafia' allows the inclusion of public officials not initially described as criminals, but who operate as such, unbeknownst to those outside the mafia. The land mafias seem to be highly mutable in terms of their accumulation strategies, sometimes holding onto the grabbed lands for a longer period, and sometimes selling them or shifting from predominantly rural grabs to selling more urban lots, which is the case in Santarém. These dynamics allow the land mafias to operate as intermediaries for larger rural elites by forming companies (see Spadotto et al., 2021), and to expand their operations to new 'development' areas targeted by extractivist mega-plans and infrastructure investments. Some mafia members can turn into landed elites themselves, consolidating power and becoming regional strongmen, with mafia bosses perpetuating and expanding the system. Not just anyone can sustain a land grab in Brazil, be it legal or based on *grilagem* (land title falsification).² To successfully maintain a land holding requires the right connections, a network of ties, benefit sharing, collusion, favours, and bribes (see de Sousa, 2023), on the local, national, and even international scale. Therefore, I consider land mafia to be a better term for defining the criminal network-type nature of those who can perpetuate and extend illegal land grabbing, while *grilagem* refers more to the technicalities of the process, and *grileiro* to the typically violent forgery process experts. For a process to be termed land mafia-led, there needs to be a larger, organized group involved, which entails violence and illegal actions, with the actor base potentially including companies, corporate directors, NGOs, state officials, elected politicians, police, army personnel, landholders, and known organized crime members, or any combination of these players.³

Brazil has notable contextual similarities with other Latin American countries regarding unsettled, ambiguous state lands like Brazil's *terra devoluta* lands, for example in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. This lack of clarity over land rights and documents creates opportunities for land grabbers. Illegal claims on undesignated public lands are routinely legalized in Brazil, both *de jure* and especially *de facto* (Kröger & Lalander, 2016), which favours the large land grabbers at the expense of forest cover (Yanai et al., 2022). There are about 50 million hectares of these undesignated public lands in the Brazilian Amazon, which have the lowest restrictions on deforestation and the least oversight by officials, which makes these lands a prime target for deforesting land grabbing (Yanai et al., 2022). Furthermore, the land-grabbing process is both urban and rural, and driven by rising land and resource prices at the cost of forest cover, as in India for example, which has notable land mafias (Satpathy, 2021). These Indian land mafias include both outright criminal actors such as leading politicians overextending mining lease areas and abusing their political elite positions (Kröger, 2020b), as well as other informal yet coercive rentier networks, which operate through corruption between the public-private divide (Levien, 2021). Similarly in Brazil, and especially in the Amazon, there are well-established criminal networks, which routinely run most of the illegal activities, including logging of valuable trees, gold mining, drug traffic routes, and grabbing of public and customarily local land. During the Bolsonaro era, these activities became more consolidated. Federal Prosecutor Felício Pontes explained to me in an interview in December 2023 that there is a specific group of federal prosecutors focusing on the *grilagem* crime networks, as 'there is an organized crime for this [*grilagem*], with even extensions in *cartórios*'. He noted that in December 2023 the Federal Police made a large raid arresting *grileiros* in several parts of the Amazon, including Santarém, which suggests a significant part of the federal police forces and Federal Prosecution Service (MPF) are trying to tackle the problem, which seems rampant at local levels. Ivete Bastos explained to me in December 2023:

We know that *grileiros de plantão* [on duty, looking all the time for *grilagem* opportunities] exist, who lit fire to say that it started by accident to ease the lottin ... at times they have informants within the [public] institutions ... there is always a judge, something, on the side of these people.

The earlier growth of Brazilian land mafias after the 1960s is also an outcome of dictatorship (1964–1984) actions and – dating back even further – a necessary sector to ensure that the colonization-created *latifúndios* (large rural estates) can expand and retain their land grabs indefinitely (particularly via *grilagem*, see de Sousa, 2023) at the cost of peasant landholdings in various forms. Violent and illegal means are routinely pursued by would-be land and resource grabbers and accepted by powerholders. Thus, a specific political economic actor comprising professionally organized and operating land mafias has formed, making a living and a lifestyle out of similarly executed land grabs, with a combination of intimidation, violence, the forging of land title documents, and corruption. State officials in key positions, such as those in the Land Reform and Colonization Agency (INCRA), were responsible for ordering the massive projects deforesting Amazon lots for colonists, who were brought from elsewhere in Brazil by the dictatorship. These INCRA officials often grabbed the best lots by force and extorted illegal payments for them (Bunker, 1988). The state and elite actors are linked to extractivist sectors, ensuring the buying of grabbed lands in irregular land markets and duly creating value through speculative rogue capitalism around land rents. Simultaneously, large national and international land investors rely on their frontier expansion and continued agribusiness to maintain legitimacy. In the long run, they can retain this legitimacy only through painstaking political work and ties, as well as links to international financial

decision-makers who consider their business model legitimate, even if it includes potentially stolen land. Ties to national political powerhouses, such as Brazil's Rural Caucus in the Congress, are part of the process that legitimizes the continued illegalities in land grabbing (Spadotto et al., 2021). The land mafias are essential, concrete actors who operate as a kind of intermediary in this process of legitimization, where hard actions are needed to feed new land into the system and to retain old holdings, ensuring dominance over territories where hegemony fails.

To explain these dynamics in theoretical terms, RDPEs are key. With this theory of RDPEs, I can contribute to the understanding of the more systemic, deeper causes of deforesting RDPEs, and where, why, and how land mafias emerge and operate to expand deforestation. In the considerable discussion on illegal land grabbing (e.g. Asselin, 2009; de Sousa, 2023; IPAM, 2006), the Amazon is particularly notorious for illegal land grabbing based on the absence or lopsided use of state power (Campbell, 2015). Since the 2016 parliamentary coup, the Temer and Bolsonaro governments attempted to dismantle the regulatory state institutions that upheld the rule of law, while supporting the advance of an elite group of economic and political capital holders (Pereira & Origuéla, 2022). There is a particular elite, a political-capitalist class (Lazzarini, 2011), pushing for this agribusiness expansion, but also regional variations, which are nonetheless connected, or nested, with the national and international linkages of extractivist economic sectors and capital flows. During the Bolsonaro era, this regime took the form of extreme right-wing authoritarian populism – with worrying signs of neo-fascism – to advance deforesting and illegal land extractivism (Sauer, 2022).

There are many similarities between the working logics of extractivism and mafias in how they siphon off value from a node by lowering costs, argue Ye et al. (2020, p. 163), who see the hallmark of the Italian Mafia as, 'its control over connections and flows and the use of extra-economic power to reproduce and expand this control'. The Brazilian land mafias provide this service in land markets, being efficient capitalist actors connecting the would-be property developers, especially agribusiness, with fenced lands without people and with some form of self-created documentation.

The rise of mafias has been greatly aided by the misplaced government policies during the Workers' Party's (PT) neo-developmental era, which literally laid the groundwork for greater land grabbing by the political-economic elites – whose power was not curtailed but increased by the PT government's key economic policies – for example, by using state money to build new infrastructure for the Amazon (Kröger, 2012). This article demonstrates in practice how the simultaneous creation of *de jure* ethno-territorial rights and set-aside zones is not enough if highways, dams, and plantations are still expanded next to them. This leads to trouble, particularly due to the existence of land mafias, which as an extractivist system require continued expansion into new lands. There needs to be a curtailment of the power and thrust of economic-political groups gaining wealth through this process, or – as the post-2016 period has shown – extractivisms will continue expanding, even within the new protection areas.

The land-grabbing mafia in Santarém region is composed of the economic powerhouses of the region, large ranchers, and the soybean producers who arrived after 2000. These two agribusiness groups have some cultural differences in their habits but have nevertheless been forming a solidifying alliance since 2005 (Adams, 2015), suggesting that the political opportunity configuration is difficult for resistance since the elites are united (see McAdam, 1999, who theorized that elite divisions are an opportunity for social movements).

2.1. Moving toward Bolsonaro-era land mafias

Brazil has a very large paramilitary force with the potential to hire armed men on the spot to intimidate, murder, and secure landholdings for the rural elite. These paramilitary forces have been bolstered by the creation of the Rural Democratic Union (UDR). Its director, Nabhan Garcia, who earlier in his career hunted down landless worker activists in the bloody rural conflicts during the 1960s–80s, has remained a key figure and figurehead of land mafias in Brazil. However, he is also subject to and in the service of the more organized rural elites, reflected in the much greater political leverage of figures such as Tereza Cristina, Minister of Agriculture in the Bolsonaro government. Yet, the role of middlemen like Garcia is essential to explain how the land mafia functions as a sector on its own.

The Bolsonaro regime appointed Garcia director of a new institute for land tenure affairs. Garcia was the key interlocutor between the Bolsonaro election campaign and the rural elites, which secured him the new state director position.⁴ This ‘Nabhan gang’, as several of my informants described this political-paramilitary group, characterizes the ways in which illegal and violent land grabbers operate in Brazil. An expert informant explained the history and workings of this ‘Nabhan gang’ to me in November 2019:

Nabhan was a protagonist in a large process of land grabbing in Pontal do Paranapanema, which was the agricultural frontier in the Brazilian sector in the 1960s. So, what is happening today in the Amazon happened in Paraná and Southwest of São Paulo in the 1960s – this entry of capital and appropriation of public land. So Nabhan is a grand ‘player’ [in the political economy of land grabbing and rural issues].

I asked whether this ‘Nabhan gang’ could be identified with the group and sector of the political economy that is specialized in *grilagem*. In November 2019, I got the following answers during an interview in the congress in Brasília from two experts closely embedded in the parliament as consultants and secretaries (A and B):

A: Yes, [they are] specialized in the primitive appropriation of land and land resources, then of course livestock ... but the first operation is the appropriation of public capital. They are after land.

B: ... [they are] killing Indigenous peoples. And yeah, his business is the land. Different ... from the other soybean operators who are there in the commodity markets and watching prices on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange.

Since the 1980s, the UDR has helped to form ‘armed militias’, mostly ex-police, with militia being a term used in Brazil to refer in particular to ex-military police consisting armed groups (who are notorious for assassinations).⁵ By 1996, the media referred to the process as an ‘industry of *pistoleiros*’, with fixed, established prices for killings, and hit lists being drawn up by the *fazendeiros* (rural elite) (Leonidio, 2016, p. 100). Hence, the UDR was instrumental in transforming the many older, fragmented practices into an organized political economic sector; practices whereby groups of armed men were paid to hunt down and murder Indigenous peoples, afro-Brazilian quilombos, and other traditional peasant populations who stood in the way of the *grileiro*’s land grabs. This sector could be replicated, expanded, regionally consolidated, re-supplied, and maintained via a network of ties to elite landholders in key political and economic positions. The expansion of this process into the Amazon has been swift and helps to explain the Santarém region land conflicts and grabs.

Based on my expert interviews, it is important to emphasize that while operating logics and methods seem to have spread across Brazil, there are varying nodes or regional cores of illegal

land grabbing, which may not be explicitly connected to an organized economy or politics. An expert organization studying these networks explained that the BR-163 Highway seems to be one such ‘core’, but they did not consider that there would be a national-scale mafia and did not know who belonged to the network or its exact size. It is difficult and dangerous to try to conduct research on these mafias, and hence there are few studies on them, as a research NGO coordinator explained to me in April 2022.

Another informant nonetheless emphasized that even if the gang actions were not nationally coordinated and planned, or necessarily connected to UDR explicitly, the characterization of this ‘sector’ of Brazilian agribusiness as the ‘Nabhan gang’ is relevant. The UDR is an important emblem, a connecting mechanism between the social, physical, and symbolic space expansions of this extractivism (see Bourdieu, 1991; Kröger, 2020b). I will now turn to the Santarém region to analyse why and how this mafia grabs land.

3. The establishment of land mafias as a RDPE: the case of Santarém

I now broach the question of why land mafias emerge and expand, delving deeper into the RDPE theory, and duly unravelling the systemic features behind these mafias. Simply put, the impetus behind the Santarém land grabs is often the desire to speculate on rising land prices, and building real-estate ventures and soybean plantation complexes near the booming Santarém soybean export port, and the tourist town of Alter do Chão. This town is 30 kilometres west of Santarém on the white sand shores of the Tapajós River and Green Lake and is an important focal point connecting rural and urban land grabbing. In 2005, Miguel,⁶ a man with Indigenous and afro-Brazilian ancestry, explained to me that one day he saw Blairo Maggi, the king of soy and governor of the state of Mato Grosso, walking along the riverside promenade in Santarém, explaining to the assembled local politicians how in a few years the whole region would be covered with soybean. He was right.

Since 2005, there has been a massive incursion of deforesting agroextractivist expansion in this municipality and its neighbouring municipalities Belterra and Mojui dos Campos (which I refer to collectively as the ‘Santarém region’). The over 50-year-old Santarém rural workers’ trade union, Lamparinha, was once famous for its staunch resistance against the encroachments of loggers, ranchers, and other land grabbers. These trade unions members are the riverside *ribeirinho* and *caboclo* folks, who based their political economy on rubber tapping, homestead gardens, and communally held land and villages along the riversides and in the region’s deep forests (Nugent, 1993). They have had numerous legendary presidents, who have been important in setting up Brazil’s multiple-use conservation area system. One is Dona Ivete Bastos, a key activist in securing large swathes of forestland for multiple-use conservation areas that offer the retention of collective legal rights and protection for the inhabitants and the forests against land grabbers’ attempts, especially in the state of Pará. These areas include the over 700,000-hectare Tapajós-Arapiuns Extractive Reserve, and several other similarly sized adjacent reserves. They are mostly located on the Western bank of the Tapajós River and are relatively safe and secure from the kind of land grabbing and deforestation I discuss, due to their strong collective and Indigenous organizations of resistance against deforestation (Kröger, 2018).

Dona Ivete claimed – in one of the in-depth interviews and participant observations I have done with her since 2005 – that the key reason for this whole series of disposessions was the 2003 installation of the Cargill soybean export port. She explained, ‘The first incentive for planting [soybeans and corn] was this port’, without which she thought that the region would probably not have experienced the surge in soybean (December 2019, Santarém). Terra de Direitos (2021), a land

and human rights organization in Brazil, argues in its research report that the company was able to expand the port illegally, violating the rights of local communities since its inauguration, due to the non-exercise of the rule of law by the licensing authorities.

The green light the authorities gave to the Cargill port in 1999 triggered the process of land grabbing and speculation, prompting the land mafia to settle into this region. The chain of cause and effect that established the regional dominance of this sector started with the announcement of a new major infrastructural export project. Ninety percent of the areas around the BR-163 Highway in the Santarém region changed ownership between 2000 and 2005 (Terra de Direitos, 2021), especially family farm plots and forest areas. By 2015, soybean plantations occupied land areas previously occupied by other uses including, family farming (42%), secondary forest (20%), pasture (20%), and primary forest (18%) (Coelho et al., 2021). The displacement of large numbers of family farmers led to the deforestation of over 92,100 hectares of primary forests, which between 1999 and 2015 were categorized as family farmer land (Coelho et al., 2021). It is worth highlighting that official land categories often obscure the fact that large rural estates co-opt family farmers to extend and hide their deforesting activities (Kröger, 2020a). Due to this push effect, studies based on remote sensing by satellite and official data often claim that soybean expansion is the cause of Amazon deforestation, and these studies are correct in pointing out the radically detrimental impacts caused by monoculture plantations in comparison to family farms, for example, related to increasing temperatures in the Amazon (Maeda et al., 2021). Observing this issue from the viewpoint of RDPE theory, which focuses on social processes and actors, it can be argued that a crucial part of the explanation is the presence of land mafias, lured by the triggering Cargill port, paving the BR-163 Highway, and other infrastructural investments, which accounted for the land mafia surge in Brazil amid such development, comprising an underlying but dormant set of social actors quickly taking advantage of such opportunities and capturing the political economic spaces. A key aspect to establish an RDPE system is that land mafias target different lands and create the conditions to expand further. In Santarém, the initial displacement of rural populations for the sale of land to soybean cultivators led to a major migration of rural people to urban peripheries (Coelho et al., 2021), opening demand and markets for land mafias to start lotting land to the displaced in these urban settings, and deeper in the forests. The *grileiros* specifically target *posseiro* lands (a category of family farmers with land rights but limited ownership deeds and state protection of these rights), as this saves on the costs of deforestation as the land has already been cleared (de Sousa, 2023). Land mafias therefore play a key role in driving away *posseiros* who might resist, a practice which seems to apply in both rural and urban areas, where developed lots are also targeted.

3.1. Violence and illegalities by land mafias in the Santarém region since 2005

I begin this section by referring to my conversations with Miguel since 2005. He described the urban land scramble and violence in Alter do Chão, the most important tourist hub in the region.

As Alter do Chão is a tourist spot, the land is very targeted, and after the road from Cuiabá to Santarém was completed, extensive land speculation began ... So, there is an elite made up of politicians, police officers and landholders who bought and documented land in Alter do Chão. (Interview, 6 April 2022, Amazon, Brazil)

Yet, this documentation was largely fraudulent, and the land acquisition was based on threats and violence. Furthermore, the grab is driven by seeing the ample opportunities offered by the current land registering system and unclear status of *de jure* land rights in Brazil. The excerpt below, again from Miguel, helps to elucidate how locals see the land mafia operations:

The land mafia person does it like this: he goes to the native who has a little piece of land, then he buys that piece of land and goes to the registry office. [While at the office], he sees a large area [next to the small area he bought] and sees that this large area has no [land ownership or control] documentation. So, they [the land mafia] legalize that piece [the smaller piece in addition to the next-door larger undocumented area], they count the hectares – it's a lot of land ... and they put it all in their name and take it and put it on a board that is only in the registry office [as a notification to possible owners]. So, if the person doesn't go there ... if nobody complains, they document it [in the name of the land-claiming elites]. This happened in Alter do Chão.

Hence, the land mafias first make use of Brazil's messy and easily corruptible land title registration system, then violence and intimidation ensue:

They [the elite land grabbers] go there with the police, with several *pistoleiros* [henchmen], from house to house ... show the documents, and threaten the person, [saying] that they have to leave ... The most vulnerable have no way of defending themselves because the police go there, so some leave because they are afraid of the pressure.

These are common tactics in Brazil. Miguel went on to give concrete examples of the violence:

There was a case where they [the land mafia] arrived at a house, and it was just the husband and wife who had lived on the land for 13 years ... The guy left the house, and while he was away, they set fire to the house. When the guy came back and wanted to rebuild it, they didn't let him.

Miguel spoke of a similar case: 'They arrived at a guy's house ... they fired bullets in his direction ... The guy stayed in the woods for about two days, afraid to go home, thinking that the police [part of the land mafia] were going to kill him'.

I also asked Dona Ivete about the dispossession tactics in the Santarém region:

They approach the kind of person who is not used to fighting ... The land grabber does not even need to pull out a weapon. Just one threat and [s]he [the rural worker] is done. Many of the dispossessed had landholder rights (*posse*) or were part of official land reform settlements. Most of them left or sold their lots [which is illegal in settlements] for a very low price, as the grabbers were very deceptive – 'look, you don't have the energy, you don't have it ... , take that money, go and buy a house where you can live a peaceful life.' So many fell for this line of conversation. Then they came [to the city slums] and then they regretted it.

In December 2023 Ivete explained to me, 'we do not even have any more space for the *grileiros* to grab, since so much has already been grabbed. It is possible they are on top of each other since there is not anymore where to go'.

Miguel described the illegality:

It's outside the law ... Old, traditional families that don't really have documents [title deeds called *escritura*], they are *posseiros*. So, the guy [land thief] arrives and documents the land [in his name] and expels the person who has lived there for many years.⁷

These examples illustrate how people end up ceding their land to the land mafias, although there are also cases of resistance. In sum, the relative strength of social movement resistance against land title fraud, and the collusion of corrupt state actors in ensuring its very effectiveness, generally coupled with the use of violence, answers the question of how and where land mafias expand.

3.2. Resistance toward land mafias in the context of a consolidating extractivist RDPE

Some *posseiros* use guns to resist these land mafia attempts and are sometimes able to remain in their houses. Miguel described the case of a friend who successfully resisted the land-grabbing mafia, composed of police, politicians, and major farmers:

There was a friend of mine called José...⁸ One day he came to my house in a very frightened state and told me what was happening [his land was being taken, grabbers were threatening him] and he wanted to [prevent this]. Then they went to his house and harassed him; armed men entered his house, and he was very scared ... I said [to him]: 'you only have two ways out, either leave everything and go, or fight for what is yours. It's yours, you bought it, paid for it and built it, everyone knows this, so, my brother, resist.' And that's what he did, he resisted, he bought a gun, and the next time the guys went there he fired shots, and they ran and never came back.

Despite the strong resistance until the mid-2000s, there are several reasons why land grabbers have been able to expand (agro)extractivism in the Santarém region. One of these is the violence waged against both resistance leaders and common peasants, and the impunity for these crimes. Another is the growing power and interests of certain political-economic groups, especially the plantation, tourism, and urban development sectors, whose appetite for land has created a cycle of rising land property valuation and pursuit. This has led other people besides the elite to try to make money through land speculation, duly making it more difficult to resist. These factors, constitute a pervasive neoliberalization and individualization of social relations, which partly explains the demise and weakness of organized rural movements in curbing the deforesting activities near Santarém since 2005. Dona Ivete explained the reasons for the decline in leadership when it came to peasant resistance against this dispossession in 2019:

Today, we [the rural trade union] are being fragilized. Capitalism is being introduced and is co-opting the [trade union] leaders ... It [capitalism] emerged and started to demoralize the social movements, seeking to end them – and is succeeding in this. There was a trade union [in the past], [we had] trade union leaders, 20,000 associates ... but today we only have about 3,000 associates. Of course, some of [this decline in numbers is due to] the retirement [of smallholders], the division of territories, and so forth, ... but even so, I think my work wasn't appreciated ... there was no daily allowance, no support ... ,but I did the work. ... At that time, I was unaware of the issue that had already been negotiated.

In the last sentence, Dona Ivete was referring to the broader developmentalist scheme, whereby the Workers' Party (PT), in collusion with local elites, had set aside key areas such as Santarém for soybean planters. She worked as a PT campaigner and later a municipal councilor. Yet, unbeknownst to her, this was a battle she was unlikely to win, given the ongoing expansion of the RDPE of agroextractivism, wherein the Santarém region had been earmarked by international and Brazilian elites. This was a sacrifice zone or, in the words of the elites, a site of progress and development for the proponents of the commodity consensus of mid-2000s Brazil.

The rapid displacement of the prior forest economies of *Caboclo* society (see Nugent, 1993) by the soybean complex – brought about in practice by land mafias – has led to a weakening of the basis for trade union resistance. This shows how moral economic changes (Thompson, 1963) are directly related to political-economic changes. Trade union strength has now dissipated, due to the extremely strong extractivist push by a violent force of soybean planters and land grabbers, 'They deforested many areas ... that were previously only for family farming. True, family farming does deforest, but not as much as a machine pulling down large areas for soybeans'.

Dona Ivete continued to reflect on the future during that bleak 2019 December day when I was interviewing her next to the dusty BR-163 Highway in the trade union premises. During my journey to Santarém at that time (I had made the over 2,000-kilometre drive on the newly paved BR-163 Highway from Cuiabá), I was stopped by paranoid military police who were asking all drivers, in the midst of allegations by Bolsonaro that NGOs were starting the Amazon fires raging at that time, ‘You aren’t from an NGO, are you?’ as if that were the worst thing one could be. During my conversation with Ivete, I recalled the ‘Do not give away your land’ posters targeted at peasants, which were part of the broad campaign against the rural exodus in the post-2005 period. The outcome was a loss in those areas not forming part of the new multiple-use conservation areas:

Many of the lands they bought were illegally grabbed [*griladas*]. There were *latifúndios* [large land-holders] that were only used to grabbing land ... and the state institutions were also quite corrupt, so they ended up legalizing properties for the *latifúndios* ... What makes me angrier is that this major farmer is waiting for compensation from the government ... [who then] pays for what didn’t belong to the farmer.

Ivete was referring to the Brazilian government’s practice of paying compensation for land that the land grabber had taken illegally, in cases where that land was distributed for agrarian reform or other pro-poor settlement, or land rights were formally given to the smallholders. I asked how this could happen, and Ivete’s answer revealed the power that a legal document, even a forged one, has in the de facto land tenure politics of Brazil, especially in the Amazon. ‘Because of the existence of a [land ownership] document, even a forged one ... it legalized [ownership]’.

In this sense, the presence of titling processes and related regularization processes such as the Cadastro Ambiental Rural (CAR), in a lopsided legal setting allowing for illegal land grabbing (AATR, 2021), can make further illegalities and the accumulation of capital by the most powerful easier and more profitable. This shows, in my view, how legal systems, or significant slices of them, can be suppressed or twisted by the RDPE of extractivism, such as the land extractivism practiced by land mafias. Laws, in a society dominated by mafias, are easily subverted for privileged use by the most powerful, although there is also room for resistance. In this difficult setting of the Brazilian Amazon, international campaigns, and political pressure, creating transnational activist networks, have been particularly important (Hochstetler and Keck 2007; Kröger, 2020b) in supporting the crucial work of local and national activists and prosecutors, and in ensuring that already-existing legal protections are put into effect. In May 2023, ClientEarth, an organization of activist lawyers, filed a legal complaint in the United States against Cargill for breaking its due diligence and local environmental licenses, and for causing human rights violations due to its Santarém port.⁹ These kinds of international state and non-state resistance actions against deforesting primary movers, such as Cargill, can have a major impact in hindering the expansion of regional extractivist and deforesting sectors, such as Brazil’s land mafias.

In the next section, I will elaborate on how rural and urban land grabbing support each other, referring to the Santarém example.

3.3. The linked urban and rural land grabs during the bolsonaro era

Land mafias also operate in urban land grabbing, where the key goal is to divide the urbanized land into lots to sell. The rural and urban processes feed into each other, with the land mafia gaining from both the rural exodus they cause, and then the increased demand for informal urban lots. The rural exodus caused by land mafias has partly affected the overcrowding and environmental

disasters in urban areas such as the Alter do Chão tourist village. The village had about 2,000 inhabitants when I first lived there in 2005. The population has now increased dramatically, with largely illegal slums spreading in many directions, reducing forestland and creating several problems linked to this unplanned urban sprawl.

In 2019, emboldened by the Bolsonaro regime's approval of land grabbing, the grabbers started committing large-scale arson, setting forest fires as a tool to grab larger expanses of land. Arson was committed next to the most valuable areas of Alter do Chão, which had not yet been built on, around Lago Verde, a beautiful, clean, green-colored lake, surrounded by environmental protection areas. The incident was reported in international news, as the flames on the shore opposite the tourist beaches turned paradise into a hellscape.

The following episode shows how those who are the victims of land mafias, or who try to resist them, are held culpable. A group of four young Brazilian men from São Paulo had been living in the town for years, linked to the NGOs WWF and Projeto Saúde e Alegria. When the fires started, they formed a voluntary fire brigade to put the fires out. However, the act of trying to extinguish the flames meant that they were interfering with the land-grabbing venture of the local elites. The police raided the offices of Projeto Saúde e Alegria and seized their computers and documents in what civil society saw as a politically motivated and Kafkaesque attack.¹⁰ In December 2020, the mayor of Santarém told reporters that the Green Lake area had been targeted by *grileiros* for over ten years and that, according to his discussions with the locals, the most common explanation was that the fires had been started by *grileiro* Silas da Silva Soares and his son, who was a military police officer.¹¹ The fire initially started in an INCRA land reform settlement area, such actions being illustrative of how attempts are made to blame smallholders, and how mere satellite monitoring with land use categories – typically used in the study of deforestation – is insufficient for detecting deeper causalities of deforestation. Soares apparently fled, and the legal case to find those guilty of causing the fires was halted due to a lack of evidence. Yet, fires raged in the same area again in 2020 and 2021, suggesting that the fire-starting *grileiros* are still active.¹² Miguel recounted in 2022 the initial 2019 episode, and started by responding to my question on who was behind the fires:

I think it's the same people [as in the other cases, the same mafia]. They even bought some land on the edge of Green Lake ... Then they started to mess up the land, setting it on fire. The fire spread in Alter do Chão and raged all night long ... Then ... a group of people from São Paulo ... they trained people to fight the fire in Alter do Chão themselves ... This was around the time that Bolsonaro won the presidency of the republic so there was a very big fight between Bolsonaristas and people on the Left. And then the people who were the *donos* [claiming to be the owners] of these lands arrested these four boys and started claiming that they were starting the fires to make money.

An ex-federal environmental officer explained to me in November 2023 in Santarém that there is this old land grabber who fled (Silas), but that 'today the problem is much greater ... there exists a shielding to cast the guilt on top of third parties'. To get to the top of the chain, a 'deep study is needed', as those people selling the lots on the beach and kiosks on roadsides, or answering the phone on sale signs, are not the responsible ones ordering things. And if and once you start to arrive at the responsible ones, by name, then they put a price on your head, and order *pistoleiros* to kill, as happened with the American nun Dorothy Stang who was murdered in Pará in 2005. She had a notebook with details, such as names and sites of *grileiros* and their grabs.

A consolidating RDPE signifies increasing dominance in the social, symbolic, and economic spheres, where it is hard – increasingly harder as the dominance deepens – to question the

mafias. As a result of the land grabs, which de facto permit occupying the grabbed, burned, and fenced lands, with the latter being widely accepted as objectified symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1991) that denotes privatized land by someone powerful in the Brazilian Amazon (Campbell, 2015). Thus, the grabbers retained the land in Santarém, even after the negative and widespread publicity about the fires and violence. In fact, setting fires is a key tool of land grabbing and impunity, local experts explained to me in November 2023, that it is much cheaper to burn an area than clear it by machines, which requires permissions. In Alter do Chão, despite people knowing about the mafias, Miguel explained ‘people linked to politics and the police still retain the land on the other side of Green Lake’. However, the pace of the expansion has been slowed somewhat by the actions of the voluntary firefighters and other local resistance, such as a very active (albeit small) group of local Indigenous female activists from the Borari tribe, called Sorarás, who are monitoring the land grabbing and denouncing it. According to Miguel, they ‘love fighting and denouncing but have little power’ as ‘there is no one to turn to. If you complain to the government, they are on the side of [the land grabbers]’. Thus, the grabbers continue to build houses, live on, and appropriate land in the areas close to Alter do Chão, which are protected by the state, namely as Areas of Environmental Protection (APA). This APA status is one of the weakest and thus most violated and non-respected environmental protection statuses in Brazil (Kröger, 2017), and hence those with power remain on this land, even near rivers and springs (which should also have safety margins). In rural areas the symbolic power revolves around deforesting, burning, fencing, and driving cattle onto the land, and in urban areas, lotting the land and putting up for sale signs. In both settings this symbolic power is more accepted than protected area statuses.

Land mafias target unclear, weak, and conflicting tenure settings. The lands along the Santarém–Alter do Chão road, in the area known as Eixo Forte, is a federal extractive settlement project (PAE), federal public land, which could not be sold, but where lots are illegally transferred and then sold. In November 2023, an environmental officer in Santarém explained to me that this federal setting is on top of the municipal APA, which is why there is a lack of clarity over who should handle the land grabbing conflicts. This tenure setting explains partly why *grileiros* target these lands. The rural-urban mix of land grabbing offers greater potential to amass capital, as I will analyse below.

3.4. The synergistic role of urban and rural land price rises and speculation

These disposessions are driven by the will to accumulate capital in the cycle of land price valuation that is expected to follow. If the land mafia did not manage to make a profit with their actions, the system would not expand. However, the rapid and comparatively high increase in land values, and the creation and expansion of land markets, coupled with liquidity and not too much volatility (as in most prior Amazon frontier regions’ boom–bust cycles), have promoted the consolidation of the land mafias. Miguel had observed these land markets:

Speculation is very high and the value of the land has tripled ... A plot of land in Alter do Chão ... you can’t buy it for less than 500, 600, 700, 800 thousand reais, on the edge of the lake ... the prices are high until you get to 1, 2 kilometers from the beach.

This rise in property value can be used as collateral for further expansion to fund land grabbing elsewhere. The loan interest rates that owners of valuable properties get are much lower than non-propertied people, a major rancher explained to me in an interview in March 2022. This is another reason why estates – and their regularization after grabbing – are so sought-after as

they have great potential for leveraging the amount of capital, given the high interest rates in Brazil. Even if one does not manage to acquire the *escritura* to a piece of land to be able to get a mortgage, one can sell the land for an exponentially increased price after just a few years, as there are now regions in Brazilian frontier areas where real-estate prices double every year, according to informants in 2022.

The rural and urban land grabs are mutually reinforcing in the Santarém region. First, soybean planters arrived from Cuiabá and elsewhere to promulgate and participate in the major land grabs in the rural areas close to Santarém. Most deforestation took place in the 1999–2006 period, and by 2007, about 60,000 hectares of soybean plantations had been expanded in the Santarém region, the extension of soybean rising less after that, to about 70,000 hectares by 2015, the lessening pace being due to various reasons, including the creation of new large conservation and family farming designated areas (Coelho et al., 2021), and local-international resistance. As soybeans could not be easily expanded close to Cargill port in the post-2007 resistance setting, the attention of the regional land mafia turned to other speculative possibilities. The soybean boom was duly followed by a process of soybean-linked capitalists appropriating or buying the best spots in towns and transferring their money from rural land grabs to opening new hotels, restaurants, and building projects in the tourist town, complete with the synergistic possibilities for money laundering that the city offers. The large pick-ups of the *sojeiros* from Cuiabá pack the streets now, in a spiral of capital that seems to be deepening, as property prices keep soaring and the dispossessed are put under further pressure.

4. Conclusions

This article has argued that what I call regionally-dominant political economies (RDPEs) explain why, where, and how land grabbing and dispossession take place. The centrality of RDPEs, such as the deforesting plantation and land speculation sector in many parts of Brazil becomes clear when conducting a longitudinal analysis, as was carried out in this study for the post-2000-period. During this period, the Workers' Party era (2003–2015) gave way to, and literally paved the way for, the 2016 parliamentary coup and Bolsonaro regime (2019–2022), primarily due to money and power pouring into the hands of land-grabbing rural elites. As the prior governments (PT) paved the Amazon highways and eased the expansion of land grabbing mafias to the Amazon, they continued this activity even more intensively when the state backed away from protecting land rights after 2016 – a task in which it was already failing during the PT era in many parts of the country, as shown by the Amazon violence and murders of activists since 2000. Once an economic sector that relies on and accumulates capital primarily based on illegal or violent land grabs becomes the regionally dominant socio-economic and political sector, rapid dispossession ensues. In these circumstances, even official state officers – who wish to resist the illegalities, not to speak of activists – see their social and personal action spaces diminished and violated. In fact, in an (un)rule of law setting, as I have argued in this article, the powerful can use laws for their own purposes, such as legalizing the areas grabbed by their land mafias.

In comparative terms, urban and rural land grabbing in the context of Santarém, and even more broadly in Brazil and the Amazon, has the following characteristics.

First, the land grabbers conducting the dispossession consist of a group of elites who have privileged access to capital or state power, including politicians, large landholders, new soybean planters coming from the south, and the police. The creation of land mafias has been aided by the possibility of a soaring rise in land prices in urban contexts as well as in rural areas close to the city.

Second, there is very violent coercion and intimidation, using arms and threats to drive people away from the land, and to keep them away. People are beaten, jailed arbitrarily, and killed if they try to resist.

Third, compensation is low. Some smallholders have been given meager amounts of monetary or other material compensation, but most have simply been dispossessed, and have had to leave their belongings and houses, forests, and gardens to the land mafias. Moreover, the state has not been compensated for having lost its land to private land grabbers.

Fourth, the legal bases for this dispossession are often dubious or at least mixed, due to the unconstitutional legal tools used by land grabbers in Brazil (AATR, 2021), which is in stark contrast to the bulk of land grabbing via leases in other parts of the world (Yanai et al., 2022). In Brazil this is an explicitly illegal process, making a mockery of the law, and demonstrating how formal laws have no significance for those with more economic, social, cultural, or symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1991) if an authoritarian pro-land grabbing, pro-paramilitary mafia-like government is in power, as during the post-2019 Bolsonaro regime. The informal set of land laws means that one does not even need to try to legalize land claims, but can, for instance, simply retain holdings inside areas of environmental protection, on state land, and on other people's land.

Fifth and finally, regarding resistance, the traditional resistance, rural trade unions, have lost their power for the most part, and new resistance organizations have either been suppressed and forced to leave the Amazonian locality for safety reasons or due to being traumatized or have received little to no support from state institutions. Thus, there are very few entities that could help the budding new resistance form, while the bases for older resistance are weakened, especially by plantation dispossession and urban property creation. Importantly, the post-2016 setting in Brazil has made it far more dangerous and difficult to resist land grabbing, given the clampdown by arbitrary and captured use of state power by mafia-like actors, locally and nationally. Furthermore, the COVID-19 situation forced people to quarantine themselves indoors (apart from the land grabbers), guarded by the police, who did not allow people to leave their homes in Santarém for a long time, making it difficult to assemble and leading to multiple attacks on civil society organizing.

Lula's 2023 victory has however signified at least a partial curbing of illegalities and land mafias. Especially the new plan to unite the over 20 different land registry systems to an open and centralized federal register, allowing for quick noting of discrepancies and illegalities, would allow for quickly detecting the land mafias in action, for which reason professor Girolamo Treccani, a leading expert on *grilagem* in the Amazon, was hopeful of the future in my interview in Belém in November 2023. A promising resistance is also linked to the rise of more movements uniting Indigenous peoples, forest-dwellers, and urban residents, who could continue to uphold the rights of people in the Amazon by further expanding multiple-use conservation and similar land rights areas. The creation of such areas on the Western bank of the Tapajós river in the 2000s can be seen as a victory for the resistance against land grabbers, even considering the simultaneous expansion of deforestation in the Eastern bank.

Notes

1. See <https://siplawfirm.id/the-practice-of-land-mafia-its-prevention-and-eradication/>.
2. *Grilagem* has been extensively studied in Brazil, with the processes and therefore also the definitions varying depending on the time and place (de Sousa, 2023). Spadotto et al. (2021) argue that *grilagem*, the professional falsification of land ownership deeds by a series of methods and intermediaries, historically typically precedes the use of the notion of land grabbing in Brazil and cannot be equated with that

- term. Spadotto et al. (2021) provide a stricter definition, emphasizing *grilagem* as a technical method to falsify land titles by *grileiros*, including corrupt notaries, and public, and corporate officials.
3. In Brazil, the concept of mafia has been used to try to frame any kind of economic activities undertaken by opposing parties as corrupt or immoral.
 4. See <https://apublica.org/2022/03/casamento-da-filha-de-nabhan-garcia-traz-elo-entre-policial-e-ruralistas-contrarios-ao-mst/>
 5. An older, still common term for *pistoleiros* is *jagunço*, which is used to denote the groups of armed *jagunços* that, in the words of *grileiros*, ‘cleaned’ and ‘brushed’ the forests free of ‘Indians’ so that coffee plantations could be expanded in the 19th and early 20th centuries in São Paulo (Leonidio, 2016, p. 96).
 6. Name changed for informant safety.
 7. At this point, it is useful to understand the different legal documents pertaining to land control in Brazil. *Escritura* refers to a document which gives the holder the right to obtain a mortgage on the land and offers the highest degree of legal protection in Brazil. One needs to pay extra and have the right connections to get such authorization from the state to a *posse*, and hence most people do not bother to do so as the gray land markets function based on the sale of *posse* documents. It is also not possible to get the *escritura* title deed in many areas, such as conservation and settlement lands.
 8. Name changed for safety reasons.
 9. See <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/press-office/press/agricultural-giant-cargill-faces-legal-complaint-over-deforestation-and-human-rights-failings-in-brazil/>.
 10. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/26/brazil-police-raid-ngo-office-amazon-wildfires>.
 11. See <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2021/02/19/inquerito-sobre-incendio-em-alter-do-chao-pa-e-arquivado-sem-apontar-responsaveis>.
 12. I spoke to a member of the voluntary firefighters in November 2023, who thought that Silas was not behind these fires, since they started in Ponta de Pedras, a beach area with heavy real estate speculation, which burned again in 2023. Silas is known as a *grileiro* of a different area, called Capadócia. The road leading to Ponta de Pedras beach is currently being pressured for paving. In 2019, land there was selling for 3,800 reais per lot, but if the road is paved, that would jump to 40,000 reais, and rise quickly year after year.

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