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Soybeans and Capitalist Transformation among Family Farmers in Argentina

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the expansion of capitalism among Argentine farmers in a historical perspective in the light of view of the recent soy boom.

First it draws attention to the soy boom, focusing on the political-economic processes at national and international level that brought Argentina to its position as a GM soy superpower. Then, the focus moves to a farmer community in Northern Santa Fe province where the author has carried out longitudinal fieldwork, starting in the 1970s. She argues that the current transformation of the community, associated with the soy boom, is the culmination of a long process of capitalist development characterised by a gradual intensification of commodity relations.

The article discusses how conjunctural shifts and changing agrarian policies have historically shaped farmers' aspirations and practices with regard to the meaning of household and family, labour, land rights and land use. Until the soy boom, their aspirations and practices were compatible with the reproduction of the family farm, albeit modifying this to adjust to new circumstances. The changes associated with the soy boom have led most farmers to abandon farming and rural life, while only a few have been able to make the passage to agribusiness. The article ends by exploring the reasons why.

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende explorar la expansión del capitalismo entre los agricultores argentinos en una perspectiva histórica a la luz del reciente boom de la soja.

Primero pone énfasis sobre la expansión de la soja, centrándose en los procesos políticos y económicos a nivel nacional e internacional que llevaron a Argentina a la posición de superpotencia de la soja transgénica. Luego, se enfoca en una comunidad rural del norte de la provincia de Santa Fe donde la autora ha realizado trabajo de campo desde la década de 1970.

El artículo analiza cómo los cambios coyunturales y las políticas agrarias históricamente han dado forma a aspiraciones y prácticas de los agricultores con respecto a la familia y el grupo doméstico, el trabajo y la propiedad y el uso de la tierra. Hasta el boom de la soja, sus aspiraciones y prácticas eran compatibles con la reproducción de la

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agricultura familiar, aunque modificándola para adaptarse a las nuevas circunstancias. Los cambios asociados al boom han llevado a la mayoría a abandonar la agricultura y la vida rural, mientras que solo unos pocos han logrado pasar al agro-negocio. El artículo termina explorando las razones del porqué. El artículo revela que el abandono actual de la comunidad es la culminación de un largo proceso de desarrollo capitalista caracterizado por una intensificación gradual de las relaciones mercantiles.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, Argentina has become the world's third biggest producer and exporter of genetically modified (GM) soy. Concentration of land by certain business groups, investment in land by urban investors, the displacement of small producers in some rural areas and new models of management dominated by leasing have transformed the rural landscape.[1] Argentine farmers embraced the expansion of transgenic soybeans, initiated in 1996, and had great expectations regarding the benefits of this crop. However, in some areas the soy boom, in spite of increasing agrarian production, has led to the vanishing of farmer communities and the farmer way of life. This is the case in Santa Cecilia, a farmer community in the northern part of Santa Fe province where I have conducted longitudinal anthropological fieldwork starting in the early 1970s.[2]

The paper explores the process by which this previously vibrant farmer community that has existed for more than a hundred years now appears almost unpopulated and abandoned. I will discuss how changes in this segment of Argentine agriculture are shaped by, and otherwise connect with, the broader dynamics of the development of capitalism nationally, as well as the capitalist world economy. Since their settlement in Argentina in the late 1880s, these farmers, integrated into the global economy, have been able to reproduce their farms, their homes and the 'farmer way of life'. With the changes brought about by the soy boom, this is no longer the case. I will argue that this is the product of capitalist agrarian policies promoting an ever more productive agriculture, based on deepening commodity relations (Bernstein 2010).

Even though the processes of change to be discussed have been instigated outside the realm of the farmer sector, they are informed by the farmers' values and aspirations for alternative futures and new possibilities that are internalised and reproduced locally. Jakobsen and Nielsen (2020) relate aspirations explicitly to hegemony, arguing that even though aspirations are rooted in popular lifeways, political-economic forces always condition them. This view grounds capitalist processes in everyday life by emphasizing how the aspirations of capital 'from above' intersect with popular aspirations 'from below'. Aspirations are conjunctural in the sense that constellations of power condition their articulation, and shape what can be done and what can be imagined. We will see that conjunctural shifts (and there have been many in Argentine history) shape individual and collective aspirations and practices with regard to alternative futures (Bennike et al 2020; Bebbington, 2000; Li 2014). We will see how the farmers have dealt with the shifts, developing individual and/or collective strategies attempting to turn changing opportunity structures to their advantage.

The farmers have embraced, accommodated or rejected changing agrarian policies. They embraced the transition from traditional export crops to industrial crops in the 1930s, the mechanisation of agriculture from the 1950s and the introduction of GM soybeans in the 1990s, while they mobilised against the concentration of capital by big corporations during the 1970s and the increases in export taxes in the 2000s. Their experience and aspirations embedded in local moralities and notions of the good life strongly influenced by Catholicism have inspired and motivated their actions (Fischer 2014; Stølen 1991).

'Progresar' (progress) is a word that I often heard when the farmers talked about their aspirations for the future. They used it referring to both individual and collective trajectories and certainly not only referring to their economic domain (Appadurai 2004). This concept comprises both a striving for continuity – new ways of behaviour to conserve existing values -and attempts to attain new ones.

The survival of the family farm, until the soy boom a persistent aspiration of the farmers, including those who left the countryside, has over the years led to transformations of the farms with regard to household and family, labour and land. The farmers have been active shapers of these transformations, not passive victims of circumstances; and they still are, in coping with the recent changes in the region.

In what follows I will first draw attention to the soy boom and the variety of factors leading to the rapid expansion of soybean production in Argentina. Then I will move to the local level, exploring, in a historical perspective, the strategies used by individuals and households, before the soy boom, to reproduce their

farms, their homes and the 'farmer way of life' within an increasingly capitalist environment. I will focus on pivotal conjunctural shifts regarding the international divisions of labour, trade and investment in agriculture generating changes in opportunity structures and shaping values and practices of the farmers. Until the soy boom, their practices were compatible with the reproduction of the family farm, albeit modified to adjust to new circumstances. This is no longer the case, and I will discuss the reasons why the recent changes have led most farmers to abandon farming and rural life, while only a few have been able to make the passage to agribusiness.

THE SOY BOOM

A number of factors have contributed to the extraordinary growth of soybean production and transformation of the Argentine countryside. Increasing appetite for meat worldwide has generated changes in the global food system influencing the dynamics of the international market for the soybean chain (Hansen and Syse 2022). The technological and organisational innovations associated with the introduction of GM soybeans has been crucial as well as the national public policies favouring the expansion of this crop.

Monsanto's GM soy variety Roundup Ready (RR) engineered to be tolerant to Roundup – Monsanto's formulation of the glyphosate herbicide – was introduced in Argentina during the Menem government in 1996, the same year as it was released for international commercialisation. The new biotechnology offered the prospect of extracting greater profits from using land more efficiently with fewer inputs, therefore reducing production costs. Due to high prices and high demands at the international market, soybeans production offered much higher profits than the traditional crops and cattle farming (Stølen 2022). Unlike other developing countries whose view of the new biotechnology was informed by concerns of food security, Argentina embraced this technology on grounds of its export potentials (Newell 2009). GM soy was considered an ideal crop, practically all for export, high prices, high demands, it did not interfere directly with food prices/workers' wages which has always been a problem in Argentina, where food crops and export crops used to be the same (Brambilla et al 2018; Richardson 2008). Historically, the main export products, beef, wheat and maize were also the primary consumption goods of the country's well-organised and combative urban workers. Because the working class does not consume soybeans, the government could both promote and tax export, generating fiscal revenues for the State while not directly harming the effective purchasing power of the urban workers and thereby creating social upheavals or provoking a balance-of-payment crisis (Richardson 2008). The Argentine government, eager to pull the country out of a deep economic recession that culminated in full-scale depression in 2001–2002 restructured its economy around GM soy.

In contrast to other soy-producing countries, Argentina did not recognise intellectual property protection of the RR seeds, since the national seed law allowed farmers to use farm-saved seeds. Thus, the RR technology was not patented and seeds were relatively cheap, something that implied a comparative advantage regarding production costs for Argentine farmers and a long-lasting judicial conflict with Monsanto (Qaim and Traxler 2005). This also enhanced the attraction of soybean production.

The Kirchner/Fernandez governments (2003–2015) more attuned to the social responsibilities of the state than the previous ones, increased the export tax on agricultural products to raise more funds for public spending, such as subsidies and social programmes, aimed at redistribution of incomes and alleviation of poverty. The export tax on soy reached 35 per cent during Christina Fernandez's government (2007–2015). In 2008, the international price of oilseeds reached record levels. When the goverment attempted to introduce a new sliding-scale taxation system for soybean and sunflower exports that would raise tax to 44% on soybeans, the farmers responded with a nationwide, four-month lockout. For the first time in history, the farmers' organisations representing different segments of the agrarian sector united in a successful struggle to stop it (Barsky and Dávila 2020; Leguizamón, 2014).[3]

The technological transformation of the agrarian sector, especially in the pampas has been exceptional, with a very rapid rate of adoption of the new technologies. Until recently, there has been a steady increase in soy production. The top was reached in the 2015/2016 agricultural season when soybeans were planted on 20.5 million hectares, more than 60 % of Argentina's cultivated land El Pais (2015). Soybeans and its derivatives represent almost 50% of agro-food exports making up more than half of Argentina's crop production and a fourth of its total exports. Soy has become the country's most important export commodity and Argentina is now the world's third-largest soy producer and number one exporter of processed soy (oil, meal and biodiesel) (INDEC 2020).

Notwithstanding the advantages of soy production and the characteristic resilience and adaptability of the Argentine farmer, the current soy-heavy model is increasingly questioned (Teubal 2008; Gras and Hernández 2013; Leguizamón 2014). Critical voices draw special attention to the land question. The most significant change in land use have taken place in the pampas where big cattle estates, historically dedicated to fattening of cattle went through a rapid process of modernization during the 1990s, converting pastures into soybeans cultivation and incorporating the new technological package. According

to Slutzky (2012) in most cases, the traditional landowners manage these enterprises themselves. However, some new actors of more urban, sometimes foreign extraction have entered the agricultural scene, investors who participate in agricultural business through new forms of production management, the so-called the 'sowing pools' (Sosa Varrotti 2019).

Initially the sowing pools consisted of agricultural producers who joined resources and efforts to increase scale. Gradually this changed. Today the 'pools' are characterised by the key role played by finance capital and the organization of a transitional enterprise system that takes control of agricultural production, by leasing large tracts of land. They buy sowing, spraying, harvesting and transport services in order to generate economies of scale and high yields. At the end of the harvest, profits are distributed to the investors of the pool. Since profits are much higher in soybeans than in wheat production, they often opt for mono cropping of soy creating land deterioration problems. Technological innovation and entrepreneurial skills, rather than land ownership has become the most important assets in today's agriculture (Sluzky 2012). "What you need to establish a big enterprise today is no more than two persons, one agronomist and one with financial skills and contacts, each with a laptop and smartphone" a farmer told me. The sowing pools play a key role in the boom and they have contributed to the demise of family farmers.[4]

A number of studies from the pampa region have examined the dynamics of farm exits and adjustments (Gras and Hernández 2009a, 2013; Azuay Ameghino 2012). They show that the strong growth of export production, an increasing demand for capital investment and technological incorporation has resulted in substantial changes in the social and economic structure of agricultural production, such as reduction in farm numbers, an increase in the average size of farms, a concentration of production and new tenure patterns. As will be discussed below this is also the case in areas outside the pampas.

THE SOY BOOM IN SANTA CECILIA

In my area of study, as in other parts of Argentina, GM soy was first planted commercially in 1996, and the farmers received it with open arms. They knew about this crop because it had been promoted by government institutions as well as by commercial firms and planted on an experimental basis for a few years. They particularly welcomed the no-tilling practice and the chemical cleaning of the fields associated with this crop. Due to its resistance to glyphosate, soybeans could be sown directly on stubble fields and survive the herbicide spraying that would kill the weeds. Before the introduction of the RR soy, the farmers cleaned the fields mechanically, which implied endless hours on the tractor, ploughing and harrowing, as well as high fuel costs.

Another advantage was that the soybean cycle is complementary to the wheat cycle; both can be grown in the same year, with wheat in the winter and soy in the summer. This enhanced profitability by having two harvests a year with a wheat-soybeans combination.

Moreover, agribusiness companies allowed payment for input packages to the farmers to be delayed until after the harvest; very important in a country where access to credit is limited (OECD 2018). Farmers were enthusiastic about the prospects of this new crop and had no second thoughts about its advantages. However, after two decades with this new crop, the majority of the farmers of Santa Cecilia have given up farming and left the countryside; only a few farms are still inhabited, but no longer producing.

FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

I have carried out three periods of fieldwork in Santa Cecilia, one year in 1973–74 together with Eduardo Archetti; eight months in 1988 when I worked alone but was accompanied by my children, 10 and 13 years old; and one month a year from 2012 to 2015.[5]

Since my first stay, I have been in regular contact with a number of my informants first by letter, later by mail and phone, and I have paid a number of shorter visits over the years. I have also received visits by for Santa Cecilia in my home country. Names of field sites, persons and families referred to are fictitious.

Santa Cecilia is a 'colonia' comprising 34 farms in northern part of Santa Fe province. It is called 'colonia' (colony) because of its origin, an area of land assigned to a certain number of European immigrants. Due to this origin the farmers are called, and call themselves, 'colonos' (settlers) or 'gringos' (foreigners), as opposed to the 'criollos' (people of indigenous/Spanish origin), who first arrived in the community in the 1930s to work as temporary cotton-pickers.[6] With the soy boom, the 'colonos' stopped producing cotton, for six decades the dominant crop in this region. The 'criollos' living in the area today are mostly un/underemployed, living in a cluster of houses that was raised in the 1980s as part of a public housing project.

Santa Cecilia is surround by other colonies sharing similar ethnic, social and economic characteristics. The distance from the centre of the colony to the nearest pueblo is 25 km. This pueblo was the first colony established in the region in 1879. Today it is a rural town with approx. 23 000 inhabitants, which provides most of the business, educational and cultural infrastructure for the countryside. Moreover, due to rural urban migration the majority of the inhabitants are of 'colono' origin. The departmental capital is located 2 km further south.

My first fieldworks (1973–74 and 1988) were based on a "whole village approach" covering all the farms in Santa Cecilia. For comparative purposes, I also covered a number of farms in two neighbour colonies. The research methodology ranged from daylong visits participating in everyday life on the farm, to structured questionnaires on particular issues suited for this technique. My informants were women, men and children of different ages whom I observed and talked to individually and in groups, at the farms as well as outside.[7] As a 'resident' in the 'colonia', I participated in community life, attending mass, fiestas, sports events and meetings of the farmers' organisations, in addition to private social gatherings such as weddings, baptisms and birthday parties. On these occasions, I observed and had informal talks with a wide range of people. Moreover, I collected a series of secondary data provided by a number of institutions such as the Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria (INTA), the cooperatives, the provincial statistical bureau, and public registers e.g. the register of lands, which enabled me to reconstruct land transactions since the arrival of the first immigrants. During my last fieldwork, I lived on a farm but shared my time between Santa Cecilia and the two closest pueblos, where I talked to people who had left the countryside.

PEASANTS, FARMERS AND CAPITALISM

My first contact with the 'colono' areas was motivated by an interest in rural social movements. In Argentina in the early 1970s, the Agrarian Leagues (Las Ligas Agrarias) were established and expanded rapidly in the north-eastern provinces of the country. In 1973, this movement had reached 45.000 member families and represented a significant political force in the country (Ferrera 1973; Archetti 1988; Archetti and Stølen 1975).

Another important motivation was an interest in the anthropological study of post-peasant societies, inspired by the debates within the area of 'peasant studies' (Redfield 1956, Potter et al. 1967, Wolf 1966, Shanin 1971). Wolf, in his classic work on peasants (1966) makes a distinction between peasant and farmer economy. According to Wolf, peasant economy does not grow and expand, because surplus is appropriated in the form of rent through various types of 'domain', or claims by outsiders to rights over land worked by peasants. The farmer economy in contrast, because of its particular articulation with capitalism, is characterised precisely by expansion and growth (1966:9–10). A similarity between the peasants and the farmers is that both base their production on the use of family labour and, in contrast to the capitalist enterprise, organise production and consumption through kinship and residence.

Historically, the farmers in Santa Cecilia have adopted innovations, invested in new technology, intensified their crop production, improved their material standard of living and educated their children, all evidence of the existence of surplus production, saving and investment. This surplus was different from profit in the capitalist sense, because it was partly a product of 'self-exploitation'. The farmer did not view the value of his work and the work of other family members as a production cost. Consequently, what he defined as surplus was in many cases not even big enough to cover the cost of the household labour input. Capital accumulation as such was not a characteristic of the farmer economy (Archetti and Stølen 1978; Bernstein 2010: 91–93).

The 'colono' farmers co-existed with peasants and capitalists, within a wider economic environment where different 'modes of production' (in the restricted sense) co-existed and were unified by one single (capitalist) mode of exchange and circulation. The peasants of the neighbouring province of Corrientes, for example, were tenants or sharecroppers, dependent on big landowners and involved in local exchange of products and reciprocal sharing of labour, and immersed in usurer credits. The 'colonos', in contrast, owned the land they tilled, invested in new technology, were familiar with bank services, and attuned to a national price system – all characteristics of capitalism. (Mintz 1955, 1956; Foreman and Riegelhaupt 1970). In spite of this, they did not conceptualise their own labour input as a cost, or their land as a capital good. The farmers did not follow a 'capitalist logic' in spite of being integrated into a capitalist market and becoming increasingly dependent on the requirements of the larger economy.

DEALING WITH CONJUNCTURAL SHIFTS

The transformation of the farmer community that I observed during my last fieldwork is the culmination of a long process of capitalist development characterised by a gradual intensification of commodity relations. Historically this transformation has been associated with conjunctural shifts provoked by economic and political changes at the global and national level. In what follows, I will discuss how the colonos have dealt with these shifts.

The expansion of agriculture in Argentina during the second part of the 19th Century was based on European 'colono' immigration. The capitalist world economy, increasingly shaped by industrialisation, had a turning point in the 1870s with the revolution of overland transport. Rail meant that the prairies of Argentina – like the ones of Australia, Canada and the US – could become the world's major exporters of grains and meat to Europe, which was rapidly urbanising and increasingly dependent on imports of staple food (Bernstein 2010: 66–70).

The colonisation of Santa Fe province started in 1860s. The gradual occupation of indigenous territories by the army was followed by the settlement of immigrants in 'agricultural colonies' (Martinez 1998; Djenderedjian 2008). Military fortification lines were built, gradually moving northwards ahead of the new settlements. In 1872, the military forces reached Reconquista where they built a fortress. From this base, the area was cleared through a process of expulsion and extermination of indigenous people and prepared for the arrival of the European immigrants.

The immigrants who settled in Santa Cecilia and the other colonies in this area came from Friuli, a region characterised by poverty due to rapid demographic growth and unequal distribution of land (Archetti 1984).[8] They obtained property rights on favourable terms, low prices and down-payment arrangements without interest. In return, they were obliged to produce wheat, maize and flax, the most important export crops of the time. They also received farm implements, draught animals, a pregnant cow and foodstuff during the first year.[9] In this region the land in each colony was divided into lots of 144 ha; a family could buy up to three lots (432 ha). However, accustomed to the land scarcity of their home region and the fact that they had to settle on their property, most people (70%) bought the minimum possible size of a quarter lot (36 ha). They built their houses in a corner of their property as did their neighbours, in order to see at least three other houses in the vast prairie (Cracogna 1988: 92: 123).

From the beginning, the 'colono' farms were family farms, in the sense of being family owned, family managed and worked with family labour (Bernstein 2010). They were self-sufficient regarding land and labour and they reproduced their own draught animals. They also produced most of the food for their everyday diet in addition to the export crops. Labour was the critical factor of production. The number of household members and their age and sex determined the amount of land they were able to cultivate, since no local labour market had developed yet.

During this period, there was little or no capital investment on the farms. The 'colonos' were marginal export producers compared to those on the pampas, with lower area productivity and low level of capitalisation. Marketing agents, who were private merchants of agricultural crops, provided loans against payment in crops. They were the only source of credit at the time, charging high rates, and defining the prices of products before the harvest. This changed after the first cooperative union Unión Agrícola de Avellaneda (UAA) was founded in 1919.[10]

During the three first decades of the 19th Century, Argentina ranked among the 10 richest countries in the world due to its agricultural exports. This changed dramatically with the international stock market crash in 1929, when the demand for the traditional Argentine export products decreased dramatically. Argentina has been haunted by political and economic instability ever since.[11]

The crash had a deep impact in the 'colono' areas. Anticipating a long-term international crisis, the Argentine government started an industrialisation process to substitute imports Dorfmann (1970). This required supply of raw materials previously not produced in the country. According to the national development plans of the period, industrial growth was based on a division of labour within the agricultural sector. The farmers outside the pampa region should produce industrial inputs, such as cotton and oil seeds, while those on the pampa should continue the production of meat and grains for export (Ferrer 1972: 177–79; Rapoport 2006).

As marginal export producers, the 'colonos' were the most hard-hit by this crisis. Their first reaction was what Chayanov characterised as a typical peasant response: namely to meet the decrease of prices with an increase in the volume of production (Chayanov 1966; Wolf 1966). In fact, there were record levels of maize, wheat and flax production in 1931 and 1932 (Archetti 1988: 448). However, when the new agrarian policy became more established, it was embraced by the 'colonos', who were highly motivated to plant cotton, locally referred to as the "white gold".

The introduction of cotton in 1936 produced two important changes in the 'colono' areas: the use of hired labour and the generation of capital accumulation. Cotton was a labour intensive crop, especially during harvest, when more hands were needed than could be provided by the family. The 'colonos' started to recruit cotton-pickers, poor landless 'criollos', from the neighbour province of Corrientes or the Western woodlands of Santa Fe. Whole families of these so-called 'golondrina' (swallow) reapers spent three to four months a year on the cotton farms of Santa Fe. Over the years, a number of these families settled on a permanent basis, living from casual work. This produced class and ethnic cleavages that have characterised the 'colono' areas ever since (Stølen 1996b).

Cheap labour, combined with high prices and favourable marketing conditions made cotton more profitable than the traditional crops. Cotton prices favoured the 'colonos' of Santa Fe, since the level of minimum price was determined by the lower productivity of the cotton producers in the neighbour province of Chaco, who constituted the majority of cotton producers in the country. Moreover, cotton was more resistant than the traditional crops to the climatic variations that characterise this part of Argentina. The annual reports of the UAA cooperative, as well as scientific sources, refer repeatedly to the profitability of this crop (Bordarampé 1948; Archetti 1977: 130). The expansion of cotton created the conditions for accumulation and investment

on the 'colono' farms, a process that intensified with the mechanisation of agriculture in the 1950s (Archetti and Stølen 1975).

The first Peronist government (1946–55) initiated the process of mechanisation of Argentine agriculture to enhance productivity, expand the internal market and promote distribution of wealth. Due to the economic growth created by the introduction of industrial crops, the farmers of Santa Cecilia and the other colonies of the region were prepared and motivated for the technological innovations. By end of the 1950s, 70 per cent of the farmers had replaced their draught animal with tractors and, during the 1960s; the mechanisation of the farms was completed. Over the next decades, a gradual specialisation in industrial crops, mainly cotton took place on the 'colono' farms, as did a gradual escalation of labour-saving farm technology, from smaller to bigger and more powerful tractors and additional equipment, producing increased surplus of labour in the rural areas (Archetti 1977).

These changes coincided with the process of regional industrial development, creating a labour market in manufacturing and increased demand for consumption goods and for basic services such as housing, education and health in the pueblos. The process of rural exodus accelerated, and gradually most farmers' sons and daughters (when they married) migrated to the pueblo. Significantly, local entrepreneurs, most of them sons of 'colonos', were the main actors of the industrial development, as well as of the expansion of a private service sector in the pueblos. They considered the establishment of a family-run service enterprise the most attractive alternative to farming. 'It is better to be a small boss than employed by a big one' I was told (Archetti and Stølen 1975).

The profitability of cotton production became insecure after the military coup that led to the fall of the Peronist government in 1955. The military government abolished the protectionist pricing and marketing policies. At the same time, synthetic fibres started to appear in the market, competing with cotton. This coincided with a concentration in the industrial processing of cotton. Many small and medium-sized spinning and weaving mills disappeared, and processing was concentrated in bigger plants. The industrial owners gradually gained a monopolist position permitting them to determine the prices, often to the disadvantage of the farmers. From 1956 to 1970, cotton producers suffered from price fluctuations and overproduction, while the pickers' salaries remained stable. This created insecurity and anxiety about the future, and prevented the farmers form sustaining a process of economic stability and growth. The most notable reaction to this instability was the formation of the Agrarian Leagues in the North Eastern provinces of the country (Chaco, Northern Santa Fe, Misiones, Corrientes and Formosa) in the early 1970s.

RESISTING THE ADVANCEMENT OF CAPITALISM

The early 1970s, the period of the first fieldwork, were in many ways very good years in the history of the 'colonos'. The climatic conditions were reliable in terms of balance between rainfalls and dry periods; harvests were good and so were prices; and there was a short return to civilian government (1973–76) opening new space for popular mobilisation and aspirations of social transformation.[12] The Agrarian Leagues, established in the neighbour province of Chaco in late 1970, spread to Santa Fe province in early 1971.[13]

The Leagues mobilised against the agrarian policy of the military government and the increasing power of agro-industrial monopolies and their manipulation of the market. In the beginning, the Leagues organised peaceful marches and roadblocks to protest against the agricultural policy of the military government, which they claimed to be unfair and detrimental to small and medium producers. The organisation gained momentum in late 1971, when a demonstration with more than 4000 participants obtained a 60% reduction in the road tax to be paid by local farmers. A number of peaceful and successful demonstrations followed, demanding reduction of interest rates on agricultural loans, import control on fibres and increase in prices of cotton and sunflower.

The Leagues soon gained support among the 'colonos', who felt that this organisation was more responsive to their problems, interests and aspirations than the Argentine Agrarian Federation,[14] which was considered conservative and not willing to attack what they considered the roots of the agrarian malaise in Argentina: the capitalist exploitation of small and medium farmers. Their actions soon expanded beyond the economic domain expressing wider transformative aspirations. They criticised the authoritarianism characterising the relations between generations, as well as machismo and the subordination of women in the extended farm household, and advocated for increased gender equality (Stølen 1996a, Ferro 2005). They also advocated for the improvement of the rather miserable living and working conditions of the 'criollo' cotton-pickers, emphasising compliance with the salary and working conditions set by law, and organising fiestas to integrate them better into the social life of the community. These visions were rooted in the existing organisations: the Rural Movement of Catholic Action[15] and the cooperative movement, both strongly influenced by Christian family and gender values, and Christian values of community and solidarity. The cooperative movement in this part of the country was conceptualised as a Catholic movement. The Italian priests, who arrived together with the immigrants, played an important role in the establishment of cooperatives in the region, and being a cooperative member was closely associated with being a good Catholic.

During the election process that led to the return of civilian government in 1973, the Leagues participated in actions by the Peronist Youth. Many 'colonos', especially the older generation who traditionally were supporters of the Radical Party, felt uncomfortable with this mode of action of the Leagues, considering them too radical and no longer faithful to the values of the Rural Movement. The bishop of Reconquista accused the Leagues of being secular and profane, and decided to close down the Action part of the Rural Movement that had become too politicised for the rather conservative clergy. By 1976, when the military again took power and deemed the Leagues subversive, the leaders and some of the more activist members, who did not manage to hide underground or leave the country, were imprisoned or even killed.

In spite of their termination, the Leagues had an enduring impact on the 'colonos'. The farmers had been able to make a difference influencing agricultural policy. They had proved that they were able to create a decentralised and democratic organisation competing with the powerful Agrarian Federation, and they had negotiated on equal terms with regional and national authorities – all unthinkable a few years earlier. Moreover, the Leagues had opened new spaces for women. In addition to recruiting women into activism of the Leagues, strong female leaders provoked a reflection on women's conditions in the family as well as in society at large (Ferro 2005, Stølen 1996a). The Leagues had also strongly supported the establishment of the "Schools of the agricultural family" (EFA)[16] a parent-organised secondary school aimed at preparing rural youth for tertiary education, while at the same time maintaining close links to the farms. This radically changed the structures of possibility and the aspirations of the rural youth. Gradually, most farmers' sons and daughters attended this school and a good number continued studying at the university.

The coup in 1976 and the economic policy introduced by the military government put an end to the prospects of progress in more than one sense. Production costs and the cost of living in general increased more than the prices of agricultural products. The farmers in Santa Cecilia tried as best as they could to deal with this new situation by reducing their level of consumption and simultaneously increase subsistence production. Thanks to good years in the interim between the military governments, the majority had renewed their farm equipment and means of transport. Therefore, only two of them got involved in the indexed credit system, introduced in 1977, which became a nightmare that obliged a number of farmers in other parts of the region to sell their equipment and, in some cases, even their land (Dreizzen 1985).[17]

The political environment changed with the return to civilian government in 1983, but inflation rates continued to be high and prices of production inputs and consumer goods excessive, compared to the prices of agricultural products. When I returned do fieldwork in 1988, I noted again a certain optimism in the region. People talked about the hardships they had suffered since my first fieldwork; the military repression and the persecution of League members combined with hyperinflation (prices sometimes doubled from one week to another) and years with heavy rains and inundations. However, they also emphasised that they had made progress. Through the participation in Grupos de Extensión Agropecuarios Cooperativos (GEAC), a new, more technocratic organisation established by the Cooperatives, they had made a number of biotechnological advances, such as improved crop practices. Moreover, there were visible improvements in their standard of living, revealing a certain surplus production. They had renovated their houses and surroundings, obtained electricity, and, with that, television and a variety of household appliances making housework much easier; and a number of farmers had bought a lot and constructed a house in the pueblo. Again, they expressed prospects of a good life and most of them had managed to find ways and means to cope with the instability of their natural, economic and political environment.

The region had maintained their lively and vigorous communities. All the farms in Santa Cecilia were inhabited and producing, but the demographic composition of the farms had changed. Migration had taken a new turn. In contrast to the extended family farms that were common in the early 1970s, most farms were now nuclear family based with a strict division of labour: a man who was responsible for the agriculture and a woman who took care of the home. The older generation had moved to the new house in the pueblo closer to shops and services, where the rest of their children and grandchildren had already settled.

I found that the Santa Cecilia farmers, during the years between my two fieldworks, had been able to produce the surplus necessary to reproduce their farms within the wider economic context of capitalist growth. When I finished my research in late 1988, my conclusion was that there were no signs that the 'colonos' – in spite of having continued adjusting to the increasingly more capitalist environment – would abandon their farms and community and their way of life in the near future (Stølen 1996a: 146).

When I started my last fieldwork in Santa Cecilia in 2012, to enquire the impact of the soy boom in the farmer areas, I soon realised that my predictions had not come true. The community was almost abandoned. The fields were cultivated, no longer with cotton and sunflower as in the 1980s, but with soybeans. Most farmhouses were empty, some of them abandoned and literally falling apart; others were maintained but only used as holiday homes. Only a small number of farmers lived on their farms, most of them over sixty years old. The social life

in the centre of the community had almost disappeared. The football and the bocce fields were overgrown; the two bars/grocery shops had closed, so had the butcher and the police post; and the church was only used during Easter and the annual fiesta of the local patron saint when people who had migrated visited their 'home community'. The school was still functioning but there were only three farmers' children left; they belonged to the only farmer family with children remaining in the community. In the late 1980s, farmers' children constituted the majority of the schoolchildren (Stølen 1996a). In what follows, I will explore the reasons for these transformations.

THE COMMODITISATION OF LAND AND LABOUR

In spite of the fact that land has been a commodity since the arrival of the 'colonos', most agricultural land in Santa Cecilia as in other 'colono' areas used to circulate outside the market; most transfers took place through inheritance (Archetti and Stølen 1977). Historically, as today, inheritance was bilateral by law; daughters had the same rights to inherit land as their brothers, while husband and wife had joint property rights. However, during the first decades in Argentina, when farmers' daughters married farmers' sons and moved to the in-laws upon marriage, female heirs were excluded from access to land through the practice of dowry. The dowry consisted of utility items, such as bed linen, dress fabrics and a chest of drawers; often noted on a piece of paper and signed by the bride's father and the husband-to-be, to prevent future land claims. This exclusion was an important condition for the accumulation process characterising the farmer economy after the introduction of industrial crops, especially cotton, in the 1930s.

As long as land was abundant and most farmers' daughters married farmers' sons, this inheritance system persisted. Property rights were related to agricultural work, which in turn was defined as a male domain, even when women carried out the work. During the first decades in Argentina, when farming was labour-intensive and dependent on the size and composition of the household in terms of age and sex, women often participated in agricultural work. When there was scarcity of male hands in the family, women were even ploughing and harrowing with oxen, considered strictly male activities. During the harvest, the whole family – adults as well as children – worked on the fields. Nevertheless, women's participation in agricultural work was defined as temporary and secondary. This also justified the exclusion of women from ownership of land.

This association between agricultural work and property rights continued as long as the farmers could employ their sons on the farm or purchase more land for them to settle on their own. With the mechanisation in the 1950s, this was hardly possible, in spite of the fact that the replacement of the oxen by tractors implied a considerable increase in the cultivated land. The possibilities of expanding the agricultural frontier was limited, since most arable land was taken and the land market restricted, since most land still changed hands among relatives. Over the next decades, a gradual specialisation in industrial crops took place on the 'colono' farms, as did a gradual development of farm technology: from smaller to bigger tractors and harvesting machines, reducing even more the demand for family labour.

When most farmers' sons migrated to make a living outside agriculture, they started to receive monetary compensation once the brother/s inherited the farm. However, the amount the heirs expected to receive was determined not by the market value of the land but by how much the brother/s who inherited the farm could afford to pay.

During my fieldwork in the 1970s, old people remained on the farm until they died. By then one son, often the youngest, remained working and living on the farm with his wife and children, sharing the house and taking care of the old parents. Transfer of property rights was not made until both parents had passed away. If more than one married son remained on the farm, they kept separate households but worked the common land, and also shared the caretaking of their old parents.

In the late 1980s, during my second fieldwork, I observed an important change in the land tenure system, pushing forward the commoditisation of land: the payment of land rent from son to father. Most farms in Santa Cecilia were now nuclear family based. Old people had moved to a newly built house in the pueblo when they retired from farm work. However, they continued as landowners, and rented out the land to the son who lived and worked on the farm. The rent enabled them to make a living in town. This created new relations of dependency between fathers and sons, since the son had limited or no land of his own; but it also created autonomy, appreciated by the old as well as the young generation. The social life of the old people improved because they were within walking distance of their migrated children, grandchildren and former neighbours, and church and shops. Those who stayed in the countryside were happy to get rid of what they secretly talked about as "the tyranny of the old generation" in their everyday life. When the parents died, the son who stayed on the farm would normally inherit the property rights to the land. The remuneration he had to pay to the other heirs was still adapted to what he could afford to pay and at the same time sustain a viable farm.

With the soy boom, this inheritance practice changed. Land has become a fully-fledged commodity, and market prices determine the value of the land in inheritance. Galloping land prices – partly due to the

economic prosperity of a few successful farmers, and the investment in land by urban people – small and medium scale farmers are often no longer able to pay for the price of the land of their siblings. Without a prospect of taking over the farm in the future, farmers' sons prefer to study, find a job and make a living in town. Some of the migrants have decided to sell the land, including the farmhouses. These are the poorer farmers who need the money for their expenditures in town. Buyers are normally more prosperous farmers from the area, who expand their farms to become more viable in the new economic environment.

Those who can afford it, keep the land in the family, and rent it out, preferably to a former neighbour and 'colono', whom they believe will take good care of their land, in contrast to 'profit-seeking' outsiders. They say that if you own land you never lose; it represents a safe investment, and land prices have always been increasing. However, other than economic concerns also seem to be at play here. These migrated landowners are proud of their background and refer to themselves as 'colonos' or 'gringos', labels also used by their urban neighbours with a different background. They also have an emotional attachment to the farm and the community, where they spent their childhood. They often maintain the farmhouse and the surroundings to visit during weekends and participate in the patron saint fiestas. Nevertheless, most of them are happy with their urban life and have no desire to live in the 'colonia'.

SUBSISTING ON THE FARMS

After two decades of soybean production the majority of the 'colonos' of Santa Cecilia have given up farming and left the countryside; only nine of the 34 farms are still inhabited by old couples whose offspring have migrated permanently.

There are two categories. One consists of seven retired couples above sixty who prefer life in the countryside, in spite of low incomes and lower level of comfort. 'I like to see the sunset on the prairie and hear the crickets singing in the evenings' one of them said. Their landholdings are 36 ha or less. None of them has been able to replace their worn-out tractors and keep up with the new technological development. They rent out most of their agricultural land and only keep a plot for a garden to produce for their own consumption and /or for sales of local products, such as fresh or processed fruits, vegetables and flowers. Some of them also own some pigs, poultry and/or cattle.

The other category consists of two couples who are some ten years younger, but also with grown-up children, some of whom are still students. Their need for income is higher and so is their level of activity. They have less than 36 ha of land, and survive by diversifying their activities, cultivating own land and land rented from retired or migrated neighbours, combined with other activities such as cattle breeding on own or rented land, vegetable production and poultry breeding. They buy tractor services from those who have invested. When these people get older, they will probably move to town to be closer to their offspring. For the time being none of their children are interested in returning to live in the countryside.

The cooperative strongly promotes new activities such as vegetable and flower production, chicken and pig breeding to diversify production, thereby enabling the smaller farmers to make a living in the community. They offer small-scale credits and technical and moral support. This will perhaps slow down the migration flow, but is unlikely to result in a return from town to the countryside. Economically, the countryside is attractive, and its attractiveness may even increase for smaller producers in the future; but it is no longer an attractive place for living due to the poor socio-cultural life.

Changes in cultivation practices (especially the new practice of no tilling) and new technologies, primarily biological but also mechanical, associated with the expansion of soybean production, require bigger land areas and heavy investments in order for farms to be viable production units. Only three groups of farmers have managed to make this transition through particular growth strategies, among others pooling resources (land/technology), renting additional land, and /or combining agriculture with other income-generating rural activities such as industrialised chicken and/or cattle breeding (feed lots). However, most farmers were not able to make this transition. The most important constraints have been their limited access to land and capital.

FROM FAMILY FARM TO AGRIBUSINESS

I will use the case of the Cantarutti[18] family to illustrate the challenges associated with converting a family farm into an agribusiness enterprise. They are four bothers in their late 30s and early 40s who have been quite successful in this venture. Several conditions have been on their side. The four brothers started at an early age to work with their father, all of them with the idea to become farmers. All of them have secondary education from the EFA School and three of them have tertiary education in agronomy, farm management and agricultural economy respectively. They belong to a family with a 'favourable' gender composition, the four brothers and only one sister. By paying for their sister's university education and buying a nice flat in the town where she now lives with her family, the question of inheritance has been solved. Three of the brothers are married to educated women who earn an income and they have settled in a nearby

pueblo. The forth is still single and remains in the family house with his widowed mother.

The brothers own 600 ha of land, half of them suitable for agriculture, the rest for cattle breeding. The first piece of this land (80 ha) their father inherited when both his parents died in 1972. He completed the payment of compensation for 'loss of inheritance' to his four siblings in three years. With hard work and the help of his sons, the father was able to make three other purchases of land from farmers who went bankrupt or had no sons willing to continue the farm, all in the neighbourhood.

When the father died in 2008, he had already started the process of transference of property rights to the sons. The brothers have individual deeds, but established a family enterprise and pool their land resources, make common investment in machinery, and work together, dividing responsibilities according to their competences. They have made the investments in land without credit, a combination of savings and instalments over three-four years. Due to periods of high inflation with devastating consequences for many indebted farmers in the past, they are reluctant regarding credits. They only use credits obtained through their cooperative, which they consider safe, but such credits are scarce and, only used to buy machinery. Otherwise, the brothers work with cash flow. They pay for inputs in cash and get a discount. Poorer farmers, who have no cash, pay a higher price and an interest rate on advances needed to obtain the inputs.

The 600 ha owned by the brothers are far from enough for them to become successful farmers. In 2015, I registered that they rented 1200 ha from nine different owners, three of them as far away as in the neighbouring province of Chaco. The latter are urban investors, a medical doctor, owner of a clinic, and two lawyers. Of the other owners, two are retired farmers, two are female relatives who have inherited land, and two are farmers who cannot afford to finance the necessary inputs.

The conditions of rent vary. The most common is paying a percentage, normally 20 % of harvested products. In four of the cases, they pay a prefixed monthly rent. The retired farmers and the female owners prefer to have a safe income rather than receiving a percentage of the harvest, which is potentially more lucrative but also more risky. The brothers would have liked to own more land, but so far this has not been possible, due to the excessive land prices and the unreliable credit system. 'Today the value of land is not determined by what we can produce, it has become an object of speculation', they claim. We have seen that farmers, who have retired or are not themselves in a condition to produce, prefer to rent out instead of selling. The same is the case for people who have inherited land in the 'colonia' and live in the pueblo. There is not much activity in the local land market and, when there is land for sale, farmers such as the brothers cannot compete with urban people who want a safe investment.

In spite of the limited access to land ownership and payment of rent, the brothers have been able to expand and invest. With the surplus gained after having covered production costs and having granted themselves a monthly salary they have, over the years, invested in machinery beyond what they need for their own production. They provide services to other farmers who have not been able to renew their machinery. In 2013 the brothers started the construction of an industrial chicken plant with a capacity of breeding 80 000 chicken five times a year. The UAA cooperative funded part of this investment through provision of input packages to be repaid upon delivery of the chicken. The brothers also have cattle in their pastureland and in a feedlot that they own with three of their uncles.

This case of the Cantarutti is quite representative of the three cases of local farmers who have managed to make the passage to agribusiness. All of them have inherited a good portion of family land. They are members of families with no or few migrated sisters and brothers who can make claims of inheritance. They are pooling their resources and working together according to a certain division of tasks. All of them are very competent farmers combining experience from having grown up and worked on the farm, from having adequate agronomic and management training, and from having been active participants and even leaders of farmers' organisations and cooperatives. In contrast to what was the case during the cotton era, when they did most of the agricultural work themselves – except for the cotton harvest – most of the agricultural work is now carried out by machines and paid operators. Production is no longer dependent on family labour nor the size and composition of the household. The farmers have become planners, managers and supervisors, organising the multiple labour processes on the farm and beyond. This also implies a lot of office work related to employment of workers, taxes, credits and marketing. They try to keep up with the latest in technology and production techniques and, follow the development of the international stock market through their organisations as well as through internet, to decide when to sell their crops. Due to the scarcity of land, they are also renting land in different places negotiating conditions and terms. They claim that they have to 'pensar en números' all the time and their 'logic' has become a capitalist one.

The fact that most people have left the countryside and live in the pueblos reflects changing aspirations regarding the desired way of life. They prefer to live in the pueblos where there are jobs for both men and women and where they have access to services, entertainment and social networks of friends and relatives. Social life in the countryside has suffered, since all the local institutions and social arenas used by the farmers gradually died out due to lack of attendance and participation. The fact that the un/underemployed 'criollos', whom they consider

their inferiors, have outnumbered the 'gringo' population, has also been an important reason for moving. Those who have schoolchildren consider that the teaching in the local school is not up to standard because of the majority of 'criollo' children, whose attendance and results are relatively poor. They prefer to have their children in an urban school to secure their education.

CONCLUSION

The processes of transformation in the 'colono' areas characterised by deepening of commodity relations are closely related to the development of capitalism at the national and global level. Conjunctural shifts leading to changing agricultural and social practices at the local level are not a result of impositions 'from above'; they have been informed by farmers' values and aspirations for an alternative future. The 'colonos' have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to adapt to new political and economic situations, turning them to their advantage. Generally, they have been open to innovations rather than resisting them.

The 'colonos', as most Argentine farmers, were enthusiastic about the advantages of soy production (Leguizamón 2014). In addition to the profitability of soy compared to cotton and the other crops, the fact that they depended on the 'criollo' workers was repeatedly emphasised. However, success in soy production required access to more land than the traditional crops, and new expensive technology, which implied investments that most 'colonos' could not afford. Moreover, as machines got bigger and technologically more advanced, specialized skills were necessary to operate them. The same happened with the planning of production and commercialisation of products. These skills could no longer be learnt in the family and the community; they had to be acquired at universities. With the soy boom, land became a fully-fledged commodity (Li 2014: 7). Due to high demand and competitive pressure for land, only those who have been able to accumulate land (owned or rented) and capital, and adopt a capitalist management strategy, could continue farming; but they are no longer working as farmers, rather as managers.

As reported from other part of the country, small and medium farmers have been at a huge disadvantage regarding the transition to soy production since they did not receive any direct help in the form of subsidies, credit or machinery. Like most 'colonos', they switched to soy because soy was the only crop that gave enough surpluses to afford the next growing season. Moreover, the export tax was devastating for small farmers. The fact that the government taxed the producers a flat tax irrespective of size favoured the big producers who had lower costs and higher profits.

The export-oriented agrarian policies favouring soy production have replaced more labour-intensive agrarian activities; and rural families move to urban areas where there are jobs and children are closer to schools and hospitals. Rural depopulation goes hand in hand with a decrease in the number of farms as well as with increased farm size and concentration of landholdings (Leguizamón 2014; Gras and Hernández 2009b, Teubal 2008). Because of economic hardship, farmers see no other solution than renting out their land or selling it; leaving farming altogether. The demand for land renting is high because of the scarcity of land among those who try to stay in business, and their lack of possibilities to buy due to high demand and excessive land prices. Land is producing more than ever, but the vibrant communities of the past are vanishing.

NOTES

1 There are a number of studies analysing different aspects of the soy boom in Argentina. See, for instance Qaim and Traxler 2005; Teubal 2008; Newell 2009; Muzlera et al. 2011; Sili and Soumoulou 2011; Gras and Hernandez 2009a, 2013; Richardson 2008; Leguizamón 2014, Lapegna 2016).

2 During my fieldwork in Argentina, I was associated with IDES (Instituto de Desarollo Económico y Social) in Buenos Aires. The Norwegian Research Council has funded all my research projects in Argentina. Thanks to my colleagues Benedicte Bull, Arve Hansen, Karen V. Lykke and Desmond McNeill for constructive feedbacks to earlier versions of this paper.

3 Export taxes has been a recurrent mechanism in Argentine economic policy. Their existence or level depend, to a large extent, on the Presidency in office and on its attitude towards free trade, exports, and the distributive conflict (Brambilla et al 2018).The Menem government abolished export tax the 1990s, but they were reintroduced in 2002. Then the tax on soybeans was 20% and gradually increased to 35% by the end of Christina Fernandez' government. Macri's government (2015–2019), reduced export tax on soy; by the end of his period it was 24.5 %. Shortly after the change of government in December 2019, the new Peronist president Alberto Fernandez increased it to 30% and later to 33%, which is the current rate (Brambilla et al 2018).

4 The two biggest sowing pools, Los Grobo and MSU, control 250 000 ha and 210 000 ha of soy respectively, most of it operated under lease (Gras and Sosa Varrotti 2013: 224).

5 A number of publications are based on previous research Archetti and Stølen 1975, 1977, 1978; Stølen 1991, 1996a, 1996b, 2022.

6 In this part of Latin America, 'gringo' refers to descendants of European immigrants, not to North Americans as in other parts of the continent.

7 My studies include five generations of informants. The oldest informant in 1973 was born in 1889. I have recorded life histories from persons of the different generations (Stølen 1996a).

8 Most 'colonos' were Friulano-speaking Austrian citizens from the part of Friuli region that at the time of emigration to Argentina (1880s) belonged to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. In 1919, it was transferred to Italy and is now part of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region.

9 For more details about the Friulian immigration in Northern Santa Fe see Archetti and Stølen 1975, Cracogna 1988.

10 The first cooperative (Unión Agrícola de Avellaneda) was established in the rural town of Avellaneda. Over the years, it has become a powerful institution with offices throughout the whole region. http://www.uaa.com.ar/.

11 Political and economic instability have been a persistent fact in Argentine recent history. Between 1930 and 1983 marking the first coup de etát and last return to civilian government, the country has been haunted by six military dictatorships: 1930–1932, 1943–1946, 1955–1958, 1962–1966, 1966–73 and 1976–1983.

12 After the coup de etát in 1966 the military established what they intended should be a permanent military rule. This initiated a turbulent period in the country characterised by persecution of dissidents leading to brain drain, the birth of guerrilla movements and urban popular turmoil in the big cities of Rosario and Cordoba (El Rosariazo/El Cordobazo) Brennan (1992).

13 Due to variations regarding the agrarian conditions in the different provinces, the way the Leagues were organised and operated at the provincial level varied. For general information about the Agrarian Leagues, see Ferrera (1973). For detailed analyses of the specific branches, see Archetti (1988) on the Agrarian Leagues of Santa Fe, Bartolomé (1982) on the Agrarian Movement of Misiones and Galafassi (1986) on the Union of Peasant Leagues of Formosa.

14 This Federation was established in 1912 after a three months delivery strike by tenant farmers on the pampa protesting against the high rent charged by the landowners. The organisation gained its strength through the recruitment of 'colonos' who owned their land and were especially important for the creation and economic consolidation of farmers' cooperatives.

15 The Rural Movement was of European origin, created to counteract tendencies of secularisation in the Catholic Church. In the 1960s, there was a shift within this movement in Latin America, away from the spiritualist and moralist orientation towards what was called 'revision of life'. The Catholic youth in Latin America maintained that to live as a real Christian it was necessary to be involved in the liberation of the continent (Ferrera 1973: 43–47; Archetti 1988; Lehmann 1990: 88–96).

16 The first EFA School was established in a neighbour 'colonia' in 1971, inspired by a French rural school system. The pedagogy of these schools starts from the analysis and reflection of the students' own reality, and teaching is divided between periods at school and on the farm. It seeks to link scientific knowledge with popular knowledge, and connect what the pupils learn at school with projects that bring it closer to work (García and Macagno 2019).

17 Interest rates were linked to the cost of living index. The fact that inflation rates were sky-high while agricultural product prices were not adjusted correspondinly had fatal consequences for those who became indebted. Many farmers as well as industrial enterprises went bankrupt (Dreizzen 1985).

18 The Cantarutti brothers has allowed me to use their case to illustrate the passage towards agribusiness.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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