

Colonization and Production Modes in Northeastern Atlantic Forest from the Perspective of Historical Materialism

ABSTRACT

The process of colonization in the Northeast Atlantic Forest (NAF) has generated the most serious consequences for the conservation of its natural heritage. In order to generate data for the definition of policies and guidelines for management and conservation of forest remnants in NAF, the article seeks to elucidate the effects of production modes and colonization process on the man-nature relationship. Therefore, it tries to explain the relationships and motivations of the social structure and commercial of the colony in the NAF, based on a combination of elements of capitalism, feudalism and slavery, from the historical materialism point of view.

KEY WORDS

Colonization. Historical Materialism. Atlantic Forest.

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1 – INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian colonial economy was sustained by economic cycles, such as the sugar cane in Northeastern Brazil (FREYRE, 2004), modifying activities of land use and occupation patterns invariably associated to environmental impacts. Accordingly, some authors (HOLANDA; BÓRIS, 1962; CROSBY, 1993; HOLANDA, 1999; OLIVEIRA, 1999; SOS MATA ATLÂNTICA, 2001) consider the environmental devastation of the Northeastern Atlantic Forest as a resulting process of the Portuguese occupation and exploration policy in colonial Brazil.

It was in the Northeast region where the colonization process left the worst consequences to the conservation of the Northeastern Atlantic Forest. The remaining parts of this region are predominantly distributed in small fragments (SILVA; TABARELLI, 2001). There are practically no long extensions of forest as the ones in the South and Southeast of the country. (BROWN JR.; BROWN, 1992; TABARELLI, 1997). Due to the low level of protection of the Atlantic Forest in the Northeast, it is in this region that we can find the major spots of endemism and endangered species in whole America (WEGE; LONG, 1995; VIANNA; TABANEZ; BATISTA, 1997; RANTA et al., 1998; SILVA; TABARELLI, 2000; LYRA-NEVES et al., 2004).

The knowledge of the historical movements and the repercussions of the agribusiness on natural resources is a way to elucidate the influence of public policies in the region, according to an environmental sustainability viewpoint which shaped the current landscape. It can be said, about the Northeastern Atlantic Forest, that the impacts from human occupation are long-standing and were intensified after the Colonial Era when human colonizations and the intensive monoculture of sugar cane began (SCHWARTZ, 1985; SANTOS; PINHO, 2003; BAHIA, 2006). Through the awareness of these processes of occupation and alteration of habitats, essential subsidies can be created to the definition of policies and management and conservation guidelines of the forest remains. This is because the resulting relationships of the production mode evolve to relationships with the environmental changes, demographic and social economic processes, and

to endogenous and exogenous factors that influence nature and its relation with the human kind.

Accordingly, this research aims to clarify, in the light of Marxist dialectics, the production modes associated with the colonial structure, especially those represented by the sugar cane mills, having as the ultimate goal the awareness of the generating actions of the current context of the Northeastern Atlantic Forest devastation.

2 – COLONIZATION AND MODES OF PRODUCTION: A MARXIST DIALECTIC VIEW

Brazilian Northeastern society has its own history which differentiates it from other Brazilian regions. Gilberto Freyre, during an examination of cultural aspects of the Northeastern culture, draws attention to three categories that are intertwined, formed society and left indelible marks on the physical and human landscape of the Northeastern Atlantic Forest: the Latifundium, as a way of property; the monoculture, as a way of economic exploration and the slavery, as the institution of social class (FREYRE, 2004).

According to these three categories, an analysis based on the reflections of Marxist authors and on the history and economic structure of the sugar cane mill in the colonial era was made in order to understand the dominant mode of production and relate its effects on the construction of the current social economic system.

As such, it was possible to approximate three lines of thought in an attempt to explain the relationship and motivation of the commercial and social structure of Brazil as a colony. One line of thought was built by authors that believe that the feudal relations are the fundamental basis of the form of the kind of colonization applied in Brazil. Far beyond the colonial era, this model consists in the biggest representation of unbalance in labor, land and power relations, and some of its elements have persisted, in a way, to this day.

Other authors consider the Brazilian colonial social economic relation as a capitalist one, recognizing in it fundamental characteristics of this system, as the over-accumulation of capital and the transformation of the workforce into merchandise, among others.

Following the first line, there are Nelson Werneck Sodré and Caio Prado Júnior and the second line, in particular, there is Celso Furtado. And there is still a third rationale presented by Ciro Flamarion Cardoso and Rodrigo Alvez Teixeira, that points to a Brazilian social economic system neither capitalist nor feudal, but with “particular features” that engendered a new strongly aristocratic and patriarchal society based on slavery, but with capitalist and feudal elements.

Whether or not inspired by the traditional modes of production, the power and labor relations were established and developed in an irregular, complex and combined way, centralized on the sugar cane mills as it happened in the northeast region. The social and political structure of the Brazilian northeast predominant up to now is still based on social authoritarianism and social arbitrariness that develop social and politic activities in which the interests of the groups fighting for power are revealed.

For some authors (GANSHOF, 1996), the feudalistic aspects survived up to the twentieth century. According to this line of thought, it is believed that capitalism has developed in a non-capitalist, feudal and slavery environment. This points to the idea of transition in phases, as it is represented by the economic cycle theory. Novais (1979) places merchant capitalism between the gradual dissolution of feudalism and the capitalist outbreak.

As critiques on the theory of economic cycles and on the supposition about the presence of feudalism in Brazil (PRADO JR., 1998) came out and with the Marxist theory as reference, it was pointed out that there was a colonization focused on the external trade of the metropolis, connected to the internal commercial capitalism and to mercantilism as fundamental elements that guided our colonization. Thus, the social economic colonial structure would be understood as an associated part of the European economic history. In this case, the colonies would be a mere channel for capital transport from the colonies to their metropolises, but internally structured on the latifundia, on the monoculture and on forced labor. Here, it is important to note Prado Júnior's (1998, p. 22-23) comment on the issue:

The colonization on the tropics takes up the form of a more complex commercial venture than the old trading posts, but it still carries on the same exploitative nature: it explores the natural resources of a territory for the benefit of European trade. [...] This is the real meaning of the colonization on the tropics, from which Brazil is a product. This will explain the fundamental elements, in social as well as economic aspect, of the formation and historical evolution of the American tropics.

This picture has been provided with a small internal accumulation and hindered the development of its market, which was basically aimed at the foreign market. This situation went on for many years, according to Furtado (1991). Therefore, the concentration of the capital produced in the colony was transferred to the metropolis, which was defined as a “business layer related to marine trade” by Ethal (2000, p.54).

Brought under a historiographical analysis with a Marxist nature, the role played by the colonization here applied would permit a primitive capitalist accumulation in favor of the European economy. However, historiography has promoted a debate on the character and the meaning of this colonization, i.e. on which production mode the economy was based in colonial Brazil. Most authors sought to analyze the Brazilian colonial reality based on concepts and, especially, on the methodological basis developed by Marx (1984b). That is, to study the superstructure formed on that basis it is necessary to adopt historical materialism, in which social life could be explained through material life, according to a Marxist contextualization and in a dialectical analysis.

Dealing with “the meaning of the colonization”, Prado Júnior (1998) adopts a methodological approach similar to Marx's. Prado's quotes refer to the fact that society has its foundations on a group of events throughout history and this allows for an explanation and understanding of this very society. Therefore, both authors recognize a relationship between past and present. However, according to the dialectical logic, it is the present that provides the key to understand the past and separates these essential elements from what is secondary or merely accessory. Marx recognizes, then, the idea of a meaning in a way that it is reconstructed from the society knowledge resulted from historical events.

In addition to the feudal characteristics of the colonial mill, Prado Júnior (1998) attributed, as a

complement, a purpose to the colonial production as it was directed to the foreign market. In the same way, Celso Furtado concludes that, as in historical materialism, the colony represented a dependent economic system which did not have any autonomy. He states: “the Colony was integrated to the European economies from which it was dependent. Therefore, it was not an autonomous system but a simple extension of bigger ones”

Following the Marxist theory, Novais (1979) sought to go deeper into the “meaning of colonization” thesis proposed by Prado Jr. (1981), contextualizing the Brazilian colonial structure in a wider view of the primitive European capital accumulation and integrating these regions physically. This way, Novais (1979) attributes the explanation for slavery to the necessity of accumulation of capital in the colony. Thus, Novais (1979) justifies this option for slave labor, an option chosen later when compared with the world scenario.

However, according to the Marxist theory (MARX, 1984a), it would be unlikely to consider capital as the subject inside the social economic system at the time, as for that it would be necessary the existence of wage labor. For Marx (1984b), the capital as head of a production mode only exists effectively in its industrial form and this can only happen after the primitive accumulation of capital. In that way, once the capital is considered independently of the wage labor and the industry, what would be the subject that generates the process of primitive accumulation of capital? i.e., what would be the main production mode? And besides, how would slavery fit in this process?

Facing the challenge of defining the presented relations in Marxist dialectic logic, Ciro Cardoso defined the Colonial Slavery Production Mode (CARDOSO, 1988). In his explanation, the reproduction of the slave labor occurred outside the production mode; though the internal production was consumed in the European market, the later was also outside the production mode. Following this line of thought, Gorender (1980, p. 56) recognizes the necessity to consider the metropolis’ external market to explain the Colonial Slavery Production Mode: “The Marxist theory of the reproduction of capital does not require a necessary connection between capitalism and non-

capitalist production modes”. Concerning the colonial slavery, however, “the non-slavery external market is a necessary condition of the production mode”.

Thus, it is possible to say that colonization, as well as slavery, could be seen as a part of the historical process, even as a part of genesis of capitalism as a production mode. According to this line of thought, some authors (CASTRO, 1980), highlighted slavery as a crucial aspect to understand the colonial system.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that, considering the presence of slavery and feudal aspects in the genesis of capitalism in the Brazilian colonial society, the search for “general rules” of capitalism, as suggested by Marx in his *Capital*, would not be possible. As Teixeira states (2011, p. 560):

[...] It is only in capitalism that we have a real autonomy of the “economic” sphere from the social life in the face of every other spheres; it is only in capitalism that the social relationships among men are presented as they were natural and thus likely to be studied by a science that searches for general rules and regularities. It is only in this society that the historical materialism could be rigorously applied.

Another example, concerning Feudalism, is when Castro (1980, p. 84) states that the feudal system, which would be the basis for the colonial production mode, was not based exclusively on the economic aspect:

What should be highlighted is that Feudalism has its basis on a historical substance – a chemical blending between the economic and political aspects – which did not exist in Capitalism. In this context, there is no room for discussing the relative weight of the economic aspect, which simply does not exist as such. Nor there is any point in trying to establish an economic law that rules the movement of this society. In other words, this social regime and its evolution are rigorously untreatable by the political economy and it is not possible to treat it as Marx did, concerning capitalism.

In the view of the considerations set out above, it shall be taken into account that the colonial structure was not modeled just by economic structures from which a social structure developed. The colonial structure was due to the production of goods and also to the use of slave labor, which is an element that does not fit in the capitalist production. In this way, the theoretical approach of the social economic colonial system should refer to the production of goods in the

capitalist economy as well as the political and social approach of the class struggle connected to slavery.

Nonetheless, Teixeira (2011) seeks to demonstrate that there is no combination between the non-capitalist character of capital accumulation in the colonies with the presence of slavery, given that in the first section of *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1894a), Marx states the laws of simple circulation, in which the goods are exchanged for something equivalent, i.e., for other goods of the same value. Thus, if one considers the model of slavery adopted, the accumulation of capital in the colony would not be capitalist, but pre-capitalist, as it is based on the exchange of non-equivalent goods.

According to Ferlini (2003), the manufacturing organization of the colonial mills shows that its mercantile determination and the conditions that made possible the agglomeration of workers in a situation in which they had to cooperate in order to produce sugar refer to the modern era's need to accumulate. The specific form of increase of the production by cooperation is on the genesis of the capital as a method applied "to increase the productive power of the labor force to optimize the profits". Marx (1984c) marked that even though the simple cooperation was present in many phases of the capitalist production mode development, it is the "the predominant form in the branches of production in which the capital operates to a large extent and no important role is played by division of labor or machinery".

A close Reading of *Capital* (MARX, 1894a) offers a clue in its distinction between the two modes of production, either pre-capitalist or capitalist, and clarifies that beyond the formal differences, class societies have a common feature in which their whole structure is based: the production as a coercive apparatus. From this point of view, it is possible to find elements that are similar to the modes of production being analyzed: the use of coercion present in Feudalism, in slavery and in Capitalism.

Moreover, if capitalism is considered the predominant mode of production, the feudal modes of production in the structures presented could not be mere remnants, for the colonial non-capitalist

forms could be essential to the understanding of the colonial economy as well as its autonomy before the external fluctuations — that modifies the search for the predominant mode of production.

On the other hand, Castro (1980) highlights the historical materialism limits when understanding the colonial economy, because, according to his ideas, it is necessary to recognize the role of slaves in economy and society. Therefore, the feudal system, whether archaic or feudal, firstly described, would explain only the colonial system implementation, but the subsequent development of this system would bring particular internal dynamics based on capitalism. However, according to Castro's view (1980), these elements would co-exist, from which Brazilian society would emerge. According to this view, the feudal or archaic mode would be rooted in a particular type of capitalist development.

This view reinforces the need for comprehension of the colonial society from other, not purely economical points of view. This is also reinforced by the characteristic concentration of power, arising from the possession of property, land and slaves, which take the role of production relations.

However, the economical activities in the colonial society, regardless of social organization forms they presented, were invariably subjected to the form of capital. To contextualize the form of capital, according to the categories put forward by Marx (1984b) (commerce, usury and industrial), Pires & Costa (2000) suggest a new form of capital, which they define as slave-mercantile capital. This form of capital can be defined, as in industrial capital, as a form of production and extraction and surplus accumulation; however, the production mode would be slavery instead of paid labor, which is a characteristic of capitalism.

Despite the diverse methodological approaches of the Marxist work, with different conclusions on the modes of productions in the colonial period, Pires & Costa (2000) suggest a view which seems more illustrative and which remains faithful to what history shows us. It is based on a kind of juxtaposition or combination of elements from different societies, that is, from capitalism, feudalism and slavery.

On the same line of thought, Pires & Costa (2000, p. 90) conclude that:

- 1) Localized slavery is not incompatible with the capitalist mode of production, but, with its development and, therefore, irreversibly bound to disappear;
- 2) We are dealing with goods-producing (purely industrial) slavery which depends on the world markets to which it owes its existence;
- 3) Slave-holders are capitalists, that is to say, we add, personify the slave-mercantile capital.

Thus, as suggested by Castro (1980), it is possible to define the colonial production model as slave-mercantile one, which would gather elements from these three forms of production. Teixeira (2011) also consider this the most suitable category to justify the combination of commercial capitalism and the other internal forms of accumulation in the colonial period without disregarding the social aspects arising from slavery.

From this conclusion, the methodological view adopted, which would be more closely tied to the Marxist dialectics, preserves historicism and positivism, although in a dialectical and materialistic fashion. According to Teixeira (2011, p. 582):

Besides being dialectical, it is materialistic, for the position of the concept is above all the effective position of the thing, i.e., the abstraction comes about previously in the materiality of social life and is later apprehended by the subject of knowledge. The concept, then, is not a mere subjectivity, not only an abstract universal, but a concrete universal, which, as such, denies itself in particularity. The adequacy of the concepts of Political Economics is then assured by the object itself: due to the fact that the capital is the historical subject of the process and grants "meaning" to the historical movement, the object is seen as exterior to the subject of knowledge and is then likely to be studied as a thing, not in the positivist sense, but as a social thing.

This means that if the capital is considered as the subject that drove the process of formation of the Brazilian colonial society, even if it was in the form of slave-mercantile capital, as defined by Pires & Costa (2000), besides that, the capital is also the result and subsequent phase of this process. Also, the capital is the cause of this process, since the "colonization sense" by Prado Jr. (1984) attributes to it the colonial mode of production to the supply of the European cities.

These considerations allow us to base an investigation and understanding of different periods of our history. These reflections will also help to think of the social economic context of the colonial period as a form under which capitalism developed in the formation of the fringes of our capitalist system.

3 – THE GENESIS OF THE NORTHEAST AS A PERIPHERY

Considering that Pires & Costa (2000)'s conclusions have to do especially with the colonial period, when the sugar mills prevailed, I will focus on them in an attempt to outline the influence of the production modes of that time in the context of social economic structure of the Northeastern Zona da Mata.

Therefore, it is essential to quote Gilberto Freyre, who investigated the formation of Brazilian society under a regime of "patriarchal economy" in a "sugar production colony" installed at first in the humid land strip of Northeast Brazil:

For four centuries, the Northeastern massapé soil has engulfed the sugar tips, the men's feet, the cow's hooves, the slow wheels of the carriages, the roots of mango and jackfruit trees, the foundations of houses and churches, allowing to be penetrated, as no other kind of soil in the tropics, by the agrarian culture of the Portuguese. (FREYRE, 2004, p. 46).

It is impossible to move monoculture away from any social and even psychological interpretation effort made in the agrarian Northeast. Monoculture, slavery, land possession — but especially monoculture — have opened the deepest wounds in the landscape and people's lives and character. (FREYRE, 2004, p. 38).

The colonial features shown by Freyre (2004), found in the sugar mills, were common in several American regions, although never as intense and long-lasting as in Northeastern Brazil. As Freyre (2004, 9. 42) says, in the beginning of his work entitled *Nordeste*: "These pages, therefore, register, a view of the Northeastern landscape, life and man which sugar monoculture has most deeply wounded."

Colonial sugar production demanded specific work forms and land possession settings, as well as power relations which keep their power until today, especially in the Northeastern Zona da Mata society, where sugar cane mills still retain several of their original aspects.

It was in the sugar mills, which concentrated land and power, that the productive process started the decomposition of several jobs related to sugar production into sequential activities, forming partial workers grouped and combined in one mechanism. And if the connection between their functions and the units which formed this productive organism was out of them, it was not alienation to capital which caused forced labor, but the utmost form of enforcement: slavery.

Ferline (2003) noticed that the need to provide the market with a larger amount of goods by a given deadline brought about the concentration of worker at the same place, performing simultaneous activities, which were apart from each other, isolated, juxtaposed in space, entrusted to different craftsman and performed at the same time by cooperative workers.

Thus, the work remained as the production basis, and technical transformations were slowly introduced in the critical sectors. In terms of machinery, there were only a few mechanical operations in the sugar mills, and they were basically in only two sectors: milling and driving force. Together in the mill, they made the millstone a machine whose motor, transmission and operating machine comprised mechanical work of men and beasts. Practically there was no human knowledge anymore, only mechanical activities for generating driving force to mill the cane, which turned production into exploitation, a typical concern of the Industrial Revolution. Thus, the factory production in labor organization was started in the sugar mill, which justified the need for foremen, harmonizing the individual procedures within the productive organism of the mill. Social unskilled labor in the slave society is at the root of deterioration of sugar mill jobs. In addition, labor subdivision, with duties being performed by increasingly unskilled workers, decreased craftsmen's requirements, simplifying their functions. That brought about a drop in the value of this labor force. In the colonial slave society, this had an even more dramatic effect: with no possibility of social ascension, nothing was left to free men. As a result, the colonial dynamics, besides intensifying primitive capital accumulation, alienated craftsmanship by subjecting worker to mercantile capital, disassociating them from the essential society processes.

Thus, a context was created in which sugar mills, monopolizing modes of production, accumulating coercive power, feudal and slavery characteristics, in the genesis of merchant capitalism, were the only space for the performance of labor, whether compulsory or not. Even so, its mode of production only allowed labor which declined men's knowledge and intellectual ability.

Center-South Brazil, represented especially by the economies of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais, went through other economic cycles, which broke with the strong ties with latifundia, monoculture and slavery which determined the *modus vivendi* associated with the sugar cane mills.

From then on, Center-South turned into the dynamic core of the economy, supported specially by coffee production, which was to become the main Brazilian export. From then on, the economic Center started to relocate from the exportation sugar market to the more domestic capital accumulation, despite the fact that Brazilian economy kept on having its dynamic element in the foreign market.

The economic and political power of Center-South Brazil was boosted by agricultural exports, especially coffee, thus creating a suitable environment to industrial development. However, according to Viana & Fortunato (2008), Northeastern Brazil did not have a financial system like that of Center-South, which started to concentrate their efforts in industrializing their economy.

The dominant modes of production in the Northeast, controlled by the sugar mills, still regulated labor relations, which could somehow be defined as pre-capitalist, with temporary, semi-compulsory, menial work force, a nevertheless powerful land, income and power concentration. According to Furtado (1961, p. 189), it consists in a system which is "much more complex than that of simple co-existence of foreign companies and the remainder of a pre-capitalist type."

This was the moment when disparities were created between the development of Northeastern and Center-South Brazil. And the features inherent to each region's history, especially for the highly specialized living conditions in the Northeast, were critical to the

aggravation of regional disparities. With strengthened asymmetries, Center-South became a central region, while the Northeast assumed a peripheral role in the national capitalist system. Since the capitalist market had no condition of reversing this situation, as this mode of production maintains non-capitalist elements, we can infer that development would hardly come through the market. With reduced state intervention, as it had been through huge changes, the disparity only intensified between these regions.

Social economic — and, as a result, environmental — situation experience by Northeastern Brazil seems to relate to the combination of the mentioned features, as confirmed by Viana & Fortunato (2008):

Concentration of income from the exports sector, basically from sugar; coexistence of a backward subsistence sector, with archaic production techniques, and a primary exporting sector, with greater productivity.

These are contemporary modes of production, despite having its genesis in the colonial social and economic structure, with feudal, slavery and merchant-capitalist traces.

4 – HISTORY AND TENDENCIES: PAST AND FUTURE

From an environment conservationist standpoint, some authors (MILLER, 2007; CASTRO, 2002) point to different understandings of the causes and consequences of the devastation of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest, especially in the Northeast.

Income, land and power concentration, mechanically marginalized labor are driving forces that structure the Northeastern society in a very peculiar way, the same that probably caused a specific man-nature relationship, creating the environmental context known today. Marx had already pointed out that, in latifundia systems, “any relationship with nature was denied to the poor”, when their rights were not considered and landowners accumulated the power of turning into “value” all that was previously deemed as public and shared (FOSTER, 2005). Thus, aristocracy and the people, represented by ancient or present sugar mill owners and slaves or paid workers, constituted the latifundia-based company of the mill, affecting and

deeply changing the regional environment (FREYRE, 2004). In some parts of Nordeste, Freyre (1985, p. 35) described his view of the sugar mill composition, which reveals a little of the man-nature relationship which prevailed in these places:

The rich monoculture farmer of the Northeast turned the river waters into a WC. A WC with the smelly wastewater from their mills. And their smelly wastewater kills the fish. Poison the fish. Dirty the river banks. The wastewater discarded by sugar mills every year into the rivers sacrifice a substantial part of fish production in the Northeast. [...] There is barely one river in the sugar cane plantations in the Northeast that the well-to-do have not degraded into a WC. Houses do not face the rivers anymore: They turn their backs in disgust. [...] Rivers are not respected by sugar producers anymore, who used to wash the dishes with their waters, and never humiliated them, always honored them instead (FREYRE, 1985, p.35).

The enforcement of modes of production which prevailed during the colonization and sugar mill operation, providing mill owners with the appropriation of nature in favor of economic development, according Freyre (1985, p.35), deteriorated the “cultural, political and aesthetic traditions” of the Northeastern civilization. In this process began the denial of nature and break-up of the traditional relationship between Northeastern men and their environment, the Zona da Mata.

With the sugar mill outbreak, capitalism, in its evolution, redefined the old labor and housing relations, devastating the universe of small producers and turning most of them into proletarians. Such facts have always been faithfully reflected in the organization of the Northeastern man’s habitat and his man-nature relationship. According to Grabois (1999), this social occupation of the habitat, including the urban centers in the Northeast, must presently be seen as a “labor force repository or vivarium”, where proletarians who basically work in rural areas live.

In this context, with no worker’s demands or claims to improve their “tragic” living conditions, according to Castro (1969), the feeling of frustration and disappointment have only intensified “man’s and land’s suffering” (CASTRO, 1969, p. 26). The degradation caused by the sugar monoculture went beyond the social aspect, also impacting soil and water quality and decimating the forests. In the Northeast, the passivity towards this

aristocratic appropriation seems to have exerted an even more intense, devastating and lasting effect.

With occupation, modes of production and social economic trajectories so diverse between the Northeast and Center-South, as studied throughout this paper, it is possible to identify clues to the conformation of the space and of the man-nature relationships which have shaped the Northeastern man's environmental practices and still persist in the region. Reflecting this, geographical data on the Atlantic Forest indicate that the biome, as a whole, still has about 8% of its original cover. However, this rate is even smaller in Northeastern states, dropping to 3% in Alagoas and 5% in Pernambuco (SOS MATA ATLÂNTICA, 2007).

We can notice that, without governmental support through public policies, environmental degradation will intensify, as well as social problems. With different features from the Atlantic Forest in the South and Southeast of Brazil when it comes to occupation and soil use patterns, the Northeastern Atlantic Forest requires particular conservation paradigms, conceived with the knowledge of the human and historical nature of land occupation and use in the region.

5 – CONCLUSION

We believe that it is necessary to go back to the past in order to rebuild a territory in the future which can replace the discomfort with the present model in the Northeast, whether in its social or environmental context, both of which are tightly related to each other.

Denying the present and going back to the historical roots can help us think of public policies or intervention forms, as well as anticipating and building a sustainable future in the Northeastern Atlantic Forest.

The readings which allowed us to build the content of this essay indicate the necessity of analysis, through the lenses of historical materialism, which takes into consideration the knowledge about the Northeast and its traditions, the relationship between man and the Atlantic Forest and the historical recollection of modes of production and social relations which could explain the present and future context of the region. From then on, it will be possible to create public

policies or guidelines for environmental conservation or regional development which can be truly based on the knowledge of the Northeastern society.

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