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# The Social Production of Hunger and the Brazilian Case

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**Abstract**
This study explores the social production of hunger, highlighting the contrast between technological advances and the persistence of the problem on a global scale. Despite significant progress in agricultural technologies during the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, as well as advances in transportation systems and international trade that have facilitated food supply in areas with seasonal challenges, hunger continues to exist at various levels in all regions of the world. This underscores that the issue is primarily political and social, rather than technical or economic. In 2021, between 702 and 828 million people, about 9% of the world population, faced hunger. In Brazil, one of the world's largest agricultural producers, hunger is a historical and ongoing challenge. Despite a record harvest in 2022, with a production of 263.8 million tons on 90.4 million hectares, generating a production value of R$ 830.1 billion, 70.3 million people still suffered from moderate food insecurity, and 21.1 million faced severe food insecurity, a situation that includes experiencing hunger.

**Keywords**: Hunger; Inequalities; World; Brazil.

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**The Social Production of Hunger**

Hunger is a problem as old as humanity itself. In the early days of Homo sapiens, hunter-gatherer populations lived in a continuous cycle of seeking food through hunting, fishing, and plant gathering. At that time, the world was a " communal property", and the presence of hunger was directly linked to environmental adversities, such as the seasons and the availability of natural resources in inhabited areas, rather than to ownership as it is today. Additionally, without modern preservation techniques, storing enough food to sustain the population during difficult periods was a challenge (Abreu et al., 2001).

With the Neolithic Revolution, about 10,000 years ago, the domestication of plants and animals marked the beginning of agriculture (Scanes, 2018). This development allowed human communities to settle in fixed locations and generate a more stable and predictable food supply. The ability to cultivate food over the centuries enabled population growth and the development of complex civilizations. However, dependence on favorable climatic conditions and susceptibility to pests and diseases meant that hunger was still a constant threat, often exacerbated by wars, conflicts, and inefficiencies in food distribution systems.

Regarding the relationship between war and hunger, Porto Gonçalves (2004, p. 8) observes that:

> europeans know what it meant not only to see war in their daily lives but also the significance of food insecurity following the destruction of communication and transportation networks and the fact that most able-bodied men were drafted into the war. The specter of hunger haunted the world in a context marked by strong ideological polarization, which made class struggles particularly explosive during the period.

For Mota and Lara (2022), the transition from the feudal system to the capitalist one presents a significant paradox related to hunger. The transformation of labor and the creation of a “free proletariat”, yet dependent on the labor market for survival, elucidate one of the fundamental mechanisms behind the perpetuation of hunger in capitalist societies. According to Marx (2011), by being stripped of their traditional means of subsistence and thrown into the labor market, workers find themselves in a vulnerable position. The constant threat of unemployment and the pressure from a surplus population that drives down wages exacerbate food insecurity. Thus, hunger is not just a matter of scarcity but also a direct consequence of how capitalism organizes the production and distribution of resources, prioritizing the accumulation of capital over the guarantee of basic needs such as food (Mota; Lara, 2022). This

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dynamic of impoverishment and expropriation creates a vicious cycle where the lack of adequate access to food is both a cause and an effect of poverty and economic marginalization.

Over the past centuries, especially in the decades following World War II (1945), agricultural technologies have advanced substantially. Simultaneously, the transportation system and international trade have enabled the supply of food to regions with seasonal issues, significantly contributing to the reduction of hunger episodes (Jones; Ejeta, 2015). However, hunger still persists - to varying degrees - in all regions of the globe, highlighting that it is now much more of a socio-political issue than a technical-economic one.

A study conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in partnership with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed that global food production is sufficient to meet the demand of all its inhabitants (OECD/FAO, 2016). Nevertheless, hunger remains a reality, with one person dying of hunger in the world every four seconds, according to data from Oxfam International (2022).

Data from the report "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World" (SOFI, 2022), organized by a group of international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO), reveal that in 2021, between 702 and 828 million people, approximately 9% of the world's population, faced hunger. In the same period, it is estimated that 2.3 billion individuals, or 29.3% of the global population, suffered from moderate or severe food insecurity. Additionally, acute malnutrition affected about 45 million children under the age of five, increasing the risk of child mortality up to twelve times. The chronic shortage of essential nutrients impaired the growth and development of 149 million children in this age group (SOFI, 2022).

Proportionally, the most affected regions are the African continent, where one in five individuals (20.2% of the population) faced hunger in 2021, a situation exacerbated by a historical set of socioeconomic issues (Stacciarini et al., 2022). Asia follows, with 425 million people experiencing hunger, representing 9.1% of the regional population, while in Latin America and the Caribbean, 56.5 million people, or 8.6% of the population, faced this condition. Oceania and North America and Europe presented rates of 5.8% and 2.5%, respectively. Although Asia has the largest absolute number of people facing hunger, it is a phenomenon that persists globally (SOFI, 2022).

It is worth noting that hunger is more prevalent in tropical regions than in temperate ones, despite higher productivity in the former. This fact highlights that hunger is much more linked to socioeconomic issues than to environmental ones. In this context, Porto Gonçalves (2004, p.2) reinforces:

> tropical regions, which hold the highest biological productivity on the planet, are not the ones with the highest economic productivity. However, this higher economic productivity in temperate regions comes at a high ecological, cultural, and political cost to the entire world. The extreme specialization, both in terms of monoculture and the dependence on a few cultivars, makes these agroecosystems vulnerable not only to pests and climatic variations but also makes them extremely dependent on external inputs, such as fertilizers, pesticides, and energy from other regions.

Economic inequality represents one of the fundamental barriers to universal access to food, despite global production being sufficient to nourish the world's population (Mota; Lara, 2022). In many developing nations, income disparities are particularly severe, creating a chasm between those with excess and those lacking essentials.

Besides economic barriers, the problem of food logistics and distribution also plays a crucial role in perpetuating hunger. In remote and rural regions, where infrastructure is often poor or nonexistent, transporting food from production areas to consumption centers is a significant challenge (Zhang et al., 2020). This situation is exacerbated by a lack of investment in roads, storage, and preservation technologies, leading to substantial food waste. Perishable products, in particular, are susceptible to spoiling before reaching markets, representing not only an economic loss but also a moral failure to meet the needs of those in need.

Political issues add another layer of complexity to the global hunger problem. Armed conflicts, political instability, and poor governance can devastate a nation's ability to produce and distribute food efficiently (Goodhand, 2001; Hassen; Bilali, 2022). Additionally, economic sanctions or embargoes can further exacerbate the situation, isolating entire countries from vital trade networks and external resources. In this context, food insecurity becomes not only a matter of availability but also of access, requiring solutions that go beyond increasing production to include political stability and international cooperation.

On the other hand, Ribeiro Junior (2021, p. 29) highlights that:

> It is undeniable that these processes are responsible for producing hunger crises; however, they are insufficient to explain hunger in all its forms and extent. Moreover, contrary to what the reports and policies of these organizations want us to believe, wars, various forms of environmental degradation, and economic crises are not deviations within the historical development of capitalism; on the contrary, they are intrinsic to it.

The author also observes that hunger and the risk of starvation have been effectively used as strategies to drive the reproduction of the capitalist system, motivating workers to engage in the labor market without the need for direct coercion. However, it is crucial to highlight that even workers who manage to employ their labor are not immune to the threat of hunger. Depending on the level of exploitation in the workplace (Santos, 2021), the remuneration can be so low that it does not meet basic needs such as shelter and food (Ribeiro Junior, 2021, p. 31-32).

**Food Production, Inequality, and Hunger in Brazil**

The issue of hunger in Brazil represents a complex and challenging reality, influenced by a series of socioeconomic and political factors that interact in intricate ways. Stacciarini (2016) reveals that the country was historically structured - since Portuguese colonization - to occupy and exploit its territory through primary activities, such as agriculture aimed at exportation. This model was based on colonialism, the use of slave labor, and the monoculture of sugarcane, which were the pillars of colonial Brazil.

Since the early days of colonization, hunger was a constant. In the context of sugarcane monoculture production, the focus was on the "reproduction of capital". Polyculture, practiced on a smaller scale, aimed to maintain the labor force. It is important to note that only enough food was provided to ensure that the slaves did not lose the energy necessary (Betto, 1997) for the extremely arduous, prolonged, and inhumane work.

After more than three centuries of slavery and the perpetuation of misery for a significant portion of society, the Land Law of 1850 was instituted in the same year as the Abolition of the Slave Trade. This legislation aimed to maintain the same logic of exploitation and production of misery. Until 1850, land was "relatively free", but from then on, slaves in the "process of liberation" were deprived of access to land and income, now through legislation (Stacciarini, 2016). Thus, the situation of hunger was perpetuated, which was exhaustively studied and reported by the northeastern physician Josué de Castro, who was nominated three times for the Nobel Prize during the 20th century (CEPJC, 2024).

> And so it was, through the history of men and the course of the river, that I learned hunger was not an exclusive product of the mangroves. The mangroves merely attracted the starving men from the Northeast: those from the drought zone and those from the sugarcane zone. All drawn to this promised land, coming to nest in that mud nest built by both and where the

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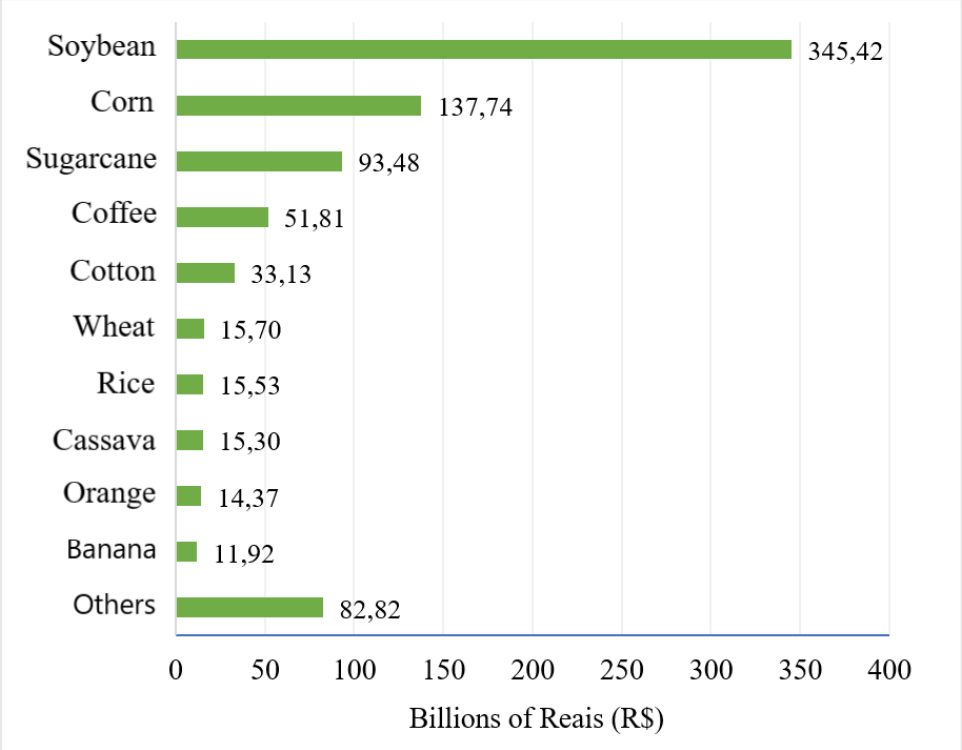
> marvelous crab cycle sprouts. And when I grew up and traveled the world, seeing other landscapes, I realized with new surprise that what I thought was a local phenomenon was a universal drama. That the human landscape of the mangroves was reproduced worldwide. That those characters from the mud of Recife were identical to characters in countless other areas of the world plagued by hunger. That the human mud of Recife, which I had known in my childhood, continues to stain the entire landscape of our planet to this day with black blotches of misery: the dark demographic spots of the geography of hunger (Castro, 1967, preface).

Over the last decades of the 20th century, Brazil consolidated itself as one of the largest economies in the world and one of the main global agricultural producers (WB, 2024). In 2022, the country recorded a record harvest, achieving an agricultural production of 263.8 million tons. Additionally, it established a new milestone in production value, reaching R$ 830.1 billion (Moura, 2023), derived from 90.4 million hectares cultivated (Figure 1). Besides agricultural production, Brazil also registered significant livestock production in 2022: 1.58 billion poultry, 234.35 million cattle, 44.39 million pigs, 21.51 million sheep, 14.02 million quails, and 12.36 million goats (PPM, 2024).

**Figure 1**: Main agricultural products of Brazil by production value (2022).




**Source**: PAM (2023). The authors.

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Despite Brazil having consolidated itself in recent decades as one of the largest producers of agricultural and livestock products in the world (Moura, 2023), the country still faces a significant discrepancy in the distribution of food and resources. This situation results in a high rate of food insecurity among its population. A study published by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) indicates that in 2022, about 70.3 million people faced moderate food insecurity, characterized by difficulties in accessing adequate food. Furthermore, the report points out that 21.1 million Brazilians experienced severe food insecurity, a condition that includes facing hunger (MDS, 2023).

On this subject, Saes and Miranda (2023, n.p.) highlight that

> The evolution of food production over the past five years shows that the phenomenon of increasing hunger in Brazil does not seem to be primarily related to the issue of food supply [...]. In the years when hunger worsened, the production of staple foods remained stable or increased [...]. Additionally, it is observed that the primary food supply advanced even in regions where the percentage of hunger is higher. According to Conab data, from the 1999/2000 harvest to the 2021/2022 harvest, the average productivity in grain production increased by 208% in the Northeast region, while for Brazil as a whole, it was 66%.

Among the issues explaining this scenario, Soares (2021) argues that the Brazilian agribusiness sector is predominantly controlled by a small group of large multinationals. The sector is marked by a series of mergers among major companies, resulting in greater market concentration in the areas of seeds, pesticides, and land. For instance, corporations such as ADM, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus control about 70% of the production, sale, and transportation of agricultural products. Due to this structure, the agricultural sector primarily focuses on meeting the global demand for commodities, which currently have high prices, disregarding critical issues like hunger within the country.

Azevedo (2022) adds that due to their high market value, agricultural commodities have seen significant expansion. Simultaneously, family farming, responsible for producing food for direct consumption, is being supplanted by large estates and monoculture practices. This trend is evidenced by the increase in credit granted for commodity production, mainly used as raw materials or inputs, in contrast to basic food products.

Furthermore, Stacciarini and Pereira (2018) and Stacciarini (2019) have already demonstrated how the economic growth derived from agribusiness often lacks the power to transform the social and economic conditions of a large part of the population in the

municipalities where it develops, frequently resulting in scenarios of specialization, vulnerability, and dependence (Stacciarini, 2023a).

Abbade (2021) highlights the significant loss of food in Brazil due to issues with logistical infrastructure and transportation and storage methods. According to the author, the annual average loss of corn is approximately 8.3 million tons, and for rice, 1.2 million tons, volumes that could feed millions of people.

Additionally, it is important to consider the paradoxical relationship between hunger and obesity in many underdeveloped countries, such as Brazil. Socioeconomic inequality often results in disparities in access to nutritious food, leading not only to hunger but also to malnutrition and obesity, especially among the poorer classes (Ferreira et al., 2010). This lack of adequate access impairs physical and mental health, increasing the incidence of diseases and medication consumption (Stacciarini, 2023b), and reducing individuals' capacity for work, learning, and leisure (Stacciarini et al., 2020; Santos, 2021).

## Final Considerations

This work explored the social production of hunger, highlighting its presence throughout various historical moments. Human dependence on favorable climatic conditions, as well as vulnerability to pests and diseases, has kept hunger as a constant threat, often exacerbated by wars, conflicts, and failures in food distribution systems. However, despite significant advances in agricultural technologies and transportation systems since the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, hunger persists globally, revealing itself as more of a political-social challenge than a technical-economic one.

In 2021, it is estimated that between 702 and 828 million people, about 9% of the world's population, faced hunger, with the African and Asian continents accounting for the greatest challenges. In the same year, approximately 2.3 billion people, or 29.3% of the global population, suffered from moderate to severe food insecurity. Additionally, acute malnutrition impacted about 45 million children under the age of five, substantially increasing the risk of child mortality.

In Brazil, one of the world's leading food producers, hunger is a chronic and persistent problem. Despite a record harvest in 2022, with 263.8 million tons produced on 90.4 million hectares and a production value of R$ 830.1 billion, there are still 70.3 million Brazilians facing

moderate food insecurity and 21.1 million experiencing severe food insecurity, a situation that includes periods of hunger.

Among the explanations for this issue, authors have pointed out that Brazilian agribusiness, predominantly controlled by a small group of multinationals, focuses more on meeting the global demand for commodities than on mitigating local hunger. This profit-maximizing model consumes high financial incentives and benefits only a portion of the population, resulting in specialization, vulnerability, and economic dependence. Furthermore, the country faces high levels of food waste due to failures in logistics and transportation and storage methods. There is also a paradox between hunger and obesity, exacerbated by socioeconomic inequality, which leads to disparities in access to nutritious food and results in malnutrition and obesity, especially among the poorest segments of society.

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