

THE RURAL ZONE BEYOND PAPER: MATERIALIZING AGRICULTURAL SPACE IN RIO DE JANEIRO (1917-1935)

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Abstract

Only in the 1920s would the then-delimited rural zone of Rio de Janeiro incorporate concerns about fostering a specific set of agricultural activities and infrastructure. That was when the idea that Rio's rural hinterland could become a sort of 'breadbasket' for the Federal District gained momentum. The agricultural rural zone emerged through zoning implementation as a tool of government authority to regulate land-use. The rural zone was no longer a static space, merely subject to taxation, but rather a dynamic territory interpreted and understood in conjunction with its prevailing social relations, not as something separate. This article aims to reconstruct this process between 1917 and 1935.

Keywords: Rio de Janeiro, Rural area, Supply, Urban agriculture, Local history.

INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century, a prevalent debate emerged over modernizing the then-capital of the Republic — Rio de Janeiro. An unexpected outcome of such debates was the solidification of the idea that the city should be divided into three districts: urban, suburban, and rural. One reason for this approach was that dividing the territory would help improve public health by removing unhygienic land uses and activities, such as animal husbandry and crop farming, from the urban core, where most of the population lived. The notion that rural areas, far from urban centers, should accommodate such uses was gaining popularity. However, such a perspective did not align with the interests of rural Rio's inhabitants.

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The debate over what role this area should play in the city's development sparked significant dispute and grew in intensity from the second decade of the 20th century onwards. The issue transcended mere technical considerations, thereby representing a complex socio-political challenge. It entailed engaging in profoundly political matters that implicated competing interests and ambitions. This manifested itself in the city's social geography through district boundaries, political and electoral influence zones, and fiscal collection patterns. This study analyzes the competing proposals for establishing a rural zone in the former Federal District, examining the distinct functions and envisioned potentials assigned to this territory by the various social actors engaged in the debate.

In a 1930 report to the Ministry of Agriculture concerning agricultural improvement in the Federal District between 1927 and 1928, the author expressed concern about the 'state of abandonment' of extensive cultivable lands, noting their potential contribution to Rio's food supply if properly exploited. Expanding on this observation, the author further notes that these rural lands, while possessing, had deteriorated into swamp-like states requiring reclamation (Pechman, 1985, p. 74). Consequently, the report showed the need for production incentives, positioning rural development as key to addressing urban affordability crisis through enhanced food supply systems. It is plausible that Ministry of Agriculture officials approached the issue of fallow lands through a broader lens than purely agricultural productivity. The available evidence suggests their concerns may have encompassed broader economic and territorial governance considerations. The abandoned land, in this sense, harmed both agriculture and Rio's public health. Regional sanitation was important then in two ways: it was a means to restore agricultural lands and eliminate the various outbreaks of disease that had settled there.

Figure 1

1911 map of the Federal District.



Source: Brazil's National Library Digital Archives Collection

The need to upgrade rural parishes/districts in Rio's municipality entered urban political debates as early as the 1900s. Advocates highlighted the region's needs by raising these issues and pushing for official recognition of its systemic problems. However, contemporary appeals for agricultural area improvements consistently prioritized combating insalubrity,² a pervasive problem in these peripheral zones. Intendant Fonseca Telles notably observed in press commentaries about the "suburban area" — "where the working class predominantly resided and the District's crops were cultivated" — that burial taxes ranked among its largest revenue sources. To this end, Telles proposed inviting the mayor to tour the region, asserting: "This visit would significantly benefit the area. Upon witnessing conditions firsthand, the Chief Executive would undoubtedly take prompt action—if not to beautify these areas, then at least to make them more traversable and salubrious" (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, September 22, 1909, pp. 176-177).

² Contrary to the current meaning of the word salubrity, which is associated with degrading or precarious living conditions, at the turn of the 19th century, the term was linked to the impossibility of living in certain areas due to the existence of disease outbreaks.

While widespread insalubrity was acknowledged as requiring government intervention, certain actors simultaneously perceived it as an opportunity to invest capital in an extensive area of the Federal District. The region's economic potential was heightened by evident demographic growth, making it particularly attractive to capital. Numerous private actors strategically framed sanitation infrastructure and agricultural development as mutually reinforcing initiatives to enhance the value of the Republic's agricultural region. This zone notably included the rapidly urbanizing 'suburban area'.³

Amadeu Fajardo, a civil engineer attuned to these dynamics, proposed a project to the municipal legislature in October 1911 for the "use and enjoyment of an electric tramway" that would "start from Santa Thereza hill, near the aqueduct, and end in Sepetiba, with" lateral, electrified, rail-less roads connecting the districts of Jacarepaguá, Guaratiba, Campo Grande, and Santa Cruz to the main line—along with associated privileges for this undertaking". The project's primary justification—and appeal—lay in its dual promise: simultaneous sanitation of insalubrious lands and their conversion into agricultural frontiers, explicitly framed as a public good. This transformation would occur at one go, addressing both public health crises and food production needs through integrated infrastructure:

The project targeted as well a neglected Atlantic corridor—from Gávea Peak to Sepetiba—where insalubrity and underpopulation had long hindered agricultural development. Considering also that the projected undertaking would not only complete the sanitation of a large area of marshy land but also determine the settlement of the extensive area served by the electric tramway and electrified side roads [...] transforming it into a zone enriched by small-scale farming and livestock capable of supplying urban markets through efficient transport (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, June 20, 1911, pp. 176-157).

Beyond capitalist interests, numerous legislators also pushed for regional improvements, grounding their appeals in the urgent need to combat insalubrity. Fonseca Telles, for instance, demanded

³ In Brazil, *the suburbs* or *suburban areas* (subúrbio) typically refers to lower-income, often underserved peripheral neighborhoods of major cities, frequently associated with informal settlements, limited infrastructure, and socioeconomic marginalization, closer in meaning to "urban periphery" or "working-class outskirts". The Brazilian usage reflects historical urban development patterns, where the *subúrbio* emerged along railway lines and industrial zones, distinct from the planned, affluent suburbs of North America or Europe.

immediate intervention at the Jacarepaguá lagoon, where stagnant waters had created a severe paludism (malaria) hotspot (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, June 20, 1911, p. 401).

A few years later, the existence of unsanitary hotspots would once again be highlighted by Cesario de Mello,⁴ such as the Guandú River region, further stressing how the issue surrounding "the misery of forgotten regions, misery that depresses their development" impeded agricultural progress in an area widely regarded as naturally suited for farming:

By misery, the Speaker refers to that caused by the morbus which, in these impalescent regions, decimates their already scarce populations, while those drawn there by the promise of fertile soil endure all things through commendable effort and defiance.

It is urgent, indispensable, and imperative to combat without respite, in these promising areas of the District, the decimating and terrifying morbus: such as uncinariasis, leishmaniasis, paludism (malaria), and the epizootics ravaging livestock (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, July 2, 1917, p. 75).

The sanitation pressures in the region grew so pronounced that under Mayor Amaro Cavalcanti's administration, the City Council formally proposed legislation for the "sanitation of suburban and rural areas" to the municipal legislature. A central objective included "clearing and cleaning riverbeds and banks throughout the District, elevating watercourses, and leveling and draining adjacent lands to enable cultivation" (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, July 10, 1917, p. 228).

In Message No. 362 to the City Council, Mayor Amaro Cavalcanti outlined his strategy to transform the Federal District's rural zone into a major agricultural supplier—what he explicitly termed a "breadbasket" for the capital:

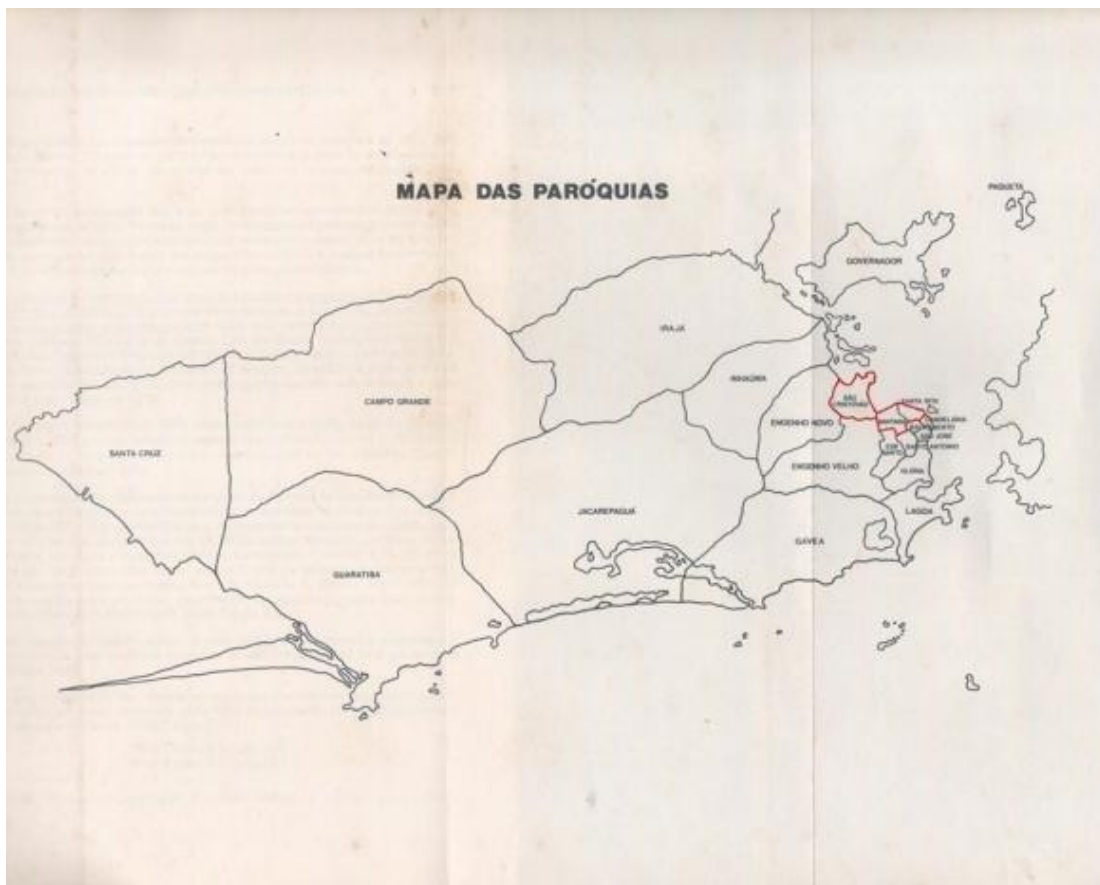
⁴ Cesário de Mello was a landowner and physician in the region, noted for his role as a political leader in the area. He was elected councilman twice (1924 and 1930) and senator for the Federal District in 1935.

To encourage, assist, and promote—without interruption—the development of agriculture in the Federal District must be recognized, by law, as one of the permanent obligations of the local government.

[...] This is not an undertaking to be accomplished all at once. No one expects to see, within just a year or two, the entire territory of the Federal District transformed into a granary of foodstuffs or into an orchard or garden yielding fruits and flowers of every kind. What is intended is to initiate, with faith and perseverance, the agricultural work of the District, sowing—where most appropriate—the good seed, so that from it may sprout select plants capable of bearing the finest fruits. Let us proceed gradually, yet with unwavering confidence in success, provided that the proper methods and tools are employed, and let us not abandon the endeavor midway through its course. If we act thus, within five or six years, the Federal District will have for its population an abundant, secure, and locally sourced food supply; its currently uncultivated lands will be greatly enhanced in value by the immense wealth they produce; and public finances, in turn, will see a progressive increase in revenue streams—streams that are now lacking and will continue to be so for as long as the fate of the District's own wealth remains neglected. (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, September 7, 1917, p. 217)

Figure 2

Map of parishes in the Federal District.



Source: LOBO, Eulália. *História do Rio de Janeiro: do Capital Comercial ao Capital Industrial e Financeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: IBMEC, 1978.

One of the obstacles to such a plan was the precarious state of agriculture in Rio itself, which, according to him, 'is meager and underdeveloped, lacking the means for its advancement.' This precariousness stemmed from the poor condition of roads in rural areas and the prevalence of unsanitary areas.

After considering that the City Government lacked the financial capacity to purchase 'large tracts of land to convert into agricultural settlements' (implying that this would have been the most advisable measure to implement), Amaro Cavalcanti proposed the following 'items for a program, albeit modest,' which would ensure 'profits and advantages' for Rio's sharecroppers:

1) A practical rural school [...] 2) Periodic agricultural workshops in various localities, where farmers would be instructed—in plain and clear language—on the best techniques and practices for diverse crops [...] 3) Small local markets [...] 4) Facilitated access to seeds, fertilizers, and machinery [...] 5) Monetary prizes (ranging from one to five contos de réis)⁵ for farmers who achieve the highest yields in specified crops [...] 6) Improvement or completion of roadworks for cart-accessible thoroughfares [...] 7) Revised transport tariffs [...] 8) Construction of a central marketplace [...] 9) Dredging of rivers—serving both as a sanitation measure and as a means to render adjacent lands suitable for farming [...] 10) Prompt drainage of coastal marshlands in Jacarepaguá, Guaratiba, and Irajá, as well as the swampy regions along the Mendanha's Rio da Prata and the Guandu do Sena [...] 11) A narrow-gauge railway, extending from Gávea through fertile coastal farmlands to Sepetiba [...] 12) Reduction of taxes or duties [...] 13) Standardized measures to streamline fruit exports [...] 14) Organized maritime or land transport to expedite the distribution of fish from coastal villages [...] 15) Land registry formalization for all Federal District properties. (**Annals of the Municipal Council**, 07/09/1917, pp. 218-220)

Amaro Cavalcanti would return to this issue nearly a year later, in June 1918, in a new message to the Municipal Council, addressing "agricultural development in the Federal District" with greater specificity. The then-mayor outlined several initiatives aimed at transforming the "modest suggestions" from the previous year into more effective measures to support municipal agricultural activities. One such initiative was the establishment of the Superintendencia dos Serviços Municipaes da Lavoura do Districto Federal (Superintendency of Municipal Agricultural Services for the Federal District) through Legislative

⁵ Contos de réis was the highest numerical unit of Brazil's first currency, the réis, used from the colonial period (1500s) until 1942.

Decree No. 1,183 of January 3, 1918. This agency, in addition to the superintendent, included four "instructor-agronomists". The primary function of this body was to provide agricultural guidance and advice to small farmers throughout "the entire rural zone of the Federal District". Initially, these instructors were assigned to four designated stations:

- Station No. 1 - Irajá, which covered Inhaúma, Engenho Novo, Meyer, and the Islands, with its headquarters at the "Demonstration Field" in Deodoro;
- Station No. 2 - Jacarepaguá, which included Tijuca and Gávea, based in Taquara;
- Station No. 3 - Campo Grande, which included part of Santa Cruz, headquartered in Campo Grande;
- Station No. 4 - Guaratiba, which encompassed another portion of Santa Cruz, based at the Sacco Farm.

Issues such as machine repairs, seed management, and problems like the 'anthill plague' ("The number of eradicated anthills is no longer small: it exceeds 400"), plant grafting, and animal training were some of the most commonly addressed topics by the instructors when assisting small-scale carioca⁶ farmers. However, the initiative faced significant operational challenges due to several compounding factors. Chief among these was the severely limited technical staff, with each agricultural station assigned just a single instructor. This meant a mere four instructors were responsible for servicing the entire rural zone of Rio, an area encompassing nearly two-thirds of the municipal territory. As Amaro Cavalcanti himself lamented: "The number of instructors is insufficient to properly address requests from various locations, often very distant". Another complaint concerned the limited supply of agricultural equipment (Annals of the Municipal Council, 18 de Junho de 1918, p. 26). The following excerpt provides a clear picture of the Agricultural Superintendence's operational challenges. The account reveals both functional aspects and grievances about inadequate working conditions:

⁶ Carioca (Portuguese: [kari'okɐ]) refers to a native or resident of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's coastal metropolis (e.g., "Carioca culture").

[...] unless by increasing the current number of instructors, it becomes necessary to provide them with a practical assistant of intermediate rank between the instructor and the laborer - one possessing slightly greater qualifications than the latter, with more competence and knowledge, so as to better assist and, in certain cases, even substitute for the instructors in their duties and supervisory tasks.

Once the stations are properly organized and adequately equipped, the instructors shall be required to conduct practical agricultural lessons at designated locations, on fixed days and hours each week, thereby enabling the surrounding population to become further skilled in the requirements of their industry.

The services currently provided at the stations have consisted principally of: Assembling agricultural machinery and instructing in its operation; Demonstrating its utility and purposes; Training animals to work with machinery; Advising on proper land selection and utilization; Plant grafting; and, most frequently, undertaking work for the eradication of anthills.

[...] It appears highly advantageous that each station maintains nurseries dedicated to cultivating useful plants for distribution to farmers - either gratuitously or at minimal cost when supplying large quantities (Ibid).

Nevertheless, the limitation most lamented by Amaro Cavalcanti, given the Agricultural Superintendency's lack of resources, concerned the works for 'draining the swamps and dredging the rivers of the Federal District'. According to the mayor:

The clearing of rivers and the drainage of fields are necessary measures, the fulfillment of which complements those just mentioned: for only then will the swampy stagnation of waters cease—a stagnation which, when it does not bring death, inflicts a slow and corrosive degradation upon the vitality of the rural worker and his descendants.

Sanitation would remain a significant problem for the region in the years to come. In July 1919, *Gazeta Suburbana* lamented the fact that Tijuca, Jacarepaguá, Campo Grande, Santa Cruz, Sepetiba, Irajá, and Inhaúma were 'localities whose progress [was] most hindered by the various diseases that debilitate or kill their populations'. The report further detailed the factors contributing to this situation:

[...] the consumption of well water, the absolute lack of sewage systems for fecal matter, the scarcity of medical assistance, the presence of numerous swamps, and, finally, the difficulty of transportation for those needing to reach the nearest prophylactic stations.

Rezult (sic): the depopulation of that locality and the loss of vital energies that could have greatly benefited the community" (*Gazeta Suburbana*, July 12, 1919, p. 2).

One of the most notorious local politicians, Cesário de Mello, described Santa Cruz as seeing 'the birth rate coefficient diminished and those of mortality and stillbirths augmented':

The influenza pandemic of past years still accounts for the burden of mortality. There is no denying that, from the State's improvidence in allowing the population to condense in an endemic environment - through permanent stagnation and pollution, lacking hygienic housing and public assistance services - stems nearly all the harmful effect to which I have just alluded (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, June 13, 1923, p. 164).

The sanitation of rural lands was increasingly becoming the greatest challenge in the region. Promoting agriculture, as a broad and mass-scale policy by public authorities, was seen as an important tool for improving the area. In the Rio de Janeiro context, agricultural activity had a sanitizing character. The project submitted by Cesário de Mello to the Municipal Council's executive board perfectly encapsulates this conception:

That measures be taken with the Honorable Ministers of Agriculture, Transportation, and Internal Affairs to establish an agreement with the Federal Government to intensify: cultivation, field development, rectification works, drainage [sic] and dredging services, and the systematization of water supply - so that, as far as possible, the desiccation and supply for hygienic treatment of household effluents may prove efficient, thereby preventing transmission to humans and animals, either directly or indirectly through insects and parasites that develop actively and incessantly in stagnant, muddy, and polluted environments, maintaining endemic conditions" (Ibid.).

RETHINKING THE RURAL ZONE'S DEVELOPMENTAL IDENTITY

'Meager resources' were not the only issue that hindered the implementation of sanitation measures. Back in 1918, Amaro Cavalcanti highlighted an issue that virtually no other political actor mentioned when discussing agricultural improvement in the rural zone of the Federal District: the question of land ownership—and, related to it, the tendency of many 'landowners' to engage in land speculation. He had observed, as early as 1918, that the improvements carried out by public authorities in the rural zone, rather than benefiting agriculture and small farmers, could instead serve very different ends:

Most of the lands through which the rivers to be cleared flow are privately owned, acquired perhaps for minimal prices, but whose owners remain waiting for the public authorities to undertake improvements, spending large sums to increase their value - with the results then being reaped by those who had no concern for the public good, nor contributed to its sanitation.

The administration must therefore be equipped with the necessary means to resolve this issue, with the general welfare in mind - that is, by productively transforming insalubrious regions into fertile and productive fields.

To this end, it must be furnished with wisely adopted laws which either: impose upon the landowners of such properties, under severe penalties, the obligation to promptly undertake their sanitation, allowing them to reap the resulting benefits themselves; or empower the public authorities with the right to expropriate them and, once sanitized, divide them into rural lots to be leased to private individuals for periods sufficient to allow them to benefit from plantings and other improvements made thereon.

I am convinced this would be one practical way to solve such an important problem, providing real compensation for the substantial expenditures that will prove indispensable" (*Annals of the Municipal Council*, July 20, 1918, p. 164).

Beyond financial resources, the Municipality needed legal instruments to prevent rural lands from serving less noble purposes. It is crucial to note that for Amaro Cavalcanti and numerous sanitarians, the measures promoting the region's salubrity carried strong moralizing undertones. They believed that the hazardous environment (especially endemic diseases) generated indolence among rural inhabitants while simultaneously being reinforced by it. The notion of sanitation was simultaneously biological and moral. In this same address, the mayor emphasized that:

Another grave ill to be vigorously combated, much like the insalubrity of the fields, is the disordered consumption of alcohol by countless individuals of the lower classes inhabiting these areas. Those who travel the various paths and roads crossing the rural zones encounter at every crossroads a small tavern. These establishments, which ought primarily to facilitate food distribution and quench travelers' thirst, are instead almost exclusively vehicles for propagating and distributing alcohol in its most harmful and repugnant form: cachaça. The field laborer, living in swampy lands and victim to the worst local endemic diseases characteristic of the region, frequently seeks recreation or pastime in conversations under the tavern's awning, where they repeatedly ingest the poison that will inevitably undermine their constitution - often already weakened by prolonged exposure to insalubrious or pestilential fields. [...] It is the habitual use of alcohol that primarily produces that characteristic indolence or lack of work dedication noted in a large portion of the rural proletariat. They earn little because they work few days, and even then, the greater part of their meager wages is invariably spent acquiring alcohol, whose consumption renders them increasingly indolent" (Ibid.).

This view of the rural population was echoed in Rio's own press. The *Gazeta Suburbana* analyzed the following on January 24, 1920:

Tillage needs hands. And the police must fulfill their duty. Why do we say this? Because we cannot tolerate so many individuals (nearly all of apparent robustness) spending entire days in taverns and suburban bars - idle and languishing through cachaça consumption - without being able to honestly account for the money funding their habits, when they could be employing their energies in agricultural work. Were the police willing, these individuals could be put to good use. This would constitute an excellent service to both the social question and the nation" (*Gazeta Suburbana*, January 24, 1920, p. 2).

Hence, from the early 20th century onward, agricultural education proposals were regularly disseminated in the press and in class association organs. The then-Federal District's primary promoter would be the Sociedade Nacional de Agricultura (National Agriculture Society) through its magazine *A Lavoura* (January 1910, p. 23). To some extent, it would ultimately succeed in establishing rural schools. The municipal education network, which had expanded since at least the administration of Sezerdelo Correa (September 1909 – November 1910), reached the rural zone by the early 1920s. This launched the Rural Schools initiative, "which aimed to provide education suited to local peculiarities". Their reconstruction began between 1922 and 1926. The first of these would be the Escola Rural Alberto Torres (Alberto Torres Rural School), located in Santíssimo, on the margin of the Santa Cruz royal road (Froes; Gelabert, 2004, p. 192). Acting just before the Municipal Government, the federal administration under Marechal Hermes established the Escola Técnica Visconde de Mauá (Visconde de Mauá Technical School) in the Vila Proletária, where agricultural courses were also taught (Oliveira, 2004, p. 2).

Moreover, the Municipal Government had already shown interest in establishing rural educational institutions in the region as early as the 1910s. On July 10, 1917, Intendant Cesário de Mello introduced Project No. 6, authorizing the mayor "to create, in the rural zone, an agricultural apprenticeship program, under the conditions it establishes, and to take other measures". In the project's introductory text, the author not only demonstrates a framework grounded in the notion of agricultural education as an instrument for redeeming the 'disadvantaged' classes (Mendonça, 1998, p. 15), but also highlights the

pressing contemporary issue of increasing the region's agricultural productivity to alleviate the city's supply crisis:

Whereas the necessary knowledge for properly directing field work must be disseminated among different social classes; Whereas through these means and knowledge - by applying rational cultivation principles and proven methods endorsed by experience - one can significantly increase production (Ibid.).

These concerns would shape subsequent government projects and actions, demonstrating that, in practice, the rural zone was not entirely a 'forgotten region' or 'devoid of meaning' for public authorities, despite this being the prevailing perception of the area. The consequences triggered by the implementation of some of these projects, particularly regarding agriculture and rural sanitation, would lead to profound transformations in the rural zone beginning in the 1930s.

Beyond improving the region's sanitary conditions, transforming the rural zone into a 'breadbasket for the capital' also addressed another crucial demand: the city's own need for food supplies.

With the First World War and the increase in the fuel price, the freight of food products imported through Rio de Janeiro increased significantly. This rise would have repercussions on the final price of the products and it would weigh on consumers' wallets, particularly the mass of urban wage earners. However, before that, supplying the city was already a problem. In her study about the implementation of the Bangu Factory at the end of the previous century, Luciana Cunha Oliveira (2006, p.49) notes that the factory's management built the Santo Antonio mill in 1900 to facilitate the supply of goods to the workers' families. The author attributes this initiative to the cost of the workers' food in Rio de Janeiro, as it was the highest during this period due to the population increase in the federal capital and the downturn in the agricultural region. This was the formula found by Bangu Factory to ease the problem (Idem). In addition to the mill, Luciana Oliveira points out that the Factory's strategy also involved creating conditions for the workers to provide their own subsistence, a point highlighted by Mr. Diocleciano Machado in a worker's article:

In Bangu they made us live together, the factory gave us a land and wood to build the house. No one in my family had ever worked in factories before. The men of the Company allowed us to farm and keep a few animals, pigs and chickens, so there were many ranches. Some planted sugar cane and sold it to the mill. (Oliveira, 2006, p. 51)

The role of the backyard in subsistence production for the 'labourers' is also recalled by Everardo Backheuser:

The backyard in workers' houses is, especially if there is no garden, one of the most important areas; it is where the household and outdoor clothes are washed, because the use of public laundries unfortunately is not widespread among us, which we wish it were; it's where the children play, because otherwise they would be out on the street; it's where the chicken coop is located. (Backheuser, 1906, p. 24)

Backheuser defends the idea that one of the few things that could lead "workers" to settle in the suburban areas at the beginning of the 20th century was the possibility to cultivate their own vegetables, as well as the "clean air" and the "more affordable" price of land, but leaving aside all the high costs of transportation (since a large part worked in urban areas). In this regard, the problem of food supply was far from being a minor issue in that Rio de Janeiro of the first decades of the 20th century⁷. Not surprisingly, the issue of high food costs would appear recurrently in many protests by workers' groups and parties in the city. However, the supply crisis was not only prejudicial to workers. An important detail comes along: workers in the former Federal District, especially in the factory sector, were the most well-paid in the country. According to the historian, "the main reason for the higher wage rate in Rio was the high cost of feeding the labor force in the region, due to the lack of local agriculture and the precarious agricultural situation in the Fluminense region" (Linhares; Teixeira, 1979, p. 20).

Other repercussions of this city characteristic were still evident in the mid-1910s. Alfredo César, in a study of the Vila Proletária (known today as Marechal Hermes), in 1914, highlights that several of the residences designed for this Vila were made for the occupation of "farmers". The author deduces that

⁷ Maria Yedda Linhares and Francisco Carlos recall that in 1918 the Public Food Commission was created, "the first body to mark the State's intervention in the supply problem". The author also mentions that this Commission emerged in the midst of "an acute social crisis, marked by popular and workers' movements that even questioned the authority of the State". (1979, p.20)

there was, on the part of the Federal Government, "a concern to make the Vila Proletária self-sufficient in necessity goods" (Oliveira, 2004, p. 2).

Aware of this problem, the municipal government, through some of its mayors, would take certain measures. In a city with a considerable degree of mobilization among the working-class, the hypothesis that this class would have to deal with the large increase in the value of food in their daily lives caused at least some concern among the public authorities. The personal notes made by Mayor Amaro Cavalcanti (1917) on the subject help to understand the extent of such concern. They were found by me during research carried out at the beginning of 2007 at the Instituto Histórico-Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute) funds. This compilation, although not very extensive, reveals a little of the public authorities' understanding not only of the supply issue itself, but also of its political and social implications. One of the [newspaper] clippings the mayor kept contains an article on 'The cheapening of Uruguay's food supply'. The text of the article contains the following information: "the Government is studying a draft law banning this foodstuff, going so far as to requisition them in serious cases, in return for payment" (Cavalcanti, 1917).

Attached with the article is a personal note from the mayor, which appears to be a draft of a speech he was going to make. Here, rather than talking about how this type of decision would be taken in the city, Amaro comments on the political repercussions that such matter could have on the population:

There is no real cause for the population, mostly laborers and neediest classes, to be led by the malevolent suggestions of those who seek to disrupt order on the pretext of a shortage of basic foodstuffs. It's not unknown the high-cost of foodstuffs nowadays. But, the situation is being watched by the Mayor and remains the same, either in terms of quantities or prices respectively. And both Mr President of the Republic and the City Hall remain vigilant in this regard, adopting measures advised by prudence and prevention on a daily basis (Cavalcanti, 1917).

Further on, certainly inspired by the Uruguayan example, Amaro Cavalcanti signalled possible measures to re-establish an adequate supply of goods. The war situation - we were still in 1917 -, in which certain initiatives were allowed, might have justified some measures. However, another element

contributed to making the period much more tense. 1917 marked the peak of the strikes organised by the labour movement under anarchist hegemony. This reflects in Amaro Cavalcanti's considerations, as we shall see:

Unfortunately, if this hope were to be a bad omen, the public authorities would still have the extraordinary measure of either fixing the maximum retail and wholesale price of essential goods or selling them directly to the population, so that their fate would not be at the mercy of speculative greed. What is needed is for each one to be careful against insinuations of individuals, not at all well-meaning, who, with the good of the workers [the harmed party], - what they really want - is the common misfortune of all (Cavalcanti, 1917).

Azevedo Sodré's City Hall administration had already been experimenting with more concrete measures a year earlier, such as Decree No. 1,126 of 20th November 1916, which authorised the establishment of street markets in urban and suburban areas.

In fact, Amaro Cavalcanti's government⁸ introduced two new priorities onto the municipal administration's agenda: supplying the capital and improving transport as well as agricultural production, in suburban and rural areas. This is the first (and fleeting) time that a mayor has demonstrated a willingness to invest more in these regions than in urban areas. To this end, the Potiguar magistrate emphasized the attendance of the demands in suburban and rural areas, as well as addressing the problem of supplying the city, encouraging farming and craft production, and repairing roads to facilitate the outflow of this production (Pinto, 2008, p. 158). The urban planner José Reis notes Amaro's great efforts to improve the communication routes between the urban district and the rural and suburban district; and this was the main focus of his administration: “with scarce funds, large stretches of local roads were improved, bringing real benefits to residents of the northern area and, above all, those of the carioca hinterland, as the Campo Grande and Santa Cruz area was called” (Reis, 1977, p. 65).

⁸ Amaro Cavalcanti (Amaro Cavalcanti Soares de Brito, 1851-1922) was born in the municipality of Caicó, in the Seridó region (state of Rio Grande do Norte). He graduated in Law from Albany Law School in New York (USA) and was mayor of the Federal District between January 12th and November 15th 1917.

Occasionally, the idea of setting up agricultural colonies in rural areas reappeared. It was an enormously costly undertaking, but the pressure to ensure a stable food supply kept growing. Paulo de Frontin would once again signal his intention to buy 'old farms' located in the rural zones in order to establish these colonies. When commenting upon the then mayor's proposal, *Gazeta Suburbana* made it clear that the problem of food consumption for the carioca population was a fundamental issue for improvements in the region:

The existence of these colonies, which could be magnificent centers for the production of small crops, poultry and small livestock, would bring great benefits in terms of abundant supplies to the existing or future small markets in all the most populated parts of this capital, as well as the cheapening of all these products, which is the only way to remedy the crisis caused by the lack of transport, the cause of the high-cost of living. Well cultivated, these farms could be a source of income that would more than compensate for the expenses incurred by the Prefecture in transforming them into agricultural colonies, if they weren't torn up and given on a precarious basis, to those who wanted to colonise them on the condition that they would take their produce to the municipal markets and sell it at the prices set by the Prefecture. Some of these farms have seaside locations. This would mean that the pisciculture industry could be set up on these lands, which would also be of significant interest to consumers, as fish and shrimp, etc., would come at the lowest price possible. This problem is one of the most important and demands a ready solution (*Gazeta Suburbana*, July 12, 1919, p. 2).

Under Carlos Sampaio's administration, Decree no. 2,392 was issued on 12th January 1921, and in its 5th article:

To fund the meat supply services reform, as well as for other improvements and new projects, the Mayor is hereby authorised to take out an external or internal loan up to the sum of 60,000 contos de réis, which may be increased by an amount equal to the value of the current loans that have been redeemed, calculating equality by the equivalence of the interest service, with the sum of 10,000 contos destined for services and improvements in the municipal districts of Espírito Santo, São Christovão, Engenho Velho, Andarahy, Tijuca, Engenho Novo, Meyer, Inhaúma, Jacarepaguá, Campo Grande, Santa Cruz and Guaratiba (Sampaio, 1921).

In the following year, the situation takes an unexpected turn. What Amaro Cavalcanti had pointed out as a drastic but necessary possibility ended up being implemented by Carlos Sampaio through Decree No. 2,274 of 29 September 1922. On the one hand, Amaro Cavalcanti's justification lay in the hardships

caused by World War I and the 'malevolent agitation' caused - according to him - by labour leaders. On the other hand, Carlos Sampaio's support for such a measure was based on the occasion of the Centenary of Brazil's Independence celebrations, held in the national capital (Motta, 1992)⁹. In his opinion, it would be enough for him to be authorised by decree "to carry out the acts he deems necessary to ensure the regular supply of basic necessities to the population of the Federal District on the occasion of the centenary festivities and gives other measures" (ACM, September 29, 1922, p. 636).

Two very important measures to improve food production in the capital were also emphasised, both of which would have great repercussions in the effort to assert the role of the rural zone as a space for agricultural production. These measures anticipate by more than a decade the intentions contained in the urban planning regulations of 1935 and 1937.

The project No.263, for example, authorized "the Mayor to transform the Sacco de Guaratiba farm into an agricultural colony and breeding farm" (ACM, 14 December 1920, p. 149)¹⁰. With the approval of this project, the *Fazenda Modelo de Guaratiba* was born and still exists today. The City Hall's decision in 1924, through Bill 154, to 'promote the colonisation of the rural zone of the Federal District' and the 'organisation of food production cooperatives' was another important measure. Through this project, the City Hall could even create a 'Banco Hypothecario Municipal' (Municipal Hypothecary Bank) to make feasible mobilising credit for the implementation of colonisation plans, involving the purchase of machinery, tools, seeds, construction of schools and improvements, etc. (ACM, 19 December 1924, p. 274).

In fact, all the crisis surrounding the issue of supply, with all its political repercussions, was largely stimulated due to the industrial surge experienced by the country and specifically by the city of Rio de Janeiro. Furthermore, population growth itself was a key factor in this scenario. In terms of the growth that is taking place in Rio, there is a further complicating element for public authorities to

⁹ See also CAULFIELD (2000).

¹⁰ At that time, the Juliano Moreira Colony was also being created. Back then, it was known as the Jacarepaguá Psychopathic Men's Colony. The purpose of this colony was to house the São Bento Men's Colony, located on Ilha do Governador and built in 1890.

manage. The majority of the population that has been incorporated into the city since the last decade of the 19th century is made up of Portuguese immigrants¹¹. Gladys S. Ribeiro reports that the Portuguese presence in the city was significant between 1890 and 1930. In this first year, for example, there were 106,461 Portuguese in Rio, of whom 77,954 were men and 28,507 were women. Men made up 50% of the foreign population and women 18%. According to Gladys, 68% of foreigners were men and women (Ribeiro, 1994).

Growth of this kind revealed to the public authorities how important it was to consolidate reliable sources of goods to supply the population of the country's capital. Rio's countryside began to be seen as one of these sources. Significantly, from the 1920s onwards, several of the improvements planned for this region addressed the city supply issue as one of the justifications for their relevance.

Figure 3

The green spaces of Jacarepaguá in the early 1950s.



Source: Observador Econômico, April 1951, no. 183, p. 58.

¹¹ Manolo Florentino and Cacilda Machado point out that of the 5,600 foreigners who arrived in Brazil between 1820 and 1972, a third were Portuguese, compared to 29% Italian and 13% Spanish. See "Essay on Portuguese immigration and patterns of miscegenation in Brazil in the 19th and 20th centuries", In: Portuguese Studies Review, Trent-Canada, v. 10, n. 1, 2002, p. 1. Another essential read about the subject is LOBO (2001).

When justifying the project to build a bridge linking the coast to Barra de Guaratiba, the legislators emphasised the appeal of the area affected by the project:

It is a real haven, a place that can be used as one of the most attractive spots on our coast due to its mild temperature, natural beauty and other essential features, such as the modest living conditions inherent in a locality with its own resources from fishing and farming. The aim of building the bridge, moreover, is to facilitate the exploitation of the restinga, which has [...] a large contribution of an appreciable supply of farming and fishing products to the population of this capital (Annals of the Municipal Council, 4 October, 1927, p. 39).

In August 1928, one of the main justifications for the rail service planned by the City Council between Irajá and Guaratiba was the fact that it was a 'producing zone' with a 'reasonable supply coefficient' (Annaes do Conselho Municipal, 4 November 1928, p. 57).

When asked to give his opinion on the High-speed Urban Transportation Project by engineer Raymundo Pereira da Silva in 1929, the then director of the Rio de Janeiro Remodelling Plan, Alfred Agache, formulated the reasons behind his approval as follows:

- 1st- The project preliminarily solves the problem of urban and suburban transport as a whole.
- 2nd - Fits perfectly into the general plan for remodelling the city and its extension, carried out under my direction.
- 3rd - Corresponds, on the one hand, to an urgent need to relieve the traffic jams in the central part of the city and, on the other hand, provides rapid communication with the centre, the suburbs and one of the best parts of the countryside.
- 4th - Facilitates the provisioning of the city with the products of small-scale farming and, at the same time, enables the construction of workers' villas and residential buildings in better conditions of economy, hygiene and comfort (Annals of the Municipal Council, 2 December 1929, p. 1396).

BEYOND RURAL: MOVING PAST AGRICULTURAL DOMINANCE

Rural zones were not conceptualized solely as hubs for agricultural promotion. Rather, they were also envisioned as strategic targets for non-agricultural investments and as spaces conducive to the expansion of urban activities and dynamics.

Figure 4

Newspaper Report on the Fazenda Modelo in the 1940s.



Source: O Campo, July 1943, p. 17

In October 1921, a proposed project at the Municipal Council sought to incentivize the construction of "houses for private habitation in suburban and rural zones" through special concessions. Though never approved, the proposal serves as a telling indication that, much like the suburbs, the countryside had long been perceived as a viable space for residential expansion.

This does not imply, however, that rural and urban functions were viewed as mutually exclusive. Rather, the initiative reflects an underlying intent to shape the region into a hybrid territory where urban and rural land uses could coexist. Various projects to improve the countryside, advanced by both public authorities and private actors, reinforced this connection, further blurring the boundaries between urban and rural development.

The bridge to be built in 1927, linking the coast to Barra de Guaratiba, highlighted—in addition to its benefits for small-scale farming in the locality—that "due to the special conditions in which the sandbank is located, it can also, as long as there are easy communications via the bridge, be used for the installation of industrial establishments, whose location is not convenient in the populated centers of the city." The project also underscored another aspect that would later be heavily exploited by the real estate market from the late 1940s onward—the construction of summer homes:

The site is one of the most desirable for recreational or leisure retreats, particularly during the calm season, and its development—resulting from the proposed connecting route—will contribute to a broader and more valuable utilization of the Guaratiba and Campo Grande zones, owing to a foreseeable ripple effect (Annals of the Municipal Council, October 3, 1927, p. 49).

Years later, in August 1935, deputy Romero Zander submitted a request to establish bus routes connecting Campo Grande to Rio da Prata. He justified the creation of this urban public service as follows:

A prosperous and densely populated locality, this rich area with exceedingly fertile lands stands as one of the Federal District's leading zones for citrus cultivation, horticulture, and extensive papaya plantations. Served only by a branch line of the Campo Grande Streetcar Company, it bears noting that residents effectively lack proper transportation due to the company's complete breakdown into insecurity, unreliability, and discomfort. The administration's good faith in supporting the enterprise with reasonable subsidies proved utterly futile (Annals of the Municipal Council, August 26, 1935, p. 448).

A few construction projects had the clear interest of favoring small-scale farming. One example is Ernani Cardoso's project for official recognition of the Bocca do Matto and Fazenda roads:

Estrada da Fazenda is one of the oldest roads in the rural zone, it penetrates the heart of one of the most fertile regions and is connected to numerous paths that run through the entire mountainous region. Bocca do Matto road crosses the entire region of the same name. It is an area inhabited entirely by farmers, who struggle with the bad roads (Annals of the Municipal Council, September 17, 1935, p. 238).

Nevertheless, as the years progressed, one could observe the emergence of projects emphasizing the non-agricultural character of rural zone enterprises. In July 1927, for instance, Paulo da Cunha e Silva and José Joaquim Galvão petitioned the Municipal Council for authorization to operate a 'motor tramway service' for passenger and cargo transportation, to be established 'between Madureira, the parish of Irajá, and Guaratiba'. As "an extension of the concession," the petitioners of said enterprise were granted:

"The right to use and enjoy a tract measuring 5 kilometers in frontage by 1 kilometer in depth for a period of fifty years, for a Bathing Villa (Villa Balnearia) they obligated themselves to construct within three years from the concession date—via Barra de Guaratiba or at the site called Pontual—whichever location offered better adaptation and provisioning conditions according to studies and plans to be presented to the City Hall [...]" (Annals of the Municipal Council, July 22, 1927, pp. 579-580).

Further on, the specified constructions are detailed in a way that underscores the urban character of this enterprise:

- A proper bathing establishment containing Suites for couples and single guests, a hotel, music hall, library, barbershop, cigar store, café and bar, stationery shop, telegraph and post office compartment, medical office, pharmacy, infirmary, hydrotherapeutic and thermal treatment room, swimming pool, and all amenities inherent to an establishment of this nature, as per the corresponding blueprint.
- Rustic and country-style houses lining avenues, built within the grounds of the Villa Balnearia, intended for rent; with one public school (under the City Hall's jurisdiction), a police station and a building for the post office, telegraph and public health services—all exempt from rent or taxes, as shown in the respective plans.
- Modern and fully secure equipment for open-sea bathing, to be installed by the concessionaires within a designated zone, following approved designs.
- Roadways, amusement parks, and landscaped gardens (Ibid.).

On August 20, 1935, Project No. 118 was introduced, aiming to legalize "owner-occupied residences built in suburban and rural zones," provided that the owner applied "within 90 days, submitting sketches of the building and land, along with receipts for territorial or property taxes, upon payment of a 30,000-réis permit fee" (Annals of the Municipal Council, August 20, 1935, pp. 349-350).

During this period - the 1920s and 1930s - the rural zone remained a kind of agricultural frontier. But not exclusively so. Even then, the region was already being conceived as capable of accommodating other types of developments.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The formulation of rural sanitation policies emerges on the horizon as a proposed solution to the prevailing unsanitary conditions in the region. At this point, sanitation and the creation of a "green belt" began to be strategically linked, as one component reinforced the other. Then the Green Belt - seen almost as a synonym for the Rural Zone - became the target of another objective: meeting the food demand, particularly for vegetables, of the urban population of the then Federal District.

That demand provided another reason to convince the public authorities of the need to preserve the countryside. Initiatives that had been underway since the 1920s seemed to attest to the fact that this notion was well-established: the federal and municipal governments were carrying out major improvements in the region, which pointed to a policy aimed at fostering the city's green belt. We can highlight the creation of rural schools, the inauguration of the Guaratiba Model Farm and tax exemptions for small farmers. The very purpose of the work to clean up the Sepetiba and Jacarepaguá lowlands in the 1930s was to gain unhealthy land for farming.

However, the Rural district was also thought for non-agricultural purposes. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, plans for the agricultural use of the region have always gone hand in hand with plans that reserved the expansion of urban activities for the same region. Once more, the federal government's sanitation works were an emblematic example: the land gained for agriculture was also excellent for urban subdivisions.

Such urban expansion would jeopardize the very existence of the city's countryside. This expansion could be supported by land grabbing, contributing to the expulsion of small farming families from their land, among other things. This process showed that, while it was necessary to promote

agriculture to supply the Federal District, it was also necessary to establish a policy that would ensure land ownership for its small sharecroppers.

The 1940s and 1950s showed that agricultural policies were not enough. In order to guarantee the preservation of Rio's green belt (then already called Sertão Carioca), it was necessary to stop land grabbing and land theft. A "land policy" was needed to ensure an agricultural policy. That, however, is a story to be told at another time.

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