

The revolving doors of environmental policy in the Brazilian Amazon: Negotiations and contradictions between technicians and bureaucracy

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Abstract:

This work seeks to trace the trajectories that techno-political devices of environmental governance follow within the bureaucracy by focusing on the relationships among technical staff working within a state agency located in western Pará. Based on ethnographic research conducted between January and October 2023, in an office situated in an Amazon region under pressure from mineral and agricultural frontier expansion, the text describes the practices of technical staff, their interactions with consultants, and the daily negotiations between work and intimacy. It highlights how the state is performed through contingent and unstable associations between individuals, roles, and motivations. The purpose is to examine how the context of Amazonian exploitation intersects with the everyday actions of individuals who, linked to the state, operate environmental bureaucracy. The research indicates that environmental policy is shaped by a revolving-door logic, characterised by circulation and simultaneity, which tends to favour large-scale extractive activities that show limited adherence to environmental regulations. By drawing attention to these intricate relationships and their effects, the article aims to contribute to understanding the limits and contradictions that environmental policy faces.

Keywords: Environmental policy; Bureaucracy; State; Intimacy; Brazilian Amazon.

As portas-giratórias da política ambiental na Amazônia Brasileira: Negociações e contradições entre técnicos e burocracia

Resumo

Abordando as relações travadas entre os técnicos que atuam no âmbito de um órgão de Estado situado no oeste paraense, este texto busca identificar os itinerários que dispositivos técnico-políticos de governança ambiental percorrem na burocracia. Trata-se de uma etnografia realizada entre janeiro e outubro de 2023 em um escritório situado em uma região amazônica pressionada pela expansão de fronteira agrícola e mineral. O texto descreve as formas de atuação dos técnicos, suas interações com consultores e as negociações cotidianas entre intimidade e trabalho, evidenciando como o Estado é performado por meio de associações contingentes e instáveis entre sujeitos, cargos e motivações. Interessa indagar como o contexto de exploração da Amazônia se relaciona com as ações cotidianas de pessoas que, vinculadas ao Estado, operam a burocracia ambiental. A pesquisa realizada permite indicar que a política ambiental é caracterizada por uma lógica de portas-giratórias, na qual predominam a circulação e a coetaneidade, o que favorece os interesses de atividades extrativas de grande escala e pouco afeitas às normativas ambientais. Ao chamar atenção para as intrincadas relações e seus efeitos, o artigo espera contribuir para a compreensão dos limites e contradições a que política ambiental é submetida.

Palavras-chave: Política ambiental; burocracia; Estado; intimidade; Amazônia Brasileira.

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This text explores the vicissitudes of the itineraries followed by technical-political devices of environmental governance within the bureaucracy, until they are later announced as the successes of the *environmental compliance*¹ programmes in vogue in the Brazilian Amazon. Behind the scenes of the goals set by the state—document issuance, registration validations, licencing orders—there are a series of circumstances that enable (or hinder) such commitments from being met, which involve relationships and negotiations between those who operate the bureaucracy. The text is dedicated to this universe of daily operations², in which state instruments convey promises and expectations³. To fulfil the objective of identifying the itineraries that technical-political devices of environmental governance follow in the bureaucracy, I address the relationships established with and between the *technicians* who work within an

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- 1 Throughout this text, emic terms that compose the bureaucratic lexicon mobilised in the ethnographic agency are written in italics.
 - 2 This research forms part of a broader research project *Conflitos territoriais sobre as frentes de expansão agrícola (Amazônia brasileira): violências, expulsões e dominação política* [Territorial conflicts over agricultural expansion fronts (Brazilian Amazon): violence, expulsions, and political domination], funded by *Agence nationale de la recherche* (ANR-21-CE41-0021), and coordinated by Véronique Boyer, to whom I am grateful for providing invaluable feedback on the initial drafts of this manuscript.
 - 3 It is worth noting here that Santos Junior et al. (2010) clearly indicate that, to be effective, environmental programmes and deforestation reduction targets must be embedded in a shift in the social, economic, and agrarian structures of the Amazon. The heterogeneity of trajectories and territories does not necessarily translate into the success of the programmes.

environmental agency located in western Pará⁴, bearing in mind the understanding that the region is affected by numerous conflicts, particularly involving the dynamics of land use and occupation (Benatti, Santos and Gama 2006; Castro 2012; Sauer 2018). Conducted between January and October 2023, the research should be understood as a behind-the-scenes ethnography (Bronz 2016; Castro 2013) and, without losing sight of the debate on the constitutive heterogeneity of the state and the practices that constitute the same (Bevilaqua 2022; 2003), it dialogues with recent production concerning the dismantling of environmental policies in Brazil (Anaya, Bronz and Magalhães 2024; Bronz, Zhouri and Castro 2020).

The ethnography conducted here examines the ways in which *technicians* operate and focuses on the daily negotiations surrounding the bonds they experience, resulting in a dynamic of permanent circulation. This instability is not new in anthropological scholarship on the Amazon, as Boyer's (2015, 2017) work, in contexts of territorial disputes, elucidates how subjects negotiate their identities by moving between different ethno-legal categories and weaving their existences in non-Manichean ways, albeit in asymmetrical disputes. As I explore throughout this text, something similar occurs behind the scenes of bureaucracy, when subjects explore the limits of their possibilities of action and experience diverse, if not simultaneous, institutional positions. I therefore emphasise the hidden aspects of the tensions and negotiations that become public in the form of *Cadastro Ambiental Rural* (CAR) [Rural Environmental Registry] validations, the issuance of authorisations in the environmental licencing process (preliminary, installation, and operating licences), inspections and reports within the scope of a *Plano de Manejo Florestal* [Forest Management Plan], among other rites and artefacts governed and required by land and environmental legislation. Evidently, because these regulations and authorisations concern specific forms of exploitation of 'natural resources', these provisions are at the heart of disputes and are of interest to actors linked to the expansion of mining and agribusiness, together with other extractive industries present in the region (Araújo and Vieira 2019; Torres, Doblas and Alarcon 2017; Gerhardt 2024).

Given these daily experiences, one question we can ask is: how does the context of exploitation of the Amazon relate to the daily actions of people linked to the state, who operate the environmental bureaucracy? By drawing attention to the negotiated nature of decisions and workflows, I seek to contribute a better understanding of the limits

4 Regarding the choices and injunctions of this text, the name of the ethnographic agency and its precise location is avoided. I also do not explicitly mention the names, backgrounds, or other specific characteristics of my interlocutors. The only exception—and one that will become relevant in the final section of this text—is gender. In her ethnography of business practices in licencing processes, Deborah Bronz (2016) chose to suppress gender differences in her account in order to anonymise her interlocutors. While I in no way wish to make the people with whom I interacted identifiable, in the case of the bureaucratic space I use as an example here, it is important to emphasise that gender is a marker that produces important differences, both within the office and outside it. The choice of anonymity is based on the firm understanding that the cases discussed and the potential questionable practices narrated are not unique, but rather respond to a shared dynamic. At the same time, it is important to clarify that non-exposure was a stipulated condition for entry and permanence in the field.

and contradictions to which Brazilian environmental policy is subject. While it is not my intention to settle the issue, I can contribute to documenting it, in order to highlight the idea that the state is performed through highly contingent and unstable associations between subjects, positions, and motivations—a process intensified by the weakening of the environmental oversight and control apparatus, itself embedded in economic and political dynamics that enable and perpetuate the expansion of large-scale extractivism in the region.

In the first section of this text, I highlight the multiplicity of bodies and agencies responsible for operating environmental bureaucracy, while not forgetting the fact that national environmental policy has recently undergone a deliberate process of dismantling. In the subsequent section, I take on another dimension of the debate by presenting the conditions of access to the ethnographic environmental agency, and the type of work carried out there. By describing the relationships experienced by the agency's staff, this section seeks to address how different living spaces—the office, football, bars, churches, and families—create layers of co-existence and involvement among the subjects, such that daily work is inseparable from these other social circles. At this point in the elaboration, I examine the weight of gender in the formation of dynamics of intimacy, given that the expectations placed on men and women are different—how this marker also engenders distinct accesses (and injunctions) to debates, disputes, and partnerships—as well as a description of the precarious employment relationships to which the staff are subjected. Together these seek to provide nuance to the debate and confer complexity to actors whose practices are often contradictory.

By adopting a public agency as a privileged observational space, I propose that the relationships established within this space exceed the *inside-outside* binomial that an initial impression would suggest, that is, I refute the idea that the connections made within the agency, or outside it, are distinct. This dynamic perspective is explored on two occasions—that of daily office life and the kind of relationship established with work—and I argue that both are marked not by a hermetic separation, but rather by a continuous movement. Finally, I argue that the predominance of a logic of 'revolving doors' enables us to characterise environmental policy as performed by a complex amalgam of relationships, the origins of which are traced in circulation. This, of course, is not exempt from effects.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY, ITS ACCESSES AND INJUNCTIONS

In recent years, the dismantling of environmental policies in Brazil has drawn the attention of social scientists committed to safeguarding rights and the production of knowledge that is subject to being questioned. The dismantling process and its arrangements, the effects of which are still being felt, have been competently monitored and documented, for example, in

publications with suggestive titles: *Passando a Boiada* [lit. Setting the Cattle Loose]⁵, a dossier organised by Bronz, Zhouri and Castro (2020), and *Terra Arrasada* [Scorched Earth], a book edited by Anaya, Bronz and Magalhães (2024). Beyond the extensive debate on the effects of large-scale projects and, consequently, on development choices—as exemplified by Sigaud (1986) and Magalhães and Sanz (2015) regarding infrastructure and hydroelectric dams; and Camana and Almeida (2019) and Coy and Klingler (2014) regarding agribusiness—the last decade has required renewed attention to political and bureaucratic processes. With the advent of an explicitly anti-environmental agenda, recent governments have opened the doors to disputes in institutional arenas that are expressed in changes to state mechanisms, if not in the discontinuation of programmes and policies.

It is against this national backdrop of the dismantling and explicit attacks on environmental conservation regulations that I began the fieldwork from which that text originated. It is worth noting from the outset that Brazilian bureaucracy provides for an abundance of land and environmental agencies with activities at the national, regional, and local levels. Technical knowledge and bureaucracy converge within these entities with varying levels of impact in the daily lives of those who call rural areas their home. This is the case with, among others, the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (INCRA) [National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform], the *Assistência Técnica e Extensão Rural* (ATER) [Technical Assistance and Rural Extension] companies, state and municipal environmental and agricultural departments, the *Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis* (IBAMA) [Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources], the *Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade* (ICMBio) [Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation], and in Pará, autonomous agencies like the *Instituto de Terras do Estado do Pará* [Pará State Land Institute].

This profusion of entities has paradoxical effects. On the one hand, you have the hyper-specialisation of activities, while on the other, the responsibilities of each agency can sometimes overlap and become confused. For instance, the validation of a CAR (registration) for a rural property in Pará can be performed by the state's environmental department or by a municipal environmental department, while the preparation of this same CAR—when not performed by private entities—can be handled within the scope of registration drives by these departments, and may also be the responsibility of INCRA or an ATER company. This does not include CARs related to differentiated territories, such as Quilombola territories that have specific registration modalities that result in a specific CAR for traditional peoples and communities. In short, the path to accessing a bureaucratic instrument is not linear. The criteria for determining where a request circulates are opaque and not always

5 In its literal form, the expression 'Passando a Boiada'—articulated by former Environmental Minister Ricardo Salles in May 2020—alludes to opening the farm gates and 'setting the cattle loose'. In reference to environmental policy, it meant 'pushing through further deregulation' under cover of COVID, enabling those who had been breaking previously established environmental regulations.

predictable, which creates a series of doubts for those who need to access the bureaucratic instruments, produces tensions among the personnel of these agencies and public bodies, and, in certain cases, leads to legal disputes over the validity of the process⁶. These two conditions—the multiplicity of agencies and the lack of predictability of the bureaucratic itinerary for forwarding and validating a request—are what enable the anonymity I opt for in this text: the disagreements and structural working conditions I describe can occur in any of the entities involved. Moreover, the anthropological profession to which I dedicate myself is not interested in denouncing questionable behaviour from an individual point of view, but rather in contributing to the documentation of routine practices whose effects lie at the heart of the violence that is inherent to the scenario of the exploitation of the Amazon and, as I hope will become clear throughout the text, is also the result of a context of labour precarity and exploitation.

When I first travelled through the municipalities of western Pará, it was not difficult to understand why this region is considered a frontier (Zuker 2022). Those aerial photographs showing forest on one side and, on the other, monoculture plantations as far as the eye can see—which up to that point, I had only seen in newspapers and schoolbooks—are a common sight, especially running alongside roads⁷ like the BR163, the highway connecting Cuiabá and Santarém, or BR230, known as the Trans-Amazonian Highway. More than a concept or an abstraction, the advancing frontier is something very palpable that is perhaps best expressed materially in the agricultural machinery that occasionally traverses the standardised fields. Alongside them, the intense traffic of grain trucks and the smell of soybeans they exude create a landscape that, broadly speaking, could even be confused with other forest regions pressured by the advance of agribusiness⁸. Indeed, the transformations in the space are undeniable and pique the curiosity of those who encounter the region; however, there is another order of change intrinsically connected to it, that of temporality. The expansion of frontiers is also a dispute over time, through which forms of connection are established that authorise, and *optimise*, the advancing production chains. It was based on this understanding that I became interested specifically in the mechanisms that dispute and impose a different

6 This is what happens in licencing processes annulled by the courts because they were not evaluated by the organ considered to be the competent authority. For example, consider the case of a mining operation in Itaituba that had been authorised by the municipal department, but the court's decision required that the licencing procedures be conducted by the ICMBio and the Department of Environment and Sustainability of the State of Pará. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/pa/para/noticia/2022/04/06/licenciamento-de-garimpo-em-area-de-preservacao-ambiental-e-cancelado-pela-justica-em-itaituba-pa.ghtml>.

7 It is no coincidence that it is precisely the roads that are markers of this dynamic of frontier expansion. A good discussion on logistics corridors in western Pará can be found in Wesz Junior et al. (2021).

8 The process of landscape homogenisation for scalability is very evident in the dynamics of agribusiness. This movement toward ecological simplification, along the lines of Anna Tsing (2015, 2016, 2019), has already been discussed elsewhere (Camana and Perin 2023).

rhythm on space⁹, something I found in the very bureaucratic spaces that are the object of land and environmental policy. In other words, what occurs in the offices and *technical rooms* of state agencies has very concrete effects on the conditions of the existence of life miles away. By treating the stage where bureaucratic environmental rites are negotiated and decided as a research setting, I have come to understand that such arrangements and their effects are exemplary of national environmental policy, particularly with regard to the asymmetry with which different social actors and their demands are received and addressed.

This understanding also enables us to read environmental bureaucracy apropos its ritual dimension, in line with Gerhardt's (2024) interpretation of licencing processes. To the extent that it is composed of a series of grammars and procedures that are both difficult to access and lack transparency, its effects have a transformative force—it is through opaque operations that transpire in these offices that possibilities and injunctions are created and enacted. Licencing requests, logging permits, and property registries (like CAR) may or may not be approved in processes in which the duration and the itinerary are not explicit and, as I describe throughout this text, encompass more elements than the text of the law or normative instructions that govern them would suggest¹⁰.

An example of this ritual dimension of procedures and relationships within the bureaucratic space where environmental policy is implemented is the issue of the grammar that governs the process. When I was first welcomed into a regional agency that later became the privileged locus of my work, I ended the day with a rather confusing set of notes: the profusion of terms and acronyms used by my first interlocutor opened the door to a daily work routine and a series of processes that were completely unfamiliar to me. In trying to organise the conversation, I used the last pages of my field notebook to explain each of the acronyms, positions, and procedures whose meaning I was unfamiliar with. In subsequent interactions in that space and throughout the fieldwork, this vocabulary proved indispensable: the terms were present in every process and conversation I observed. Contrary to that which the organisation of my notebook suggested, I argue that the glossary is not an appendix to environmental policies and their provisions, but rather informs the conditions of entry and circulation within the bureaucracy: only those who know and master the vocabulary of bureaucracy can move between two worlds—that of laws and what they govern—which expands the ritual dimension of the work undertaken by environmental agency *technicians* and, in parallel, provides elements for us to consider later regarding the circulation of people within the office. To wit, entering the bureaucracy means encountering a very specific vocabulary

9 The discussion on temporal mismatches is also evident in the very relations between politics and technology, as Perin (2020) rightly points out. In the context of Amazon land and environmental policy mechanisms, this is a topic worthy of further exploration.

10 It is intriguing that the analysis of bureaucracy, precisely where the world claims to be rationalised and objectified, reveals the opposite: opacity and mystery.

which is simultaneously naturalised by those who perform it¹¹. In this context, emphasising the issue of grammar is not insignificant: mastering it is a prerequisite for accessing the universe it governs, while ignorance of the terms is often accompanied by a lack of knowledge of the rites and, therefore, is a criterion for exclusion for those who are and/or should be in this bureaucratic space. In the following section, I seek to resize the scale of this debate by presenting the environmental agency in which the research that informs this text took place.

LANDING BUREAUCRACY: FROM REGULATIONS TO THE OFFICE

In western Pará, larger municipalities have offices of the numerous institutions that run environmental bureaucracy, which typically serve local and regional needs. These are places where interested citizens or their representatives can file requests, obtain information, and submit documentation to obtain titles, licences and certificates necessary for, among other activities, the marketing of products, access to sectoral public policies, and obtaining financial resources. It was in this context that I settled in a municipality located along a major highway, where I observed the daily work of *technicians* from a land and environmental agency. Located in a central area, the institution is easily accessible for those coming from nearby areas via the waterway or bus terminals, which can be reached by public transportation, although some walking is required.

Upon first glance, the building comprised of four main sectors is no different from any other *division* in Brazil: in front is a sign indicating the agency's location, it is a simple masonry building, and the main gate remains open during *customer service* hours, which are from 8 am to 2 pm¹². To enter, you simply pass through the security booth, where a uniformed staff member wearing the attire of a security company stands during this period, opening the window of their small booth solely to direct people who arrive seeking assistance to the *protocol* office or to provide information on the surrounding streets to lost passers-by. During the afternoon, in particular, this security guard is often accompanied by a staff member from the *administration* sector, and they chat on a variety of topics.

Upon entering the building, we find an anteroom where staff and people seeking assistance and information are separated by grey modular screens with aluminium edges. This is where the *protocol* sector provides *customer service*. The department consists of two staff members and an intern, who receive documents from interested parties through an opening in the partition, which forms a counter. In this first public area of the entity, there is a row of three upholstered chairs for those who are waiting, together with a small restroom. To

11 Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that some people working at the agency had their own 'glossaries', which included everything from the meanings of commonly used acronyms to simplified schematics of common procedures. This enables us to speculate concerning the translation processes of an environmental policy from its formulation to its implementation, a topic that I plan to address in greater detail in a future work.

12 By the end of the research, two more staff were hired for the reception and protocol, so that customer service was extended until 5 pm.

the left, a cork board displays promotional materials for the agency's campaigns and information on the main service fees; however, payments are not made here: payment requires the *issuance of a bank slip*, which is paid at a bank, and then the person returns to process any request. To the side of this anteroom, a four-seat round table is available so that *technicians* can occasionally assist the public directly, which usually occurs when the information requested exceeds the expertise of the *protocol* staff or a *type of request* that is not covered in the service manuals, requiring someone from the internal departments. It was here that I was received when I requested an initial conversation with a member of the *technical staff*.

Between the *protocol* counter and the small table, there is a door that leads behind the scenes of land and environmental bureaucracy. Upon entering, on the left, there is a clock-in device, accompanied by a sign that reads 'Don't forget to clock in', reminding us that this is a workplace, after all, where work (both hours and productivity, as I explore in the next section) is measured and monitored. Next are the rooms for the *legal* sector, the *administration* sector, and *management*, and two *technical rooms*, which I will call the 'rural room' and the 'urban room'. Inside, the building also houses a women's restroom, a men's restroom, and a kitchen with a long table and about ten chairs, where the staff typically eat breakfast and chat before starting their day's work—in addition to frequenting the space during other breaks throughout the workday. In a crockery cupboard, two shelves are reserved for staff mugs and, even though it is an unwritten rule, everyone uses their own: some bear the organisation's visual identity and were likely provided by the institution itself; others are the result of inside jokes, as they feature printed photos of the staff at work and a catchphrase; still others have inscriptions referring to other social contexts like 'Congratulations on your graduation' or 'Best dad in the world'. Collective lunches are frequently held there, prepared by two outsourced staff members with supplies paid for by personnel in the organisation, as are birthday celebrations—the dates of which are commemorated by a bulletin posted on a bulletin board in the kitchen listing that month's birthday people, prepared by a woman from the *administration* sector who usually chats with the security guard. Indeed, the kitchen is the main meeting place for staff from different departments, with the possible exception of the *boss*, as well as the space they go to for private conversations throughout the day. Once I entered the behind-the-scenes area, I was invited to and participated in breakfasts, celebrations and, with the call 'You fancy a coffee?', to a series of whispered conversations in this cafeteria. They always indicated which mug I should use. Outside the building, there is a garage with trucks that display the agency's business sticker and a room where the drivers hang out when they are not commuting or travelling to an activity (usually inspections or public events where the *boss* or a representative must be present).

The two *technical rooms* are divided according to purpose, although the work carried out in one is often co-dependent on what is accomplished in the room opposite. The 'rural room' assesses requests for the issuance of documents required for numerous extractive ac-

tivities, generally in the form of licences and exploration permits—this is the case in livestock farming, larger-scale plantations (especially for commodities like soybeans), and logging. The issuance of virtually any of the requested permits requires the applicant to have complied with other steps in land and environmental legislation. This room also assesses other registrations that are a mandatory step toward regularising productive activities. The ‘urban room’ assesses applications and subsequently issues documentation related to landscape alteration activities linked to infrastructure, including the construction of roads and bridges. This space also complies with procedures that permit industrial mining and the implementation of other activities with potential polluting impacts. The work of both rooms is permeated by the identification of problems at different points in the bureaucratic process, and when any *environmental irregularity* is detected in the analyses performed, *technicians* must take administrative action. In other words, it is through the analysis of these *technicians* that a given property and, consequently, its owner or occupant is called upon to change its licencing project and/or compensate for irregular deforestation, among other measures and sanctions, for example, when non-compliance with the minimum preservation areas in a legal reserve or permanent preservation area is detected.

While the ‘rural room’ is staffed by seven *technicians*, all engineers with different specialties, the ‘urban room’ has four *technicians*, only one of whom is an engineer—the other three have degrees in related earth sciences. In both rooms, which are separated by the hallway leading to the kitchen, there are no dividers between the desks, so the staff occupy desks in a circle, each separated by two or three computer monitors, since they often operate multiple screens simultaneously. This means that each person simply needs to look over their monitors to see and converse with their colleagues. It is common for staff members in these departments to be absent for inspections, so questions often arise among them, like: ‘Is so-and-so in or *out* of the office?’ The trips—which can last from one shift to a full week—are always undertaken in pairs and constitute an object of desire on the part of the *technicians*, since those who travel receive *allowances*, financial compensation added to their monthly salary, which all the staff I spoke with considered attractive.

Despite the specificities of the work carried out in the two *technical rooms*, it is safe to say they are complementary, if not mutually dependent. In addition to travelling together on inspections and signing their decisions to release or impose an embargo together, always with the *boss’s* signature of approval, one *technician* often depends on the work of another to process the requests in their possession. This work dynamic creates a condition of involvement that is not always straightforward, given that the relationships established in that space have meanings beyond the professional sphere, as I explore later.

While the agency itself already contains a range of intertwined relationships between individuals, these relationships do not end there. Within the vicinity of the office, a few blocks away, a profusion of land and environmental advisory and consulting firms can be

seen. Typically featuring green facades and trade names that evoke *regulatory compliance* and *technical* procedures, their signs advertise the services provided by these professionals, including: land division, property georeferencing, legal advice on fines and embargoes, projects for the restoration of degraded areas, the preparation of CARs and licencing projects, and the preparation of projects for finance applications. It is not uncommon for the signs to feature the logos of banks with which the consultancy firm typically works to access rural credit: Banco do Brasil, Banco da Amazônia, BanPará, and Sicredi—public banks (like the first three) and cooperatives (Sicredi and others)—that form part of the *Sistema Nacional de Fomento*¹³ [National Development System], an entity committed to financing ‘strategic sectors’ for Brazilian ‘development’.

These consultancy firms are typically staffed by engineers (agronomists, environmentalists, and forestry specialists) and agricultural technicians, and, in some cases, they also include the participation of lawyers. Several offices surround the public bodies dedicated to land and environmental issues, but consulting services are also found close to municipal registry offices. While a careful walk through the municipality reveals a landscape that intertwines—or at least brings together—public bodies and private offices, a longer sojourn behind the scenes reveals that it is not only the buildings that are connected in this network. In that same *protocol* anteroom, among citizens asking questions concerning state requirements and the procedures for obtaining some licence or other, there is a common figure: men and women, briefcase in hand, carrying a series of files to be *protocolled*. Known by name to all the staff, these *consultants* skilfully navigate the region’s land and environmental agencies, sharing the grammar of bureaucracy—though without being properly imbued with decision-making power, given that they do not hold a public office that authorises referrals.

Thus, while I was initially interested in understanding how *technical expertise* has circulated within land and environmental regulation mechanisms in the Amazon, as part of a broader research project, it gradually became requisite to consider how other relationships also come into play and are central to the interpretation of how the state is performed. It is this circulation of people, with different moralities and motivations, that operates the bureaucracy. This does not occur without tensions and compromises, however, even if these are not included in the staff handbooks.

TENSE, ENTANGLED CONDITIONS: WORK, GENDER, AND INTIMACY

- Hey, Marcos, Adilson is here to go over that licencing thing with you.
- Here comes that pain in the neck...

13 A system composed of 34 public and private financial institutions.

In this section, I explore how the relationships established by environmental agency staff among themselves and with *consultants*—profoundly traversed by gender—establish the conditions for the possibilities of actuation within the bureaucracy. Considering the context of western Pará, where the agricultural frontier appears to be expanding despite environmental legislation (Torres, Doblas and Alarcon 2017; Menezes 2023; Benatti and Cunha Fischer 2018), it is not a trivial endeavour to determine how the spaces where decisions are made, which authorise or prohibit large-scale extractive activities, are organised. While it is true that decisions and *dispatches* made within the agency have the capacity to alter the course of an activity or property, here I propose a prior analytical movement, and seek to interpret how these same decisions are the effects of actions and relationships that precede them. Ultimately, I propose to test the argument that everyday bureaucratic procedures are entangled in political and economic circuits and relationships at different scales, and that these greatly influence the operations of environmental policy in the Brazilian Amazon.

Particularly in the mornings, when the street gate remains open to the public, the *technicians* are frequently interrupted in their work by *protocol* staff, who summon them to assist engineers working in consultancy firms, as the opening sentence of this section indicates. On most of these occasions, the *consultants* call upon *technicians* by name, since they know who holds their files. Because a single *technician* works on multiple requests simultaneously, it is common for many of them to have been submitted by the same *consultant*. It is also not uncommon for *consultants* to ask *protocol* staff who they would like to review their requests, something officially justified by the *technical expertise* the designated person possesses to handle that type of request¹⁴. Although these visits to the public agency sometimes resemble ‘courtesy visits’, they evidently carry with them pressure to expedite and approve requests, in addition to speculation concerning the entity’s own operations and policies announced by the state. The folders that visitors bring are usually filled with client files, about which—generally after a chat—they then inquire about the *status*. In this intense flow of people, while some visits are welcomed, others are accompanied by a certain frustration. Though rarer, there are some that are avoided: in such cases, the *technician* asks the *protocol* staff to say they are not in, which is usually justified by hypothetical trips for inspections.

However, during work hours, it is not only in the office that *technicians* are contacted by *consultants*: their WhatsApp accounts are constantly buzzing with calls (including video calls) and all sorts of messages, through which *consultants* not only seek information on the progress of one process or another, but also rectify them: ‘Hey there, Roberto! Mate, I sent

14 In my fieldwork, I observed requests for process referrals to one or another technician based on the staff member’s alleged prior knowledge of the region where the property was located or the type of activity that required licencing (particularly in the case of requests involving authorisations for extensive livestock farming). Evidently, because it is evaluated by a specific person, this type of request opens the door to intimate relationships (and, potentially, other types of negotiation and pressure), jeopardising the principle of equality before the law in customer service.

the wrong document in the Rio Fundo Farm process, please disregard it'. While access via the instant messaging app is undertaken by interested parties, in some cases I have seen, it is also true that the dialogue was initiated by the *technicians* themselves. This was the case when Catarina realised that the georeferencing files she had been sent were incorrect in the process she was assessing; they did not match the coordinates indicated in other documents in the request. Because she knew the person who was providing consultation and had assumed *technical responsibility* for that request, Catarina sent a message directly asking them to send the correct shapes. 'If I were to request it through the *system*, I'd need to open a *communication*; it could take days for them to respond... it would delay everything. But it would be correct way, right?' Catarina commented to me. In less than 30 minutes, she received the appropriate files via WhatsApp and was able to continue her analysis.

If the relationship between *consultants* and *technicians* is permeated by tensions, pressures, and favours, something very similar occurs among the *technicians* themselves. My place of observation enables me to say that, within the walls of the institution, gender is one of the factors that produces circulation between the *technical rooms*, since women are the predominant presence in the 'urban room', given that they spend more hours in the office and have been at the institution longer than the two men who work there. It is they who occasionally invite one of the only two women in the 'rural room' for coffee in the kitchen, where they share impressions about their colleagues and the demands of the day.

In the 'rural room' there is an evident male dominance, they form the majority, which is even manifest in the temperature of the air conditioning, always very cold, a condition that forces the women to wear coats and closed shoes at work, clearly at odds with the usually high temperatures of western Pará. When my presence became a constant and, perhaps, less uncomfortable, sexual jokes among the men in the room became a common experience, just as it was customary to witness speculation as to the causes of other such sensitive situations when the national news broadcast a report on gender issues, something that invariably reverberated in jokes and imitations of women. On these occasions, after the laughter had passed, they always made a point of reminding themselves (and me) that it was all a joke, because the truth was that they *respected* women. *Outside* the office, gender is what grants or denies access to certain spaces of sociability, since among the men of the 'rural room' there are some deep-rooted positions that play into the exclusion of women under the veneer of *respect*. Thus, women are not invited to the traditional beer at the end of the afternoon, when work is over—the only exceptions I witnessed were when the men brought their own wives to the bar, or when meetings were organised between smaller groups. It is interesting that they invoke *respect*, and not superiority, to justify their exclusion: the women in the *technical rooms*, with the exception of one, are all married and mothers, which confers a different status on them; the men, again with one exception, are also married and fathers, but looser expectations fall on them regarding the distance that should be maintained. Still

on the subject of spaces reserved for men and women, men tend to play football regularly, which generates some jokes in the office about each person's performance; however, other conversations rarely spill over into the collective. The women, who are fewer in number in the office, share wellness tips and some do physical activities together during their lunch break. Among them, there are at least two cases in which friendships resulted in being godmothers to children, which adds other layers of intimacy to their interactions. Where men and women share common ground *outside* the office is the space of churches, since some attend the same denominations and the occasional activities promoted by the professional association, in which political disputes even divide them at times.

This dynamic suggests a fold, since the relationships that take place in different spaces are not immune to each other. In other words, it is possible to speculate that the jocularity present *inside* the office reflects the spaces *outside*, while the activities conducted *outside* potentially involve discussions on what is happening *inside*. If so, then gender matters because it defines the spaces each person is authorised to be in, spaces that are the stage for the relationships that set bureaucracy in motion. Ultimately, gender is a central marker for understanding the production and purchase of intimacy (Zelizer, 2005), something that is at the heart of the dynamics of exchanges of jobs and favours that are of interest to this text.

These transactions occur on a daily basis, and certain commitments are updated from time to time. Significantly, these unofficial agreements require that each staff member's monthly salary depends on their colleagues' performance assessments, which, when positive, generate a bonus. All my interlocutors say they count on this amount at the end of the month and know that this is a shared expectation among everyone in the office. Thus, even though these assessments are confidential and conducted through the *system*, negatively judging a colleague's performance is out of the question, even if they unofficially criticise each other's productivity and practices (because with some, you need to *be shrewd*). In kitchen conversations, more than one person told me about an occasion, early on in this *system* of mutual assessments by the team, when a *technician* received a poor evaluation, in which they lost their bonus for that month. Even though no one disagreed with that specific assessment, a witch hunt ensued: who had deliberately harmed a colleague? After this incident, which caused friction among the team, it was unofficially agreed that this institutional tool would no longer be used in a way that would *harm* anyone financially, because as a technician from the 'urban room' told me, 'We resolve our issues some other way.'

In addition to the bonus for the assessments and travelling *allowances*, a bonus is added to the monthly salary of each *technician* for achieving goals established by the state. These goals are measured in terms of the number of completed *processes*, which generate greater *celerity* and *efficiency* in the bureaucracy. While I have highlighted some terms so far to challenge the lexicon so naturalised in these spaces, this is yet another occasion in which the grammar of management asserts itself and produces effects: in the daily work of the office, activities

are categorised as either *documents* or *processes*. In the world of bureaucracy, *processes* are considered to be the set of information that requires processing, that is, a flow of actions that assumes input and output in which the nature of the information is modified, for example, what comes in as a request is eventually transformed into an authorisation. In contrast, *documents* are information that conclude the request when forwarded, for example, memoranda, official letters, registration requests. In an environmental agency, a licencing request is viewed as a *process*, while the validation of a CAR is a *document*—even though for licencing to occur, a validated CAR is required, which indicates an entanglement of operations¹⁵.

The productivity metrics established by the state consider only the *processes* completed by each *technician*. Thus, it is explicit that in their daily work, *technicians* choose to work on assessing one type of request (those understood as *processes*) to the detriment of others (the so-called *documents*), since they envision a financial reward in this choice—besides the pressure among colleagues and management to do so, given the productivity bonus is not calculated individually, but is shared by the entire team. In part, this reward (and categorisation) structure helps explain the slow pace of certain activities in Pará, like that which occurs with CAR analyses and validations, in addition to reproducing a logic that favours large-scale extractive activities (monoculture, livestock farming, and the timber industry, for which CARs are validated as a priority to proceed with the licencing that guarantees the team bonus), to the detriment of *posseiros*¹⁶ and small landowners who need the CAR to access credit or markets, for example, within the scope of policies like the *Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar* [National Programme to Strengthen Family Farming] and the *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* [National School Feeding Programme].

In truth, there is a rather utilitarian relationship with work, in which the choices made by each person are influenced by the horizon of financial rewards that are presented. Furthermore, contrary to that which hegemonic and economistic perspectives postulate, money is not devoid of social meanings. In the office, there is a narrative effort to purify and rationalise the sphere of work and money, which is evident when staff members affirm—to me and other citizens who go to the *customer service desk*—that they merely follow the rules stipulated in the manuals, effacing any relationships of affinity and interest. At the same

15 It seems to me that there is a certain constituent ambiguity in these definitions, since specific requests are difficult to classify. In the bureaucratic context I observed, this grammar and categorisation was accepted with resignation, since no one could explain the reasons why some very similar workflows were defined differently. This process of learning bureaucratic language and its implications, together with the scope for action that this enables, is something that should be problematised in-depth at another time.

16 In Brazil, a *posseiro* is an individual who occupies vacant or abandoned land and cultivates it, similar in some senses to crofting or homesteading. The history of the occupation of the Amazon in Pará, particularly since the 1960s, highlights a mismatch between migratory flows and INCRA's limited institutional capacity to conduct colonisation, which has resulted in the proliferation of *posseiros* who began occupying public lands (Hébert 1989). These were generally families dedicated to subsistence farming, but with no legal documentation guaranteeing their possession or ownership of the land. The unstable situation of *posseiros* and the right to regularisation of land tenure are at the heart of legal and local disputes that still reflect in data on rural violence (CPT 2024).

time, they endow the universe of financial transactions and work with moral connotations, such as when they choose not to evaluate anyone negatively, since this would be equivalent to *harming* a colleague. Thus, despite what anyone might say, everyday experience undermines any expectation of separation between these worlds, since work and intimacy, money and affection, intertwine. And as Zelizer (2005) has already identified, money and intimacy are not ‘hostile worlds’ and, therefore, incompatible, but coexist and, in the case of the staff who operate land and environmental policy, they challenge one another¹⁷.

This is not a question of dismissing the separations between the domains of feeling and rationality, of moralisation and purification, that the subjects articulate, nor about giving in to moralistic and normative interpretations regarding how this relationship represents the contamination of spaces. It seems to me that there is an analytical gain to be pursued: paying attention to flows because work and friendships (or even animosities) are also representative of how everyday life exceeds the logic of *inside-outside*. And, in the context discussed here, the subjects—even though they conform to certain social expectations and articulate the separation between the two—are aware of the circular nature of money and affection, since they constantly equate them. The very bureaucratic mechanisms of office life, such as team evaluations and the stipulation of goals, establish a process of negotiation that blurs the boundaries and the supposed linearity of the *processes* established by land and environmental policies.

Thus, at the end of a month’s work, *technicians* expect to receive add-ons to their salaries; a statutory minimum set by the professional council¹⁸, plus productivity bonuses, and bonuses based on internal peer assessments, together with occasional travel *allowances* and other labour rights, including food vouchers¹⁹. Although the subject is a sensitive one, it is no secret that they do consulting work *on the side* to increase their income and network of contacts; however, few speak openly—as they do, for example, at the breakfast table—concerning these extra activities. This is partly because they fear institutional reprisals, but it seems to me that the secrecy surrounding their work also reflects competition among *technicians* for consulting opportunities in the region.

One morning, while monitoring the work of a technician from the ‘rural room’, he snorted, ‘*Natália’s a fuck up. We try to help, but look at this?!*’ I looked at the three screens he was working on: a geographic information system (GIS) *software* was open on the one in the centre; on the right was the *system* used to check the data for the request under review, a

17 A moment that is kind of representative of this occurred after a few months of fieldwork. In a rare moment of dialogue, the *boss* asked me if I would like a position at the agency, as he had been ‘really thinking about it’ [of hiring me]. On several occasions, staff members also asked me if I intended to work there when I finished what I was doing.

18 In Pará, the statutory minimum salary for engineering professionals working a 40-hour work week is almost R\$11,000 [US\$ 2.200; mean US exchange, 2023]. See more at: <https://creapa.org.br/voce-sabe-qual-o-piso-salarial-de-sua-categoria-profissional/>. It is common, however, for employers to hire engineering professionals under other titles and positions (e.g., analyst) in order to reduce the base salary.

19 In the context of Brazil, these amounts are not insignificant and are equivalent to more than ten times the minimum wage.

CAR analysis for livestock licencing; on the monitor farthest to the left, he was attempting to open some documents sent by the *applicant*, including the *property title*, the ID of the *proprietor* and that of the *technical manager*. These documents had been requested about 30 days earlier to resolve certain doubts and inconsistencies in the original request. The files were sent in very low-quality .jpg format: photographs taken on a tablecloth, showing old, partially illegible documents. The person who had sent the documents, Natália, is the *consultant* responsible for the process. Beyond this specific case, I sense a dynamic between *technicians* and *consultants* marked by this *trying to help*²⁰ articulated by my interlocutor, which operates in two directions.

Later, they may need the assistance of these *consultants* themselves, because even though it is a public body, few of the personnel are civil servants—those selected for permanent employment and who enjoy job security. In fact, in the space described here, only four of the eleven *technicians* fit this condition; three men and one woman, all members of the ‘rural room’. The remainder hold position because they submitted and were approved in *simplified selection processes (SSP)*, which provide for a fixed contract period of no longer than 24 months. All *protocol* and *administration* staff are also governed by this unstable, temporary employment contract. Those in the legal department, however, hold positions as political appointees.

The type of employment relationship each staff member holds is not incidental information, indeed, many of the scenarios and situations I have described above derive from this. This is because the *SSP*, which most *technicians* are subject to, is valid for one year and extendable for another year—a maximum two-year contract. Before a person can apply for a position under a new *SSP*, there is a mandatory period of at least six months in which they can have no record of employment with the state. This is a source of anguish for many of my interlocutors, who are constantly reminded of the months remaining on their current contract, while they make plans to get a new job as soon as the contract ends. During this interim period, the *technicians* invariably migrate to *consultancy firms*, where they begin to produce exactly the same type of product that they assess when they are working for the state: logging projects, property division, licencing applications, georeferenced sketches for CARs, and so on. There are those who have worked in this intermittent condition for more than ten years.

If before I perceived the tensions in the relationships that are established *between* the *technicians* of the public body, how the *inside* and *outside* of the office shape each other, the contrast between *personnel of the public body* and *consultants* adds another development to this supposed *inside-outside* separation. Regarding this interpretative dimension, the fieldwork conducted indicates that more points of contact than differences are perceived: intermittent employment relationships, at the very least, enable (if not provoke) a circulation of people (and with that, *expertise* and interests) between the *advisory services* and the public bodies.

20 It is also through ‘trying to help’ that staff members assess each other positively, as I described earlier and continue to insist on.

The case of western Pará is an example of how a type of revolving door policy is forged and maintained, where, in theory, the subject is sometimes serving private interests, sometimes operating the state. Indeed, the revolving door metaphor is interesting insofar as it convenes an extrapolation of the *inside-outside* fracture, calling for the perception of continuity (and coevalness) between *processes*. In this dynamic, it is conceivable that a person could assess a request prepared by themselves, though I have never witnessed anything like that. From an analytical standpoint, I think that a situation like this, though anecdotal, is of minimal importance: of greater interest is describing this entangled, unstable circuit that constitutes the behind-the-scenes of environmental policy in the Amazon. In a region under pressure from the advance of mineral and agricultural frontiers, the ambiguity of ties and relationships expands the grey areas of bureaucratic action that are far from harmless.

Thus, when documenting the routine practices of this environmental agency, it is important to highlight the predominant dynamics of circulation within the office. This circular movement occurs on two scales: i) between staff members and consultants (and their comings and goings) in different spaces of sociability, in which intimate relationships have implications for the prioritisation of certain demands in daily work; and ii) upon closer inspection, even jobs are precarious and rotate, such that the context of labour precarisation and exploitation is related to the expansion of mega-extractivism territories in the Amazon, given how the bonus system drives the issuance of licences—not to mention the vulnerability to pressures and favours that staff members face.

This ‘revolving doors’ dynamic in the local and regional offices where Brazilian environmental policy is operated has implications for the very scope of the norms and regulations that, in theory, should guarantee the environmental compliance of production practices in Brazil. Without denouncing individual conduct, throughout this text I have sought to describe how the constant circulation of personnel, implied in institutionalised turnover, creates an environment of instability marked by daily negotiations, a process that I assume as exemplary of the operating modes of environmental bureaucracy in the Brazilian Amazon. The ethnographic work I conducted enables me to suggest that these daily articulations reflect broader *processes* that characterise our national environmental policy, in which administrative rites respond asymmetrically to the demands of different social actors. This is expressed in who is or is not received in the offices and in the evident contrast between the attention dedicated to issuing licences for large enterprises and that directed towards the demands for issuing documents for family farmers, extractive peoples, and other local communities. This asymmetry is not exactly new, as indicated by the work of Penna (2022) on racial selectivity in access to land documentation, and by Campbell (2015) regarding how, in the Brazilian Amazon, even regulatory programmes created with small landowners in mind are gutted and appropriated by other interests. The recent pressures to which national environmental policy has been subjected, on a national scale, have been equally well described and documented (Anaya, Bronz and Magalhães 2024; Bronz, Zhouri and Castro 2020).

What is less evident—and constitutes one of the main contributions of this work—is how the governance structure itself, marked by this institutional turnover of ‘revolving doors’, favours interests linked to mega-extractivism, while weakening the oversight and control apparatus. Thus, even though these policies are formally ‘functioning’, in certain contexts, their operation is sustained by pressured, vulnerable, and frequently demobilised administrative structures, which indicates a structural fragility of environmental control in Brazil, even beyond the most visible moments of institutional dismantling.

CONCLUSIONS: THE REVOLVING DOORS OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

In order to contribute to the record and extend the set of arguments that expose how the violence of mega-extractive practices in the Brazilian Amazon is the product of a dynamic that entangles different aspects of daily life, in this text I addressed the relationships and negotiations present in the work routine of the staff of an environmental agency located in western Pará. By considering that the dynamics of the ethnographic office are exemplary of practices common to other spaces that operate national environmental policy, I sought to identify the itineraries that technical-political devices of environmental governance follow, emphasising the ways in which routine bureaucratic rites are permeated by economic and political dynamics. In the recent context of the rise of an anti-environmental agenda within the Brazilian state, I draw attention to the fact that even agencies and legislation that at first glance resisted the dismantling that has been promoted are subject to a fragile structure that by making staff members vulnerable, leaves room for outside pressures and interests.

To construct this argument, I shed light on the composition of the office and how the relationships that arise there can be read through markers other than bureaucratic proficiency. In this text I explored one of them, gender, and the conditions for the possibility (and intimacy) that this difference establishes. Intimacy, as became clear throughout the presentation, is not something incidental, but rather a mechanism capable of expanding (or restricting) the possibilities of the subjects, which are revealed in each individual’s financial gains, given the *bonuses* and *remunerations* provided by the salary structure. If intimate relationships are central to staff members’ daily lives, they are equally important when observing the relationships between *technicians* and *consultants*. Always on the lookout for other opportunities, the *technicians* working at the institution cultivate affectionate relationships with colleagues who may eventually be useful to them in the workplace. This phenomenon is intensified by the prevalence of fragile employment relations within this agency, which exacerbates the instability experienced by the staff, who must complete a period of at least six months with no record of employment in the civil service.

The proliferation of *consultancy firms* and the forms of intermediation that these actors promote between the state and the individuals living in the territories remains an issue that requires further study. In a mutually dependent relationship, public bodies and *consultancy*

firms drive land and environmental bureaucracy. As I have mentioned, when looking at the subjects who comprise forums and spaces, they are often the same people: *technicians* who are sometimes in environmental *consultancy firms* preparing and filing requests, and sometimes in positions in public bodies assessing these same demands, which I have characterised as a *revolving door policy*. When you realise that some individuals have been in this back-and-forth movement within the organisation for almost a decade, it becomes evident that this hiring regime, which presumes temporary, circumstantial work, has established logics that alter the work itself, in a manner that is not without impact on bureaucratic flows: in this environment permeated by ambiguities, grey areas of action are being created. Evidently, this institutional configuration should not exempt individuals from accountability for any irregular or illegal practices, which should be investigated by the competent authorities; however, this text is more interested in drawing attention to and describing the mechanisms that authorise (and to some extent incite) such questionable acts than in denouncing them as isolated incidents. In the context under study, in which there is an ongoing dispute over mineral and agricultural frontiers that mobilises bureaucratic devices to appropriate and ‘open up’ new areas, it is possible to speculate that the precarious labour structure within the state favours those who operate and enrich themselves through land grabbing and deforestation. In this sense, future reflections should advance the interpretation of how bureaucratic rites and spaces—to the extent that they highlight what is common and naturalised in a given time and space—are themselves violent.

Finally, to avoid deviating from the revolving doors metaphor I have continued to insist on, it is worth remembering that this concept also requires us to consider that *inside* and *outside* are not the only possibilities: while revolving around the axis, there are times when you can be simultaneously in two places. From a field perspective, in certain situations—such as when *technicians* working for the state provide consultancy services *on the side*—it is difficult to define whose interests the subjects’ actions respond to. Embracing this coevalness is perhaps more interesting to the social sciences than the pursuit of analytical frameworks that divide and enclose.

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The raw data is not available due to data privacy laws.

The dataset underpinning the interpretations in this article originates from ethnographic fieldwork. Anonymity and the non-disclosure of the interlocutors and the institution were conditions stipulated for entry and continued presence in the field, in accordance with the General Data Protection Law (LGPD).

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