

NEO-EXTRACTIVISM AND CORPORATE AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS OF BENTO RODRIGUES, MARIANA/MG

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Abstract

This article investigates the dynamics of neoextractivism and corporate authoritarianism in the context of the Fundão Dam criminal disaster in Mariana, in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. It analyzes the role of Samarco, the company responsible, and the impact of its activities on the municipality, which, in 2015, culminated in the collapse of the dam. The study revisits the old urban-territorial structure of the community in Bento Rodrigues, a sub-district in Mariana, which was violently affected, examines the reparation process, administrated by the Renova Foundation, and reveals the lack of participation by the affected community and the violence that it has suffered. The Bento Rodrigues resettlement is explored as an example of corporate authoritarianism, where the reparation process has failed due to a lack of transparency, and has disrespected the community, imposing an urban and architectural structure that does not meet their needs and has mischaracterized their way of life.

Keywords

Neoextractivism; Involuntary Resettlement; Bento Rodrigues; Corporate Authoritarianism; Ways of Life.

NEOEXTRATIVISMO E AUTORITARISMO CORPORATIVO NO PROCESSO DE REASSENTAMENTO DE BENTO RODRIGUES, MARIANA/MG

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Resumo

Este artigo investiga a dinâmica do neoextrativismo e do autoritarismo corporativo no contexto do desastre-crime da Barragem de Fundão no município de Mariana, Minas Gerais. Analisam-se o papel da Samarco, empresa responsável, e o impacto de suas atividades no referido município, que culminaram no rompimento da barragem em 2015. O estudo recupera a antiga estrutura urbano-territorial da comunidade de Bento Rodrigues, subdistrito de Mariana-MG, violentamente afetada, e examina o processo de reparação administrado pela Fundação Renova, mostrando a falta de participação da comunidade atingida e a violência sofrida por ela. O reassentamento de Bento Rodrigues é explorado como um exemplo de autoritarismo corporativo, em que o processo de reparação peca pela falta de transparência e não respeita a comunidade, impondo uma estrutura urbana e arquitetônica que não atende às necessidades dela e descaracteriza seu modo de vida.

Palavras-chave

Neoextrativismo; Reassentamento Involuntário; Bento Rodrigues; Autoritarismo Corporativo; Modos de Vida.

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1. Introduction

This article analyzes the *modus operandi* of the mineral extractive industry in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais (MG), focusing on how it contributes to socio-environmental conflicts and the eviction of residents from areas of mining interest. The article also critiques the resettlement processes, which have mischaracterized the way of life and housing of the traditional populations.

Outbreaks of conflicts may be observed between distinct spatial practices operating either in the same territory or in interconnected territories, leading to clashes and competition between the different systems of use, control, and meaning of resources, in which the eviction of local groups is not uncommon. Criminal disaster has therefore concretized the threat posed by fore-warned conflicts. With the event, the territory, and territorialities of those affected by the operations of the mining complexes¹ have been permanently compromised.

While this phenomenon is not new, since the 2010s, there has been a marked increase in the number of violent evictions resulting from the negligence of both mining companies and the State. This has further been compounded by deliberate delays in the effective reparation of the damages caused.

The collapse of the Fundão Dam in Mariana, in November 2015, exposed this reality when it released approximately 50 million cubic meters of tailings. The disaster affected several states and cities, killed nineteen people, displaced

1. Mining complexes are characterized by mega-structures that degrade the surroundings of the localities in which they are installed, generating incalculable risks to the diverse forms of adjacent life.

populations from their territories, devastated all the surrounding nature in its path, and made it impossible for various communities to maintain their production and reproduction modes.

The repetition of a similar criminal disaster in Brumadinho (2019), with 270 deaths, reinforces the non-episodic nature of the case addressed in this article.

Reparation has been outsourced through the Renova Foundation, an organization created and controlled by the three companies responsible for the criminal disaster. Thus, the community of Bento Rodrigues, a subdistrict of Santa Rita Durão, devastated by the collapse, has suffered a long resettlement process without the effective participation of the affected people in the decision-making moments that have determined their future.

The mischaracterization of the ways of life occurred not only with the arrival and installation of the mining complexes, but also with the aggravating factors that the collapse has brought with it: the imposition of an urban lifestyle and the dispossession of the rural way of life. The ill health and social suffering of these communities that have not yet been resettled are also present within this context.

Amidst this complex scenario, other actors, besides the companies, from the Renova Foundation, and the public authorities, have played significant roles, and are also analyzed in this article. The Minas Gerais Regional *Cáritas* (CÁRITAS), an organization linked to the Catholic Church, has been acting as a technical advisor to those affected since 2016, and has been fundamental in articulating the interests and defending the rights of the affected communities, with a view to ensuring that their voices are heard and considered in the reparation process. In parallel, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Minas Gerais (MPMG) and the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) have played a critical role in supervising and seeking justice. These bodies have actively monitored the actions of the Renova Foundation and defended public and environmental interests.

Thus, the present study seeks to analyze the manifestation of corporate authoritarianism within the conjuncture of the criminal disaster of the collapse of the Fundão Dam. It specifically sets out to understand how the reparation process, led by large corporations, takes on a violent nature when it fails to adequately consider the ways and projects of life of the affected community. This aspect is especially evident in the Bento Rodrigues resettlement process.

This study therefore proposes a critical analysis of the power and decision-making dynamics during the post-disaster period, emphasizing how corporative actions have directly impacted the lives of those affected people and shaped the reparation process in a manner that is far removed from the community needs and expectations.

2. Context, materials and research methodology

The authors' involvement with the topic began in 2016, shortly after the criminal disaster, when university research and extension groups, already engaged in the issue of mining and its socio-environmental impacts on traditional populations, intensified their studies, thereby attracting more teachers and students to work in this complex field.

One of the authors, a student, living in the region, witnessed at firsthand the impacts of the Fundão Dam collapse. As a result, in 2018, she participated as a fellow in an extension project that carried out a cartography of the homes, territorialities and lifestyles and life projects of the people affected by this criminal disaster in rural areas of the municipality of Mariana, Minas Gerais.

The project in question was conducted together with *Cáritas*, which has acted as technical advisor to those affected in Mariana, providing the first contact with the field and the families involved. In line with the work methodology adopted by this organization, all those affected by the criminal disaster were registered, using the social cartography method.

In the final graduation project, the research material resulting from this study enabled further in-depth research related to the criminal disaster of the collapse of the Fundão Dam, adopting the sub-district of Paracatu de Baixo as a reference case, which was one of the communities directly affected by the quagmire of slurry. The study wove relationships between the evictions of these populations, environmental racism and the areas of mineral exploration in Mariana, in order to understand the interference of the mega-corporations in traditional communities.

The continuation of this study brought the two authors of this article closer together, with the perspective of broadening the research, monitoring the reparation and resettlement processes of the affected population, investigating the involvement of the complex web of actors who work in this process, and analyzing the rupture between their way of life and housing before and after the criminal disaster.

So as to provide a basis for the analysis, the study focused on a case study of the community in the subdistrict of Bento Rodrigues, while adopting a qualitative method. The proposed methodology involved holding semi-structured interviews with local residents, directly affected by the tragedy. This method was chosen for its ability to capture perceptions, experiences and personal narratives, essential elements for understanding the human and social dimensions of the disaster, in addition to enabling a difficult reconstitution of their pre-existing ways of life and housing that no longer exist.

The interviews have therefore provided crucial accounts of the impact of neoextractivism and corporate authoritarianism as experienced by the community. The selection and analysis of these interviews were guided by the objectives of the research, which investigated the socio-spatial consequences of the dam collapse. The adopted method not only enabled relevant data to be collected for the study but also contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the reparation process, including aspects of the Bento Rodrigues resettlement.

The research also involved visits, immersions, and field surveys both in the ruins of the old community affected by the criminal disaster and in the resettlement area. It should be noted that access to these locations was a strenuous task, since Renova, on behalf of the companies, had sought to remove external actors from this reparation process, making physical entry into the settlements difficult. This difficulty imposed on conducting the research is further evidence of the authoritarianism exercised by business corporations.

In addition to the difficulties involved in conducting the study, it is also essential to mention the resistance on the part of the residents to talk about their past, marked by tragedy, by emotionally charged memories, and extreme fatigue after so many years of resistance and expectations for a reparation that has taken so long to come through and that, by no means at all, is able to recover what was lost.

3. Neoextractivism and its impact on the territory

3.1 The operations of the mineral extractive industry and the expansion of the neoextractive frontier

Neoextractivism is defined as a development model focused on economic growth, and based on the large-scale extraction and appropriation of natural resources for export, in poorly diversified production networks, culminating in subordination to international geoeconomics. According to Santos and Milanez (2013, p. 119), the presence of neoextractivism in Brazil may be perceived in two dimensions: (i) it may, on the one hand, be associated with the reprimarization process of the Brazilian economy, measured by a constant increase in the participation of the mineral extractive industry in the country's exports and gross domestic product (GDP); and (ii) neoextractivist assumptions, on the other hand, may also be identified in liberalizing proposals such as the new legal framework for mining, prepared in 2011, by the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME).

The intensification of the liberal economic agenda, which as from 2016 gained ultra-liberal nuances, accelerated socio-environmental deregulation, in addition to transferring public assets to the private sector. This was characterized

by the violent, repressive nature of the states and corporations against the affected groups and resistance movements.

According to Wanderley et al. (2020), the dissemination of the image of mineral exploration as a gift has reinforced the broadening of the neoextractivist model, which is presented as a central, inevitable solution for promoting economic growth and job creation, by:

[...] implementing measures so that environmental and labor legislation may become more flexible, for greater business participation in public management and to diminish the participation of organized civil society in political decision-making, with a reduction in dialogue and public debate (Wanderley; Gonçalves; Milanez, 2020, p. 558).²

By reserving territories predisposed to mineral exploration, neoextractivist logic disregards legislation on the environment and heritage and consolidates physical-territorial organization, overlapping with human occupations on different scales. The population, vulnerable to this process, and with no political strength or social capital, is subject to eviction, in what may be understood as environmental racism. This term, according to Herculano (2008, p. 1), “concerns social and environmental injustices that disproportionately affect vulnerable ethnic groups”.

In seeking to increase their profitability, mineral extractive activities, combined with new technologies, in addition to threatening and unbalancing nature, lead to the deterritorialization of populations, neglecting the safety issues of workers and communities living in the vicinity of exploration centers. For Sassen (2016, p. 21):

[...] the geography of extraction has expanded rapidly through new complex technologies and is now characterized by even greater imbalances in its relationship with natural resources and their use [...] threatening essential components of the biosphere, leaving us with ever-increasing expanses of dead land and water.

In the neoextractivist rationality, the extracted resources are mainly aimed at export as raw materials, i.e., it is a development model subordinated to global demands and the volatility of international commodity prices. As Milanez and Losekann (2016) stated, the expansion of this model is linked to the immersion of Latin American governments in the neoliberal prescriptions of the 1990s, which

2. This and all other non-English direct citations hereafter have been translated by the authors.

guaranteed the institutionalization of benefits for large corporations and the acceptance of norms created in transnational spaces. In this context, international capital encounters a favorable environment, given the low energy and labor costs in peripheral countries.

It is within this scenario that the extractive industry in Mariana is inserted, which disregards the harmful consequences of extraction processes, degrading the natural and social environment in which it operates, “especially when dealing with megaprojects – which break the vital cycles of nature and destroy the substantial elements of ecosystems, preventing their regeneration”, as explained by Acosta and Brand (2019, p. 49).

For Harvey (2017), the ecosystem of capital is full of inequalities and uneven geographic developments. Capital often depletes and permanently destroys latent resources in nature. This particularly occurs when capital is geographically mobile, as is the case in the production of the mineral extractive industry. According to Harvey (*ibid.*, p. 238): “[...] the ecological effects are localised, leaving behind an uneven geographical landscape of abandoned mining towns, exhausted soils, toxic waste dumps and devalued asset values”.³

The theoretical analysis raised by these authors is closely related to what we have observed in Mariana: the exploitation of profits resulting from territorial devastation, which includes nature, geographic landscapes and communities adjacent to the exploration centers. This context is inserted in the “disaster industry”, in which the State is a strong, essential ally. “Disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2008) acts as an instrument to enable and accelerate the transnationalization processes of capital, and, within this situation of crisis, we may mention the collapse of the Fundão Dam, a criminal disaster, which has remained irresolute and with no prospect of reparation.

According to Klein (2008), after a criminal disaster of the scale that occurred in Fundão, policies that favor privatization and deregulation are frequently implemented, generally to the detriment of the interests and rights of the affected population. The corporations responsible for the crime use the situation to create markets and expand their influence, both economic and territorial. This is evident in the way the Renova Foundation has managed the reparation process, in which the needs and ways of life of those affected appear to have been secondary to the interests of the companies involved, which have increased their profits and spread further across the territory.

3. N.B. For direct citations the English version was used of HARVEY, D. *Seventeen Contradictions and The End of Capitalism*. UK, Profile Books Ltd. (2014, p. 257)

3.2 The Samarco and Vale operations and their impact on the municipality of Mariana

In November 2015, we witnessed one of the biggest, if not the biggest, socio-technological disasters of a socio-occupational-environmental nature on Brazilian territory, the collapse of the Fundão Dam in Mariana, belonging to the mining company Samarco S.A., a joint venture⁴ between Vale S.A. and BHP Billiton. The crime resulted from a combination of negligence on the part of several actors, which included the mineral extractive industry and the State, with its lack of public policies, regulation and inspection of mining activities, especially with regard to the operations of tailings dams. The toxic tailings from the collapse devastated communities, deprived the territory of its fauna and flora and

[...] traveled around 663 kilometers along the Gualaxo do Norte, Carmo, and Doce rivers, until it reached their mouth, having affected the ecosystem, a vital breeding ground for various animal species. The impact extended beyond the environment, affecting the lives of 35 municipalities in Minas Gerais and four in Espírito Santo (ES), leaving roughly 1.2 million people without water. (Lacaz; Porto; Pinheiro, 2016).

In this context, with territorial devastation, those who were affected by the operations of the mining complexes found themselves deprived of their different territories, their economies, their ways of life and projects. The Samarco/Vale/BHP Billiton criminal disaster illustrates “how the corporate practices and technical options of mining companies operating in Brazil have been poorly guided by the State agencies in charge of their public regulation, whether due to their financial, technical and operational ineptitude, or due to their selective (in)action” (Zonta; Trocate, 2016, p. 94).

Samarco Mineração S.A. is involved in a series of procedures that range from mineral extraction, through secondary processing, to the transoceanic transportation of pellet feed and, mainly, iron ore pellets.⁵ Its operations in the municipality of Mariana began in the late 1970s, at the Germano mine, with the subsequent expansion of its operations to several locations across the region.

The collapse of the Fundão Dam makes part of a trajectory of dam disasters in Minas Gerais, within a context of precarious licensing and monitoring procedures.

4. Samarco Mineração S.A. is a Brazilian mining company founded in 1977, currently controlled by a joint venture between Vale S.A. (former Companhia Vale do Rio Doce) and the Anglo-Australian BHP Billiton.

5. Pellet feed is a type of finely ground iron ore that goes through an agglomeration process, resulting in pellets, which are used in the steel industry.

According to Wanderley et al. (2016), since 1986, seven cases of tailings dam collapsing have been recorded in the state of Minas Gerais alone.

Furthermore, in recent years, according to the same authors (*ibid.*, p. 29), Samarco has significantly increased its water consumption – which was already highlighted in the analysis of its primary processing and tailings disposal operations –, thereby reducing the efficiency levels of its use in extraction, production and transport processes. Simultaneously, the municipality of Mariana experienced a critical situation of water scarcity, which culminated in the establishment and intensification of a supply rotation policy, thus favoring industrial use over human consumption.

Wanderley et al. (2016) argued that choosing the Fundão stream valley as the tailings dam location was the only one of the three locational alternatives that produced direct cumulative impacts and effects on the Germano and Santarém dams, which raised the possibility of a catastrophic domino effect in the event of a collapse. In addition, it was the only option that drained directly towards the rural community of Bento Rodrigues in Mariana, thereby significantly increasing the potential for socio-environmental damage and fatalities. As Wanderley, Gonçalves and Milanez (2020) identified, the document, in relation to the technological choice, presented no alternative technology for the management and treatment of mining waste, even though there were other treatment methods on the market and even possibilities of reusing the slurry.

Thus, as Coelho (2020) explained, dependence on minerals creates a situation of subordination to global commodity markets. This subordination results in environmentally, socially, and economically unstable mining sites due to fluctuations, cyclical or not, in mineral prices. This dependence, according to Coelho (*ibid.*), which is initially of an economic nature, also manifests itself in political-social dependence. It is a multidimensional phenomenon, in that, on a local, state and federal scale, large corporations in the mineral extractive industry include representatives of their interests in public bodies in the deliberative process, seeking advantages for the activity through tax exemptions, licensing flexibility, investment targeting, transport logistics support, infrastructure construction, among other mechanisms.

After explaining how mineral dependence manifests itself in both the economic and political-social dimensions, it becomes crucial to observe the direct repercussions of this dynamic in specific contexts. This is the case of Bento Rodrigues, whose reality was violently altered by the collapse of the Fundão Dam. The destruction of this subdistrict not only exemplifies the material consequences of a deep-rooted dependence on the extractive industry, it also highlights the way

in which corporate decisions and public policies interact, resulting in profound socio-environmental impacts. Thus, as we enter the fourth topic of this article, we focus specifically on the subdistrict of Bento Rodrigues, initially analyzing how the intersection of neoextractivism and corporate authoritarianism manifested itself in the lives of the 612 residents who were forcibly displaced, thereby revealing the deeper layers of the socio-environmental impact caused by the criminal disaster.

4. The subdistrict of Bento Rodrigues and the collapse of the Fundão Dam

The subdistrict of Bento Rodrigues was entirely destroyed by the collapse of the Fundão dam. Recovering its territorial structure, which is now in ruins, and the way of life of its 612 residents, who were forcibly displaced, is essential in order to understand the socio-environmental impact caused by the criminal disaster. The lives of these families have been irremediably transformed, not only by the collapse, but also, as will be seen in section 5, by the authoritarian and insensitive way in which the company organized the resettlement.

4.1 The urban-territorial structure of Bento Rodrigues

While Samarco established and expanded its operations in Mariana, the community of Bento Rodrigues found itself directly within the company's zone of influence, hence, the environment was dramatically shaped by the presence of mining. So as to obtain a better understanding of the impact of the Fundão Dam criminal disaster, it is crucial to examine the urban-territorial structure of Bento Rodrigues at its origins.

According to Ferreira, a collaborator from the *Projeto Museu Virtual Mariana Território Atingido* [Virtual Museum Project of the Affected Territory in Mariana] (2022)⁶, the buildings located in the communities of Mariana are typical examples of rural houses in Minas Gerais, which, at the same time, reveal simplicity and beauty integrated into the landscape (Figure 1). The building complex of each plot of land, whether urban or rural, presents typical characteristics of the countryside, related to agricultural crops and animal husbandry, together with the residence itself.

6. In May 2022, there was a significant contribution to the memory and historical records of the criminal disaster in Mariana: the launch of the *Museu Virtual Mariana Território Atingido*. This was the result of collaboration between the Minas Gerais Regional Cáritas, the Commission for People Affected by the Fundão Dam (CABF), the newspaper *A Sirene* and research groups. This digital project consolidated four years of meticulous, in-depth work of collecting and documenting.



Figure 1. Side of the São Bento Church and a section of São Bento Street (2014)

Source: Photograph provided by interviewee M. S. (December 2022).

The urban layout of Bento Rodrigues evolved organically, with plots of land in irregular shapes and sizes, often with no established visual, cartographic boundaries, thereby providing a visually porous landscape. The main axis of this sub-district is São Bento Street, which connected the chapel of the same name to the Chapel of Nossa Senhora das Mercês [Our Lady of Mercy], located on the highest point of the community.

In a field survey carried out in 2022 (Soares, 2024), the houses on Ouro Fino Street were observed (Figure 2), the only street where access to the original territory is permitted. This is one of the highest sections of the subdistrict that was not directly hit by the “avalanche” of tailings. The other streets, not directly destroyed by the wave of tailings, have been blocked by Samarco, which strictly controls the entry, stay and exit of both cars and people.

The few houses that still exist are in ruins, unkept, deteriorated by time and with no windows, which were looted shortly after the dam failed. Most of the buildings were single-story, with no surrounding walls or fences, and faced directly onto the street.



Figure 2. Entrance to Bento Rodrigues through Ouro Fino Street

Source: Photograph taken by Natalia Beneton (December 2022).

According to the listing registration dossier for Bento Rodrigues (PPGACPS, 2019)⁷, together with what is evident from the aerial photos (Figures 3 and 4), the other streets, such as Raimundo Muniz – which emerged as an alley in the eighteenth century –, Dona Olinda and Nossa Senhora das Mercês, were perpendicular to the main axis and part of the street that was established as from the twentieth century. In Figure 3, it is possible to identify São Bento Street, which is the main axis of the subdistrict's road network, connecting the Church of São Bento, now in ruins, to the das Mercês Church, at the highest point of the community. In Figure 4, it may be observed that a large portion of the subdistrict's territory was directly affected by the slurry.

According to the listing registration dossier for Bento Rodrigues (PPGACPS, 2019), the Church of São Bento (Figures 5 and 6), the patron saint of the community, built in 1718, was destroyed by the avalanche of tailings, leaving just the foundations and floors, as well as other architectural and applied art elements.

7. Published in 2019 and produced as a result of collaboration between Icomos Brasil, Instituto de Estudos do Desenvolvimento Sustentável (IEDS) and the Postgraduate Program in Built Environment and Sustainable Heritage (PPGACPS – UFMG), this dossier is a technical, historical document that offers guidelines for the preservation of historical-cultural heritage and for recovering the memory of Bento Rodrigues.

These cultural assets were retrieved shortly after the disaster during emergency work by the Minas Gerais Public Prosecutor's Office, and are now archived in the Reserva Técnica, in the center of Mariana. Figure 5 features Sandra's Bar, an important meeting place and passing through point for people from the community, and the church, before the collapse. The wreckage is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 3. Satellite image of Bento Rodrigues, before the Fundão Dam collapse (2015)
Source: Google Earth Pro (July 2015).



Figure 4. Satellite image of Bento Rodrigues after the Fundão Dam collapse (2016)
Source: Google Earth Pro (April 2016).



Figura 5. Sandra's Bar and Church of São Bento (2012)

Source: Google Street View (July 2012).

The church, of significant historical and emotional value, is highly esteemed by local residents. Most of the community's baptisms and weddings have taken place there, as well as numerous religious celebrations. The urban layout and squares are also of great heritage value, particularly the central square, located in front of the São Bento Church, the scene of festivals and sports tournaments and where everyday life also took place.



Figure 6. The ruins of Sandra's Bar and the São Bento Church after the collapse (2015)

Source: *FolhaPress*. Photograph taken by Avener Prado (2015).

4.2 Housing and the everyday life in Bento Rodrigues

In the previous item, we briefly addressed the urban-territorial structure of Bento Rodrigues and the way in which the community had been shaped by the environment and the presence of mining. It is also necessary for us to understand the essence of life in this location and the subsequent impacts brought by the collapse of the Fundão Dam, by analyzing the daily life of the community at its origin, through the vegetable plots, backyards and neighborhood relationships.

The material collected by the collaborators of the Affected Territory Project (2022) demonstrate that backyards are characterized as spaces used for food production, as well as for family life, work, and leisure. They also constitute a central element of family farming developed by residents of the affected communities. They reveal the specificity of production practices, experiences of sociability and organizational forms of family work. Cultivation and backyard care practices reflect the complexity of their knowledge that connects generations, as related by M. M., affected by Bento Rodrigues, in an interview conducted in December 2022:

If I were to go to your house and saw a seedling, whether it was something for decoration or for production, I would ask its name, “*can you get me a seedling? A seed? What’s it called?*”, and so I produced different kinds of oranges, different kinds of bananas, jaboticaba [Brazilian grapetree], lots of trees, mango, acerola, sweetsop, custard apple, breadfruit, soursop, star fruit, everything like that. The plantations were inside what was just mine. There were two [plots of land] – facing each other, right on Raimundo Muniz Street. This street was named in honor of my grandfather, a storyteller from Bento Rodrigues.

In addition to guaranteeing the domestic consumption of the house, the production from the backyards (Figure 7) would be distributed among neighborhood groups and family members, thus forming networks of exchange and reciprocity mediated through food. The flows that involved food, affection, courtesies and gifts also linked this community to residents in other locations, such as the center of Mariana itself. The importance may be observed of family farming and the economy based on exchanges between the residents of Bento Rodrigues, a context that brought security and food sovereignty to the community. According to M. M., affected by Bento Rodrigues (2022):

It worked both as an exchange, and when it came to sales. I can mention maize as an example. My brother-in-law [...] Mauro, he often always remembers, he’d planted maize there, and he’d say “no, you can have some of the stalks”, they picked the ears and said “take

the stalks so you can grind them up to give to the cattle”, and then it would be, “take some wine for yourself, some rum, take some eggs” [...] And there were vegetables too, at the back of the kitchen, [...] my wife wouldn't even need to step onto the soil to pick green onions, parsley, greens. [...] That's what the productions were like, and there was cheese, milk, [...].



Figure 7. Backyard with a vegetable garden in Bento Rodrigues (early the 2000s)
Source: Photograph given to Brasil de Fato by the interviewee M. M. (Tavares, 2016).

In addition to production, the backyard usually housed a wood stove and a clay oven, important elements in the cuisine of Minas Gerais and which are currently reasons for dispute in the Bento Rodrigues resettlement, as stated by the affected M. S., interviewed in December 2022:

The project was also put on hold for some time because the Renova Foundation gave no response, and still hasn't, about the wood stove. They're installing pre-molded wood stoves in several houses in the family resettlement, and the stoves have burst, because they can't take the heat, they can't take the fire all day long. The wood stove that we're used to, that we've always used, you light the fire in the morning and it stays alight all day long until nighttime. So I said "Look, I don't want a pre-molded stove in my house, because that's not what I'm used to. In my house it was always a brick stove." If the Renova Foundation had delivered the resettlement on the scheduled date, then my brother would've built the wood stove. He passed away two years ago. So, there's a lot of things that those on the outside often think is because we want too much, but it's not that. This will greatly influence our ways of life [...].

For eight years, the community has been enduring the ongoing disaster, grappling simultaneously with the forced displacement to the center of Mariana. This displacement has fundamentally altered their access to food. Families now find their meals dictated by the limitations of their available monetary resources. Insecurity regarding the origin and quality of the food they can afford is compounded by the fracturing of social connections traditionally fostered through shared meals and food-related activities.

Backyards served as vibrant canvases for expressing social and family relationships. They mirrored the unique ways of life and cultures cherished by these communities, such as weddings, baptisms, and birthdays, functioning as the vital nucleus for family socialization. However, as we will explore in the next section, this cherished way of life has faced significant change due to the process of deterritorialization.

5. Authoritarianism in the resettlement process of those affected: reparation as the destruction of a way of life

This item addresses how the reparation process was privatized following the Mariana disaster, particularly its ramifications for the residents of Bento Rodrigues. It sheds light onto how the lack of democratic participation in the decision-making has directly affected the livelihoods of those impacted, further exacerbating the challenges that these communities are faced with.

5.1 Characterizing the reparation process by the companies responsible for the crime

Bento Rodrigues was the first location in the municipality of Mariana to be devastated by the wave of ore tailings, located 5.5 km downstream of the Fundão Dam. Of the 612 residents, it is estimated that, at the time, four hundred were in the area. It should be noted that no emergency plan with any alarm system was activated (Cáritas; CABF, 2020).

In 2016, the Federal General Attorney's Office reached an extrajudicial agreement with both the companies and the governments of the states involved that put an end to several regional public civil actions filed against the defendant companies. Through the Transaction and Conduct Adjustment Term (TTAC), the reparation measures began to be administered by a private foundation called Renova, representing Vale/Samarco/BHP Billiton.

Thus, one of the 42 programs under the responsibility of the Renova Foundation, specifically dedicated to resettlement, placed the administration of this entire crucial process in the hands of the Foundation itself.

The privatizing treatment given to the resettlement process opened a new frontier of accumulation, which included the privatization of essential public sectors and services. Companies – in alliance with the State – “established new rules, created inter-federative collegiate bodies and foundations, designed and imposed new governance models” (Rojas, 2020, p. 58), thereby excluding the affected population from the decision-making processes.

According to Santos and Milanez (2018, p. 137), the absence of representatives from the affected communities in the decision-making process and in the subsequent preparation of the TTAC resulted from a decision by the public authorities to keep them away from the process. The idea was that the guarantee and defense of trans-individual rights and interests would constitute a technical issue, thereby restricting decision-making power to the Renova Foundation, environmental agencies, hired experts and State bureaucracy.

Thus, the preparation of the TTAC presented a significant imbalance of forces, in which the influence of the private sphere, represented mainly by the Renova Foundation, was disproportionately greater in comparison to the governmental component. The Foundation emerged as the almost exclusive agent of intervention along the Doce River, assuming varied responsibilities that ranged from identifying those affected and defining compensation criteria for environmental management, such as carrying out studies on contamination and drawing up the Tailings Management Plan (Losekann; Milanez, 2018, p. 28).

This centralization and the method of approach adopted by the TTAC led the Public Prosecutor’s Office (MPF) to position itself against the agreement. The MPF not only refrained from signing the TTAC, but also took legal action against its approval, arguing that the agreement failed to incorporate the needs and demands of the affected communities, since it did not ensure their effective participation in the environmental recovery and compensation process. Aligned to this, while the MPF maintained an open public civil action against Samarco, a negotiation process was initiated with the lawyers of the companies involved (Samarco, Vale and BHP Billiton), in order to modify problematic aspects of the TTAC. This initiative was, in part, a response to the demands of the mobilizations of those affected, and represented a negotiation strategy with a view to obtaining more equitable agreements (Losekann; Milanez, 2018, p. 29).

The forced displacement of the Bento Rodrigues community, as well as the structural changes that the population was obliged to face, demonstrates the violent atmosphere that the reparatory process acquired. The community’s livelihoods were altered, creating food insecurity; the loss of community and cultural ties destroyed their traditional ways of life, external to the neoliberal capitalist circuit. M. M. F. (2022), technical advisor and affected person from another community that

was destroyed – Paracatu de Baixo –, offered us a comparative vision between the old territory and the reality of waiting for resettlement:

The dynamics were like this: you'd arrive, and there'd be so many people on the street, lots of children playing in the street, it was all very permeable, even the houses, I'm at your house, I'm having coffee and what not, then next door I'd grab some vegetables and take them home. But here in Mariana [where they were taken], obviously, we don't have any of this, [...], it's all on a very large scale, and the people are very cut off [...] from you sitting at the front door, chatting. And you don't know who your neighbor is here. There, at least everyone knew everyone, everyone. [...] When the dam collapsed, the people [of Mariana] blamed the families [of Bento Rodrigues] because the mining had stopped. [...] [People] died in the mud and people put up a sign saying "Samarco Stay". [...] Older people find it much more difficult to adapt; the older the person, the more they want to go back to their origins. But not younger people. They're more adapted, they've created a relationship with the neighborhood, with the neighbor.

According to Chauí (2008, p. 70), "in the case of the poorer classes, rights are always presented as concessions and grants given by the State, depending on the personal will or discretion of the ruler". This assertion may be observed in a speech by Mauro Silva, a resident of Bento Rodrigues, for the newspaper *A Sirene* (Tavares; Gonçalves, 2019):

At the hearings, we observe that the opinions of those affected are not taken into account. We are in the audience merely as a figurative institution, with no power of voice. I realize that we are being used to validate something that has already been previously defined. What companies have always been preaching – equality, impartiality, this has not happened. We regret all of this, because this is a reparatory process, and nothing to do with being a kind of bonus, as if it were something being done to make people happy, so to speak. Resettlement is an act of reparation for something that was criminally removed, and this reparation has not been conducted fairly. We regret that this space is not democratic. But we will continue the fight, we will not give up.

The atmosphere of violence that has set in with the arrival of mining complexes, which has become even worse with the collapse of the Fundão Dam, has permeated families and territories to this day. As Zhouri (2020, p. 53) explains, "denaturalizing violence is understanding the current ways in which it presents itself and is intensified, a task that is a constant challenge in understanding Brazil and the struggle to build a more just society, dignified and diverse."

For Zhouri (ibid., p. 60), the symbolic violence that determines inclusions and exclusions culminates in the expropriation and consequent annihilation of a way of life. This symbolic and material violence is aligned with institutional violence, which changes norms and regulatory frameworks and establishes the expulsion policy in which human rights violations occur.

Housing must be considered part of the territory, which involves work, affection, belonging, neighborhood relations, autonomy, memory and an economy based on exchanges. Therefore, the resettlement process should not only take housing typology into account, but also the modes of production and reproduction in the rural territory, including improvements, creations, plantations, and backyards. However, defining the project presented numerous interruptions. The various alternations of outsourced teams have fractured the process of collectively elaborating the resettlement design with the affected community, dismantling the bonds created with the responsible professionals. This is what Rennê Tavares, technical advisor at Cáritas, said at the time, in an interview given to the newspaper *A Sirene*:

We have seen professionals arrive from the new company [Renova] with the finished project, without building or developing the project as something that was reached. This professional just sits in his office and develops a project in his head, which he considers to be most relevant. Except that, for the lives of these people who have not left their homes because they wanted to, this does not apply to them, because they need to have effective participation in developing their homes. [...] This process, which goes from pre-project through to the detailing, is a process that should never leave the company that developed the preliminary project together with the affected family. And this was the first thing that Renova did. It took it away from the company and turned the project into such a mess, that the person affected, in the end, had no power whatsoever to decide exactly how he wanted it. (Tavares; Gonçalves, 2019)

The first deadline for completing the works expired in March 2019, as well as the subsequent deadlines, in August 2020 and February 2021. The deadline was changed three times to benefit the mining companies, thereby aggravating the conditions of vulnerability, social suffering, insecurity, and injustice for all those affected (Cáritas, 2021).

The urban plan and the design of the houses were prepared while the registration, a key stage carried out by the technical advisory team, was in progress. This was based on the form that initiated the registration process for assessing their losses and damages suffered.

This form is the primary source for the other complementary instruments. An extensive document, which sought to cover the widest range of possible losses and damages caused as a result of the dam collapse, and may contain up to 4,400 questions, depending on the sections to be addressed in relation to each family unit. They are subdivided into four main thematic axes: Axis 1 – Material assets: personal documents, land, infrastructures, plantations, main and accessory buildings, improvements, domestic and personal assets and vehicles; Axis 2 – Economic activities: salaried work, fishing, agriculture, livestock, commercial activities, services, self-employed activities, among other sources of income; Axis 3 – Collective goods: schools, health centers, religious temples, post offices, public lighting, leisure spaces, sewage and pavements; Axis 4 – Intangible assets and moral damages: use of time, popular festivities, loss of the river, human losses, processes of physical and mental illness, suffering, among others.

In October 2022, seven years after the population had been evicted from its territory, the Term of Commitment was signed, which supported the action plan between the Renova Foundation and the Municipality of Mariana to guarantee that essential services (water and sewage, transport public, urban cleaning, lighting and security) would function in the resettlement. Figure 8, below, presents a house in the final stages, the tiered levels of the building, the access stairways and the new relationship that the property established with the street.



Figure 8. House nearing completion in the Bento Rodrigues resettlement (2022)

Source: Photograph taken by Natalia Beneton (2022).

In December 2022, the Renova Foundation announced on its social networks that the Novo Bento infrastructure had been completed, and that moving to the resettlement would take place at the beginning of 2023, although with no indication of a definitive date. Since the day of the criminal disaster, November 5, 2015, 58 residents from the Bento Rodrigues community have died without ever having their rights fulfilled.

5.2 Defining corporate authoritarianism and how it materialized in the case of the Bento Rodrigues

Large companies operating in the neoextractive sector wield corporate authoritarianism, which is intrinsically linked to the power imbalances inherent in the conflict dynamics of mining territories. As long as companies continue to prioritize profit over human rights and environmental protection, and as long as affected communities continue to be in a position of vulnerability and marginalization, the situation of conflict and inequality in these regions will tend to perpetuate.

The collapse of the Fundão Dam and the resettlement of the community are part of the authoritarian logic promoted by large corporations, currently exemplified by the Renova Foundation, since it imposes a slow reparation process, linked to a lack of transparency and democratic participation. For Mônica dos Santos, a resident in Bento Rodrigues, in an interview with the newspaper *A Sirene* (2023):

In a few years, maybe not even years, we'll be talking about [...] families who had to leave their properties in the worst way. And we'll still be talking about reparations, we'll be talking about non-punishment. It just keeps going on and on, right? That's why the Renova Foundation was created exactly for that, to renew the crime every day. [...] What I can see and perceive from all this is that, although they said they'd learned from the crime of the 5th, they haven't. [...] They go on acting in the same way. [...] And, they simply won't learn because they don't want to learn, you know? (Sobreira, et al., 2023)

Figure 9 draws attention to the tiered backyards and to the major containment and drainage works. When visiting the construction sites of the houses, the families are surprised by the size of the rooms and the containment structures, as well as by the permeable areas. They have been dissatisfied, despite the hegemonic viewpoint that the houses may seem sophisticated and “modern,” as M. S. (2022) states:

When we made our choice [of house], we drew up plans where everything would be, and when the Renova Foundation started the

construction, it was totally different from what we had planned. [...] When people arrive, they see that it's really striking, you know... because of the colors, each one has a different color, bright colors, and these buildings of today, you know, always two floors, so it attracts a lot of attention. It's like the house is very big, much bigger than what we used to have, but that's not the case. Most of them have been left with no land, because the land that was left is so steep, there's no way to plant anything, you know... there's no way to restore our way of life, because we were used to living on the flat land, with a backyard, contact with the earth, vegetables, fruits, and the vast majority today will not have that. [...] The rooms are very small, although the Renova Foundation says that everything is in accordance with the family's wishes, but although we participate, our questions and our wishes are not taken into consideration.



Figure 9. Homes nearing completion in the Bento Rodrigues resettlement (2022)
Source: Photograph taken by Natalia Beneton (2022).

According to the understanding expressed in a report by the *Cáritas* Technical Advisory Team (2021), the Foundation should have improved the methodology for preparing the project, so that families would be guaranteed a full understanding. The problem originated in the choice of land. According to a soil impact and recovery study, areas of agricultural suitability are restricted. Most of the land presents low fertility levels, with poor, shallow soils, susceptible to erosion, and unsuitable for planting and livestock. The methodology adopted by Renova prioritized the architectural projects of the houses, without integrating the improvement and land use into the projects, so much so that it does not restore the rightful full area of the families, directly impacting both the area of use and occupation of the lot and the

possibility of reproducing their ways of life. With no decision on how compensation will be implemented, families will suffer enormous losses due to the loss of area. Interviewee M. M. (2022) revealed:

They talk about restoring the same ways of life. So, I need these lands, don't I? So I can have the same ways of life. [...] I need these other lands. Why? [...] I'll be able to do what I like doing most. Working with crops and with animals, without land, so my two lots are here, [...] on Raimundo Muniz Street, the same, the same as they were. [...] On the original land they were opposite each other. So I said: "You're putting my land over there. One was thrown toward the street, and the other into another. How can I stop living on a street, when the street is named after my grandfather, can I stop living there?"

The construction of new homes follows a logic essentially linked to the neoliberal capitalist circuit, a reality foreign to the old territory, resembling a gated condominium because of the standardization and homogenization that the resettlement has reproduced (Figure 10). The forced introduction of a new housing standard to the community, which disregards local ways of life and culture, may be understood as an expression of corporate authoritarianism.



Figure 10. Overview of the Bento Rodrigues resettlement, the tiered levels of the building scheme (2022)

Source: Photograph taken by Estefânia Momm (2022).

Corporate authoritarianism generates the imposition of policies and practices without considering and respecting the rights and interests of the affected residents, creating an undemocratic context with no effective participation. Decisions centralized in Renova were dominant in the resettlement process. Before the arrival of the technical advisory team, those affected were exposed to decision-making using data and materials offered by Samarco, thereby lacking transparency or access to detailed information.

The affected community of Bento Rodrigues, according to Zhouri (2018), faces difficulties due to the format of the reparation policies and with the organizational demands imposed by the State and the companies involved. The means, the language, and the temporality of the standardized, institutionalized channels for “participation” reveal not only the limits, but also the pernicious effects of the management of damage and suffering, when their diverse experiences and languages are transformed into immediately apprehensible and measurable attributes under the standardized and numerical register of instruments such as the “socioeconomic registration” of the victims and the “matrix of losses and damages”. In issue 84 of the newspaper *A Sirene* (2023), Lucas Marra, Maria Luísa Sousa and Rodrigo Passos, technical advisors at Caritas Regional Minas Gerais, stated:

There is a continuous line between the collapse of the Fundão dam and the construction of the Bento Rodrigues and Paracatu de Baixo resettlements. A risk which, for more than seven years, has been revealed as vulnerability, and takes on different characteristics from what existed before in the original communities. New crossings compared to what is perceived when the conceptual stages of the houses are carried out, the factors of insecurity are highlighted as the works progress, in the distribution of land, in the materiality of the projects and in the new configurations of the public roads. (Sobreira, et al., 2023)

It is necessary to consider the original territory and strive to maintain protection networks in the face of any risk so that the affected people are able to resume their ways of life. The events surrounding the collapse of the Fundão Dam are many, and every day demonstrate the continuity of violations, violence and damage caused by predatory mining, as well as the struggles of those affected.

6. Final considerations

This text has explored several interrelated themes, all centered on the criminal disaster of the Fundão Dam in Mariana, in the state of Minas Gerais. Having reached our final considerations, it is crucial to link these distinct elements in order to understand the breadth and depth of this event and its infinite impacts.

First, we must consider the broader context of neoextractivist frontier expansion. The mineral extractive industry, exemplified by Samarco's activities in Mariana, has played a fundamental role in the Mariana, Brazilian and global economy. However, as we have seen in this municipality in Minas Gerais, this expansion often comes at the cost of exploitation and the subsequent destruction of local communities and the environment, with potentially devastating effects.

The collapse of the Fundão Dam in 2015 was a tragic example of these effects. The criminal disaster not only caused significant human losses and environmental damage, but also forcibly displaced entire communities, including Bento Rodrigues, shedding light on the practices of the mineral extractive industry, specifically with regard to the management of tailings dams and corporate responsibility.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the reparation process led by the Renova Foundation has revealed its non-participatory nature, showing traces of corporate authoritarianism.

The community of Bento Rodrigues, which suffered a direct impact from the collapse of the Fundão Dam, has largely been excluded from decisions about its own future, including the resettlement process, which has not considered the complexity of the affected population's lifestyles, since it does not reflect the traditions and culture of the community, nor does it respect the urban-territorial structure that shaped life in the original territory.

This case evokes the need to consider the importance of meaningful, participatory involvement of the affected communities at all stages of the reparation process, since it is understood that adequate reparation could prevent the recurrence of these events.

In turn, it becomes evident that reparation processes must be managed by autonomous entities independent of the responsible companies. The essential condition of greater corporate accountability, with the adoption of stronger governance policies within the mineral extractive industry, should not exclude State accountability, when characterized by signs of insufficient regulation and inspection.

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