

## *Oikonomia*. Governing the House in Land Reform Settlements in Brazil

### Abstract

In this paper, I explore the notion of *oikonomia*, which I translate as 'government of the house', as a tool to understand how the house, an object of State policies, is also a focus of everyday living practices. Aristotle is usually credited as being the first to formulate a notion of « domestic economy », under the label of *oikonomia*. However, a close reading of his writings, brings out the centrality of the concern with « government » in a Foucauldian sense, involving both government of the self, and government of the other.

Drawing on this insight, and on a long-term ethnography, I look at the ways the house, has become the main focus of tension between the government by the State agencies and beneficiaries' practices in three land reform settlement projects (*assentamentos*) in the Northeast region of Brazil. Most beneficiaries had formerly been resident workers, known as dwellers (*moradores*) in sugarcane plantations ; the house was therefore a pillar of the traditional system of personal domination by plantation masters. As the Land Reform State project gives a central role to production concerns, State agents are prone to « govern the house » using legal and economic tools. Brazilian government agencies set up projects of "housing units" in *assentamentos* in order to provide shelter for the labour force in charge of exploiting the land under the regime of « family agriculture ».

By contrast, for project beneficiaries, a '*casa*' (and a *sítio*, the house and agricultural space whose meaning is even closer to Greek *Oikos*) refers to a material and moral construct, whose physical and moral boundaries shift across time and changes in family configurations. Concerns for "sustaining the house", as a means to insure life and good life are linked to the double striving for autonomy and protection, and imbued with the claim for the recognition of one's moral worth (reputation). *Oikonomia* offers a template to re-conceptualize from ethnography as "government of the household" everyday domestic practices that are usually seen from the perspective of "domestic economy", thus highlighting the political, moral and affective aspects that are crucial for our interlocutors in the field.

One Saturday afternoon, last October 2014, Careca, protected from the hot sun by a tin roof, was addressing, in a calm but firm tone, a small gathering in the *agrovila*, the urbanized nucleus of Bonito, a Land Reform settlement in the *Zona da Mata*, the sugarcane area in the Brazilian State of Pernambuco. This ordinary meeting of the Association of Bonito Beneficiaries was informal, as less than a quarter of the 65 members had bothered to show up at. Careca, a former leader of the Landless Workers Movement (MST), who had become a beneficiary from the Federal State Land Reform in a neighbouring settlement and had just been elected as executive of the local Rural Workers Union, tried to uphold the morale of his fellow beneficiaries, who were complaining about general neglect by the State and local politicians, lack of

resources, and specifically the further delaying of long expected funds for reforming the houses<sup>1</sup>: “If you visit the *engenbos* [sugarcane plantations] belonging to the *usina* [sugar refinery], what is the quality of houses [there] ? Most are still made of mud (*taipa*) and conjugated houses [*arruado*]”. He contrasted that with the situation in Bonito, where beneficiaries live in independent houses made of bricks:

“Here you live on what is yours, and your house provides support! (...) It may not be well finished, it may lack a soil or a toilet, but you have a large house, which may shelter the whole family! (...) Everyone who has lived in *engenbos* knows the quality of houses there. They are terrible, terrible! (...) We are undergoing difficulty, but we have a better house, at least you have your own plot of land, you may plant what you wish, you go to work at the time you wish, and you do whatever you want in your plot! And nobody is going to arrive giving you orders and tell you: “Hey! Either you go to work, or leave this shack!”.

Cabeludo intertwined here arguments about the quality of the houses in the land reform settlements compared to the ones in neighboring sugarcane plantations, and about the advantages of “living on one’s own” and not having to obey orders. He was drawing here on the previous experience of many beneficiaries, who had been living on plantations, where residence was conditional on their availability to work upon demand by the boss or his foremen. What Cabeludo’s speech made clear, is how crucial the issue of the house is for Land Reform beneficiaries, entangling conditions of living, autonomy and security.

In a previous work (de L’Estoile, 2014), I articulated an ethnographically based critique of dominant perspectives in economic anthropology, which, while striving to formulate empirically and theoretically better grounded accounts of “the economy” than standard market models, still routinely uses the “idiom of the economy”, if not of economics, as a taken for granted frame of reference (see also Narotzky and Besnier, 2014; Motta & al. 2014; Shipton 2014). I suggested that, even if it was difficult to shake our deeply entrenched ontological belief in the existence of “the economy”, we might try to suspend it for a while, and look for alternative frameworks for describing and making sense of daily practices of “making a living” and trying to “lead a good life”. I suggested to look at the ways local fields of opportunities and frames of reference shape expectations by paying attention to vernacular versions of what Aristotle called *oikonomia*, understood as “government of the house”. In this paper, I intend to go further along this path, both theoretically, by elaborating the notion of *oikonomia*, and ethnographically, by exploring the issue of the “governing the house”, in a context where the house is a *focus* of tension between state agencies and

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<sup>1</sup> As of May 2015, the process is still in uncompleted.

beneficiaries, in Brazilian Land Reform Programme settlement projects. I will start by outlining how the notions of *oikonomia* and *politiké* might be more helpful than notions such as “domestic economy” or “economy of the house”. I will then look at the way Brazilian government agencies in charge of Land Reform policy set up projects of “housing units” in *assentamentos* in order to provide shelter for the labour force in charge of exploiting the land under the regime of « family agriculture. Finally, I will try to show that *oikonomia* provides an alternative framework for describing and understanding local conceptions and practices of the house/home.

### 1. *Oikonomia* : Domestic Economy or Government of the House?

At the risk of being overly reductive, one could lump up the efforts of economic anthropology and sociology as aiming to uncover the “social foundations of the economy” (to use Bourdieu’s words) or to study “how culture shapes the economy” (Zelizer 2010). This has been immensely successful and has greatly increased and complexified our understanding of “economic life” outside and beyond the market. Many of those looking for non-market-based approaches follow Karl Polanyi (1957), who credited Aristotle with the “discovery of the economy”, enlisting the Greek philosopher’s musings on *oikonomia* as an ally. *Oikonomia*, as any student of Economics 101 knows, is the etymon of “economy”<sup>2</sup>, but not its synonym. For Hann & Hart (2011), “*oikonomia* was conceived of as the antithesis of the market principle”. Steven Gudeman (e.g. 2012) draws on Aristotle to develop a sort of “anthropological economics”, starting not from the market, as do standard economists, but “from the house”<sup>3</sup>. *Oikos* (οἶκος) has a large span of uses in Greek; it refers to the house as a building, but also the family, the home, or an estate. *Oikonomia* is often translated as “domestic economy” (since *Oikos* corresponds to the Latin « *domus* », house/household) or “management of the household”, or possibly “householding”, a notion Polanyi coined but later abandoned (Gregory 2009). Such renderings locate the notion in the context of an ‘economic’ discussion.

Indeed, Moses Finley, the historian of Ancient Greece (1971 : 19), noted that in works studying ‘economic phenomena’ in other settings (Ancient Athens or the Trobriands), the very existence of the economy was not questioned :

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<sup>2</sup> *Oikonomia*, from *nemein* (to divide, to order) + *oikos*.

<sup>3</sup> Gudeman and Rivera had earlier argued that Aristotle’s views were present among Columbian peasants.

This learned activity presupposes the existence of "the economy" as a concept, difficult as it has become to find a generally acceptable definition. The current debate about "economic anthropology", largely stimulated by Karl Polanyi's insistence on a sharp distinction between what he called the "substantive" and the "formal" definitions of the economy," is a debate about definitions and their implications for (historical) analysis, not about the existence of "the economy."

Polanyi himself significantly writes "Only the concept of the economy, not the economy itself, is in abeyance of course" (1957: 71)<sup>4</sup>.

I would like to challenge this received understanding of *oikonomia*, by looking up the various occurrences of *oikonomia* & *oikonomikè* in Aristotle's *Politics*. He starts by stating that *Oikoi* (households/ estates) are the basic components of the *polis*, the Greek City-State. *Oikonomia* or *oikonomiké* (οἰκονομική) is constantly paired with *Politikè* (πολιτική), referring to civic government/ rule). Aristotle writes in the context of a contrast between the government of citizens in the polis, by the magistrate (*archontos*) and the government of dependents, including slaves, by the master (or administrator) of the *oikos* (*despotès* or *oikonomos*).

It is evident from what has been said, that the government of a master (*despoteia*) and of a city (*politikè*) are not the same, or that all governments are alike to each other, as some affirm; for one is adapted to the nature of free men, the other to that of slaves. The government of an *oikos* (*Oikonomikè*) is a monarchy, since every house is governed by a single ruler [20]; but the government of a *polis* (*politikè*) is the government of free men and equals. *Politics*, [1255b]

Aristotle used the word *Archè*, which means rule or domination (*dominium*). In other words, *oikonomiké* and *politiké* are presented by Aristotle as two forms of exercising rule, the one in the context of the *oikos*, by the housemaster on dependents, the other in the context of the *polis*, on citizens, by the city magistrate. The *despotès*, master (in fact, the term means originally housemaster, Benveniste 1967) rules as a monarch within the *oikos*.<sup>5</sup> In Latin, *Dominus* (master, and especially slave master) is derived from *domus*, referring primarily to the household, not the building; he has full *dominium*, the right to rule legitimately, in his house and on his family. Aristotle states that the concern for the health of the members of the community holds as well for *oikonomia* as for *politikè*. This parallel between the respective modes of government of the *oikos* and of the *polis* echoes the play on the polysemy of « government » by Michel Foucault (1984 : 728), who

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<sup>4</sup> This failure of recognition is due "the difficulty of identifying the economic process under conditions when it is embedded in noneconomic institutions." (ibid.)

<sup>5</sup> Thus Saint Jerome writes "in navi unus gubernator, in domo unus dominus" (quoted by Benveniste 1967: 300): "in a ship one pilot, in the house one master".

suggests it encompasses both the government of the state and the “government of one’s wife and children”<sup>6</sup>.

Aristotle makes a further distinction between *oikonomiké* and *chrematistiké*. *Chrematistiké* refers to the practice of supplying the *oikos* with the necessities of life (through production, or secondarily exchange)<sup>7</sup>. For Aristotle, this activity—which is in fact quite close to what Polanyi calls “substantive economy”—is important insofar as it guarantees the self-sufficiency of the *oikos* and hence is a condition for maintaining its autonomy. Supplying the necessities of life of the *oikos*, is thus subordinated to *oikonomia*, concerned with the government of persons rather than with the administration of things. Aristotle states that “*Oikonomia* involves more care for men than for the acquisition of things, more of the quality of men than of things, more of free men than of slaves”. In that sense, *oikonomia* has a moral dimension, as it involves both the government of oneself and of other<sup>8</sup>. Polanyi (1957: 81) notes this specificity of *oikonomia* :

The economy – as the root or the word shows, a matter of the domestic household or *oikos*—concerns directly the relationship of the persons who make up the natural institution of the household. Not possessions, but parents, offspring and slaves constitutes it.

While Polanyi seems here fully aware that *oikonomia* for Aristotle is primarily about rule, his obsession to counter the “market model” in economics leads him to enlist him as a founder of the substantivist position, writing that “Aristotle’s adherence to the substantive meaning of “economic” was basic to his total argument” (1957: 82).

By contrast, *politiké* refers to “government” in the common-sense use of that term, referring both to policy and politics. Finally, it is useful to bring in an additional notion, *philia*, a topic much elaborated by Aristotle

<sup>6</sup> It is plausible that Foucault, in a context of discussion of ethics, referred here implicitly to Aristotle.

<sup>7</sup> Polanyi points out that “*Chrematistiké* was deliberately employed by Aristotle in the literal sense of providing for the necessities of life, instead of its usual meaning of money-making” (p.92). He suggests it refers to “the art of supply, i.e. procuring the necessities of life in kind”. This is confirmed by Finley : « *Chrematistike* is ambiguous. (Its root is the noun *chrema*, "a thing one needs or uses", in the plural *chremata*, "goods, property".) *Chrematistike* (...) here has the more generic sense of acquisition, less common in ordinary Greek usage [than "the art of money-making"] but essential to Aristotle's argument. (Finley ; 15).

<sup>8</sup> Among the various formulations of « gouvernementalité » by Foucault, I find the following most stimulating : « I call ‘governmentality’ the encounter between techniques of domination exercised on other, and techniques of the self ». He added that he was getting more and more interested in « the interaction which takes place between oneself and the other », and « the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself through techniques of the self ». Foucault, 1982 : 785.

in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Suffice it to say here that *philia*<sup>9</sup> refers to the relational-affective links between humans, between friends, but also within a family, a city, or any kind of human community.

Although I hope my reconstruction of Aristotle's use of *oikonomia* is well-grounded, I am not advocating any return to an Aristotelian notion of *oikonomia*<sup>10</sup>. I am instead borrowing from Aristotle a term related to "economy", but with a different meaning, and use it, with a Foucauldian twist, as a template to formulate an alternative analytical framework to the 'economic' one. To sum it up, *oikonomia*, or government of the house, involves three interrelated aspects:

- A) the ability to rule as a master on one's own house and one own land.
- B) everyday practices aimed at supplying the "necessaries of life" (what we can call, following Aristotle, *krematistikè*), so as to insure the autonomy of the house, either by production, by exchange in the market or by mobilizing networks of reciprocity and solidarity (*philiai*).
- C) the house as a place for a "good life", not primarily materially, but morally: assuming control of oneself and one's house and being recognized by one's peers as a "proper person".

The acid test for this framework, of course, will be its capacity to enhance (or not) our describing and understanding concrete situations.

## 2) The government blueprint : housing the « Family Unit » for production

Before laying out the Pernambuco version of *oikonomia*, I'll turn first to the *politikè* aspect, which in the case of Land reform settlements has three dimensions:

- a) *politikè* regards the relationships, within the settlement project, between the houses, the beneficiary families, which includes the association politics
- b) it regards the relationships, individual or collective, of beneficiaries with the state agencies (or NGOs) in charge of implementing State policies
- c) finally, local politics at the municipal level, with the mayor and municipal representatives.

I will focus here on the second aspect. An earlier Bonito association meeting I attended in 2006 was presided by João, an officer of the INCRA (National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform), the

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<sup>9</sup> Finley, *op.cit.* : 8., noting that *philia* is "conventionally, but inadequately translated 'friendship'" suggests "mutuality" as an equivalent.

<sup>10</sup> Which is premised on the natural inferiority of slaves and women.

Federal State agency in charge of implementing Land Reform. When one beneficiary complained that other were letting their house in the *agrovila* (semi-urban nucleus in the settlement) for rent to alien people, thus generating problems, especially violence, João reacted strongly and stated forcefully: «There is a house only because there is a plot (*parcela*) ! ». He expanded on this point:

If someone has misused the house, which was for the family, and let it, he is the one responsible. He will be called, be given a deadline to vacate the house. Otherwise, he will be excluded from the Land reform process.

The association's president expressed his weariness to hear beneficiaries replying to his observations: "The house is mine, I can let, lean or gives it to whomever I want". João erupted: "Mine my foot! How much did you pay to say : "it's mine"?"?. Showing his leather bag, he said: "I can say it's mine because I paid it, I have the bill!". The situation was different for houses, he argued:

The house does not belong to the beneficiary. It is not « mine ». The house was destined for the family to dwell, so as to provide it with the conditions of having a dwelling in order to produce on the plot. This is the finality, the objective of the house. It was financed by the Federal Government, by way of Housing credit [*habitação*].

João expressed here the official point of view of the State agency, stressing that the house is but an attribute of the plot . João's reminder to beneficiaries to follow the official rules reveals the importance taken by the house for beneficiaries, and the discrepancies between their expectations and the official blueprint (Lestoile, 2015).

Bonito is one of the three Land reform settlement projects (*projetos de assentamento*) in the Southern part of the State of Pernambuco where I am conducting fieldwork since 1997 (de l'Estoile and Sigaud, 2001). From 1951 on, they had been large sugarcane plantations (*engenhos*), in the hands of two brothers (they were not landowners, as they were renting the estates, but were "bosses"). In 1997, they were expropriated by the Federal State and turned into settlement projects under the Land Reform Programme. While about one third of each plantation was turned into an "environmental preservation area", the rest was subdivided into plots (from 4 to 7ha), granted by INCRA to beneficiaries, rural workers of either sex and their families. Those were of two kinds: on the one hand, former workers of the plantation (who according to land reform law have priority), who were either residing on the plantations (*moradores*), or who had left it, for small houses or barracks in the neighbouring smalltown; on the other hand, those who had participated in the land occupation or were later included by the local Rural Workers Union; most of

them were also sugarcane cutters, a number of whom had earlier worked or lived on these very plantations. The three settlements are quite different in their history and therefore in their composition<sup>11</sup>.

The creation of the *assentamento* defines a space where specific rules obtain, in stark contrast both with the order of the plantation formerly ruling the territory and its inhabitants, now abolished, and with the sugarcane plantations surrounding the *assentamento*, as in fact sugarcane shows no sign of declining. Officially, an extensive body of laws and rules defines quite precisely what an *assentamento* project should be, and how it should develop orderly until being considered self-sufficient enough to be emancipated, its beneficiaries becoming legitimate owners of the land. However, State presence is discontinuous and inconsistent, and the new rules of the game are not fully established by this normative framework.

Officially, the objective of the Agrarian Reform is to turn private unproductive land into productive one, through “family agriculture”: that is the rationale for their expropriation by the Federal State, based on the law of Land Reform, decreeing that unproductive land may be expropriated for social use. A family is therefore the basic unit of land reform programs in Brazil. A “Contract of Concession of Use” of a plot of land, in exchange from “agricultural development of the land” by the beneficiary and its family is signed between the INCRA, representing the Brazilian Federal State, and the Family Unit (*Unidade Familiar*), normally represented by a man and a woman (with equal rights): the latter required to live on the lot (*parcela*) or in a zone included in the settlement project (agrovillage), exploit it directly and personally<sup>12</sup>. The “concession of use” is ultimately supposed to turn into actual ownership, and after 10 more years into full property. However, this transitory stage has been dragging off, leading from a legal point of view to a situation that may be characterized as “stabilized precariousness”: beneficiaries enjoy possession, but have no ownership, and may in principle be expelled if they fail to meet the criteria<sup>13</sup>.

The INCRA provides funds (credit) for insuring that beneficiaries have use of a house, either by reforming existing ones, or building new ones. For INCRA, providing housing is primordially to provide a

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<sup>11</sup> In Boa Vista, the plantation was full of resident workers. As a consequence, most beneficiaries were former workers, most of whom had come to live and work on the plantation between 1951, when the plantation had been rented to a farmer, and the early 1990's, when it entered into crisis. The other plantation, while it formed a single unit of exploitation, was in fact legally divided into two estates, which turned into two settlements after expropriation. In Pedra Azul, 26 former registered rural workers (*fichados*), a number of which were leaving in small houses near the Great House, divided the *parcelas* with 8 unregistered workers, and three newcomers who had taken part in land occupations. Finally, the third one, Bonito, was relatively empty at the time of expropriation, except for two *sítios*. 56 families of beneficiaries were settled in the *assentamento*.

<sup>12</sup> Contrato de *assentamento*, 2000

<sup>13</sup> To « stop residing in the place of work or in an area belonging to the project, except for a just cause recognized by the administration of the project » is explicitly stated as a motive for rescinding the contract.



shelter for the labour force in charge of exploiting the plot. In the INCRA view, a beneficiary who becomes unable to cultivate his land should get out of the Land Reform program and leave her plot while simultaneously leaving the house for the new beneficiary. So for INCRA, the land is first and foremost a means of production, while residence is but a secondary consequence. INCRA provides funds (credit) for insuring that beneficiaries have use of a house, either by reforming existing ones, or building new ones house for each parcel, and one parcel for each house. This derivative character is apparent in the very limited size of settlement houses as planned by INCRA<sup>14</sup>. Expanding constructions is in principle submitted to previous authorization by INCRA<sup>15</sup>.

State agents are obsessed with control and with “irregularities”. INCRA officers explain the complexity of the process : settlements have to follow the rules of public administration. Thus each and every receipt has to be signed by both the association’s president and its treasurer. This extremely cumbersome process<sup>16</sup> is completely alien to beneficiaries, who are lacking bureaucratic resources. This is in part a result of accusations of fraud and corruption by beneficiaries and other, which have been repeatedly made against the agency: this has contributed to increasing enormously paperwork and procedures, slowing down the bureaucratic machinery, already considered inefficient by its own agents. The INCRA frame of action is defined by a number of economic and legal constraints, resulting from the working of the Brazilian bureaucratic system. Plans and objectives are decided at a national scale, sometimes ill fitting the local situation. In practice, however, efforts at governing the house translate into trying to spend the part of the budget dedicated to the item of housing by trying to induce the settlement associations to provide ‘proper’ files, formally acceptable for the bureaucratic process. In fact, there is a high degree of discrepancy between the settlement as it exists on paper in INCRA Recife headquarters and as it is for those who live in it. The confrontation between these two conflicting realities takes place when INCRA agents, such as João, meet beneficiaries (L’Estoile 2015).

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<sup>14</sup> Thus a recent normative protocol for the reform of houses states that “aggrandizing will be permitted only in the case of residences with a built area equal or inferior to 36 m<sup>2</sup>, or for constructing toilets in the absence of adequate hygiene conditions”. INCRA, Norma de Execução n° N° 79 de 26 de dezembro 2008, com alterações da Norma de Execução n. 86/2009.

<sup>15</sup> IV : it is forbidden to the FAMILY UNIT without previous and explicit agreement of the conceding part to build edifications in the parcel alien to the Plan of Development for the Settlement (PDA).

<sup>16</sup> Thus, « the liberation of credit has to be preceded by a proceeds allocation document, emission of bank order, and the signing of contracts ». « Contrato de concessão de credito de instalação. Modalidade de recuperação material de construção ». INCRA, 1997.

I once attended a visit by João, to the *assentamento* of Pedra Azul. The leader pointed to him that a vacant house had been allocated by the association to a beneficiary widow, who only had a house on her plot and needed a place closer to town for her married daughter; however, that house had been “invaded” by Dinda, the spouse of a beneficiary. As the leader asked João for his help, the INCRA officer used the opportunity to state the rules:

INCRA is still the owner (*dono*) of this here! The house is not hers, nor of anyone. It belongs to INCRA ! When INCRA bought the *engenho*, it bought it with all its property and improvements. (...) She can't get possession of that, because this is an invasion.

The officer, having summoned Dinda, duly lectured her: “You have no right to invade the house, because the house belongs to INCRA, the land belongs to INCRA, everything belongs to INCRA”. Dinda replied, unimpressed: “I was born and raised here. There are people here who arrived, invaded here. There is much wrong here. There are people who sold houses, who sold land.” As she left, she kept shouting from afar: “I am a daughter of the *engenho*”. As is usually the case, João had only a partial understanding of the situation, based on the selective information provided by the leader. Dinda, who was born in Bonito, where her father was a resident worker, had left her home after a quarrel with her husband to go to the house formerly occupied by her late mother, and then her sister, who left it when she married. She was here claiming both that she was more entitled to live in Bonito, than the widow who had come much later when she married an old worker living on the plantation, and that it was unfair that she should be singled out when so many people were committing more serious crimes, such as selling state property. That case was later commented to me by a neighbor: the leader wanted to give the house to a woman who already had two houses, one on her plot, one in town, and wanted to “give it to her son in law who doesn't do anything”. The conflict arose thus in part from conflicting views of the legitimacy of the transmission of the house: for Dinda, her long-time residence and family implantation gave her precedence, while for INCRA regulations the woman who was cultivating her plot had to be privileged.

*Politikè*, and government policies, are framing the field of opportunities and constraints, in the sense that they open up possibilities, and make other ones more difficult. They are also endeavouring to ‘frame’ the actions of their targets, by trying to prevent certain practices and favour others, by way of regulations or

incentives. However, they are confronting the beneficiaries' expectations, which were defined by a completely different frame of reference, defined by their previous collective and individual experience..

### 3) The house as place of domination and autonomy

In many narratives of the past, precarious housing conditions epitomize the indignity of the condition of the sugarcane worker; thus Grandão, a former sugarcane worker who had grown up in a nearby plantation once told me that, in his youth, his family « lived in a goat house ». What he meant was not that they lived in an actual goat house, but that « at this time, we lived in a house that was [proper] for hen, for goats ». In other words, it was not a proper human house. This reflects the precariousness of the house and of the status of occupation itself.

The material and symbolic value of house, shaped by the long-term history of dwelling and domination in the Nordeste, has its roots in slavery<sup>17</sup>. It is significant that Gilberto Freyre's 1933 landmark work, *Casa Grande e Senzala* was translated into English as *The Masters and the Slaves*, but its original title (« Masterhouse and slave barracks ») stressed the link between place of living and domination. After Abolition (1888), *senhores de engenho* (plantation masters) tried to attract and stabilize the labour force by offering residence on their estates. The plantation house was thus at the same time the means by which one entered into personal dependence relations and its symbol (Palmeira, 1976). In the standard model which used to be predominant in sugarcane plantations until the 1960s, a worker (occasionally a widowed mother) did not ask the landholder for a “job”, but for a *casa de morada*, the right to dwell (*morar*) with his family on the plantation, with the understanding that it entailed the obligation/opportunity for family members to work for wages on the plantation, and that the *morador* (the resident worker) was to have access to a small tract of land to cultivate food crops such as manioc and corn. In exchange of his loyalty, a *morador* could expect, beyond lodging, protection and ‘help’ (*ajuda*) in case of need (taking the ill to the hospital, giving money to buy a remedy, a coffin, etc). When referring to the “time of the *engenho*” (an ideal-type whose empirical referents vary according to each experience), people insist either on the hardships of domination, calling it “captivity” (*cativoiro*), or on the protection they were receiving from the “good boss” (*bom patrão*). The ultimate ideal of any *morador* was to be granted a *sítio*, that is to say an isolated house on the estate,

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<sup>17</sup> Starting with Portuguese colonization of Pernambuco, in the XVIth century, the cultivation of sugarcane used slave labour on a large scale.

together with a garden and, most important, the right to plant fruit trees, which, in contrast with annual crops, meant long-term occupation and a degree of relative autonomy. In that case, gaining access to land was strongly linked to (and formally a consequence of) access to being granted a dwelling within a plantation. However, permanence was linked to the goodwill of the patron (and of the worker, who often decided to go): therefore, the quality of relationship was one important factor of uncertainty, which could be dealt with by mobilizing links of *philia*, “friendship” (*amizade*).

While sugarcane mills were capital-intensive affairs from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on, most *engenhos* were not run as capitalist firms, but from a perspective akin to *oikonomia*: while profits on the world’s sugar market allowed them to acquire the necessities and luxuries of life, *senhores de engenho* were also valorizing the ideal of self-sufficiency, and the control over land and men. The traditional *engenho* in a post-slavery context fits in many ways the model of the *oikos*: while the *moradores* were legally free men (and often chose to leave the plantation in search of a better boss), they were *dependent* from the *dono*. From the 1960s on, partly as a result of new labour legislation, most landowners progressively stopped to maintain a large labour force on the plantations and stopped the practice of giving *sítios*, encouraging their workers to leave the plantation and move to the towns (Sigaud 1993) : that was the case in Bonito during the 1980s<sup>18</sup>. One could tentatively say that this structural change was in part a reflection of a shift in the management of plantations, from *oikonomia* to an ‘economic’ rationality, balancing monetary loss and profit, which was also linked to the substitution of *engenhos* by *usinas*, refineries run according to capitalist rationality (Sigaud 1998).

In the mid-1990s, as the sugarcane was in crisis, a number of land occupations arose in the region (L’Estoile and Sigaud, 2001); to many of those who had, voluntarily or not, left the plantations, the perspective of land reform apparently offered an opportunity to “go back to the land”, and realize their dream of having a *sítio*. Being included in a Land Reform programme has sweeping consequences the field of opportunities for individuals and their families. Access to the status of beneficiary within a land reform settlement was especially valued, because it was associated with “freedom” that is, with greater autonomy and dignity, with the right to be “master of one’s own nose”, instead of having to obey the orders of a master.

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<sup>18</sup> Various beneficiaries told me that the boss in Bonito advised his *moradores* to leave their *sítio*, and helped them to build a house in the periphery of the neighbouring town, by giving wood or money.

While the claim for “land” dominated activists’ discourse, the beneficiaries’ concern for the “house” (*casa*) was central from the start. I attended the moment in September 1999, when trucks delivered loads of bricks in Bonito on what had been until lately a sugarcane field, and a few days later, people started to build their houses. Bliss was in the air. Augusto told me of his “joy to be here”, as “now we start building our little house here, because yesterday we didn’t have one, a lot of people don’t have one, and now one has to rejoice”. At that same time, Grandão had told me that he intended to build a *casa grande*, literally, a large house, but having in plantations the sense of « master house », adding: “There are people here who want to show that they are people” (*gente*). Years later, his reference to the “goat’s house” of his youth made me understand the essential link between being “human” (*gente*) and having a *casa*. In that context, building a *casa grande* is a claim for a dignified life.

One means of proving oneself human was indeed to construct much larger houses than the standard module planned by INCRA., and that was the case in the three settlements for virtually all beneficiaries<sup>19</sup>. This meant allocating to the house other resources than the ones made available through the official housing credit program. Thus many people used some of the money dedicated to agricultural projects (which came at the wrong timing in terms of agricultural cycles) to buy more bricks, windows, etc. They asked local politicians for the donation of a sack of cement, a door or a window. This also means that the amount of resources (monetary, in kind, social) invested by beneficiaries in the house is usually significantly higher than the one received by the State, which contributes to creating a sense of ownership. However, this cannot be considered as an “investment” in the economic sense: the value of the house is not primarily monetary, even if it is a form of capital. In the worst case, the house represents a form of saving, which might be liquidated in case of need (but usually at a loss, since people tend to sell when desperate).

In Pedra Azul, beneficiaries used the housing credit to build on their plots, where some already had *sítios*, while others started new *sítios* by planting fruit trees. However, the location of the new houses was significantly different from the “*casas de sítio*”: while the latter were usually in low places, slightly above a stream and hidden from view, they chose to build the new ones on elevated grounds, sometimes mid-hill,

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<sup>19</sup> A few of them were unable to finish their houses, as they ran out of money before the end !

or on top of the hills, like the *casa grandes*. Most houses were modeled externally on the *casa grande* with a covered sitting area in front of the house.

“*Casa*” in Portuguese has a larger meaning than “house” in English (or *maison* in French) (Da Matta, Woortmann). It denotes not only the building, but also covers the notions of household, home (*em casa* means “at home”), sometimes family. A *casa* might correspond not only to a detached house, but also to an apartment, in some cases a room. The richness and complexity of meaning of *casa* makes it closer to *oikos* than to house. To make a *casa* is not only to build the house, but also to “make a home” for oneself and one’s family. “Building your *casa* (...) you give a direction (*rumo*) to your life” as Coca told me.

The claim that “the house is mine”, is however not to be understood as an “ownership” claim, in the sense of “property”, as did João. For him, one could only claim something as “mine” if one had paid for it: therefore, he said, it was the INCRA who was “*dono*” (in the sense of legitimate owner). When people describe themselves as “*dono*”, they claim to act and be recognized as a master in one’s house and plot. One frequently hears phrases such as “he commands (*manda*) in his house, now in mine he does not command!” or accusations such as “he wants to be a master (*dono*) on the land of others”.<sup>20</sup> Dona Morena once put up for me an amazing performance where she fictively expelled her former boss, Aldair, from her house. Years before, she had been expelled of Aldair’s plantation, after a discussion. By playing out this scene for my benefit, she was performing her status as *dona*, free to invite me into her house and close her door to her former boss: while he was *dono* in the *engenho*, she had herself become a *dona* thanks to the Land Reform. The *sítio* is in many ways a miniature version of the *engenho*.

On the one hand, life in a land reform settlement reduces structural unpredictability and uncertainty by giving some security and stability. The house is a future-oriented project.

As these are large houses for local standards, they offer room for a temporary shelter.

Even if beneficiaries are not “owners” of their plot or their house and may (in principle) be expelled if they fail to meet the criteria set by INCRA, most of them, after some time, enjoy a sense of relative security, especially because they feel “at home” in what they insist in calling “their house.” This sense of

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<sup>20</sup> Brazilian anthropologists who began fieldwork in that area in the late 1960s/ early 1970s had no access to the inside of plantations, because of the control by the landlords, and met workers in the unions. (Sigaud, 1973).

(relative) security is evident in their practices, as over the years, houses tend both to expand and to multiply, following household's development cycle (Cavalcanti).

The house is associated with autonomy: thus, when a couple gets together (usually without formal marriage), they are said to *casar* (to marry in the sense of living together)<sup>21</sup>. The proverb "*Quem casa quer casa*", who marries wants a house, is taken literally, and for a couple to live in the parents' house is deemed transitory and undesirable (Woortmann). "Living in the house of other" is unanimously repudiated as a bad experience, justified by temporary necessity, but a source of conflict and tension. This sentence is used to refer either to dwelling on plantations (living in the "house of the boss") or to living with relatives, as dependent. Both are disparaged because of the constraints on autonomy they entail. As Augusto told me: "I have no house, because the house of one's mother, when one is married, it ends up you do not have a house".

It is seen as part of parents' responsibility to help their children to have access to their own house when they get married. It is thus expected that parents either build or help to build a new house on the plot or in the *agrovila*. Alternatively, if money or space are wanting to build a new house, one builds an extension of the house, in adobe or brick, according to possibilities, whenever possible with a separate door. A third possibility is to transform the house as to provide a "new casa" (i.e. with its own hearth) within the house building, by closing an internal door and opening a new door to the outside<sup>22</sup>. Thus, in Pedra Azul, one beneficiary, who had built a massive house with the initial housing credit on his plot later used his State pension to "raise a house for my son", while he repaired an "old house" (which had been made by the boss at the time of the *engenho*) for her daughter, because "she does not want to live in the boss's house any more". A few years later, his son in law would build his own house in another part of the plot, and finally, move out of the house when separating from his wife.

Over time, there is a tendency to create clusters of related houses (a configuration of houses): as settlement houses and attached *terreiros* are rather large, they offer much room for lodging for temporary periods parents, or relatives of one sort or other<sup>23</sup>. One result of such processes is the densification of

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<sup>21</sup> By contrast with elite representations of Brazilian popular families as "naturally collective", Woortman (1980: 221) notes the "strong emphasis on independence and autonomy, the extended family being perceived as an abusive interference in the freedom of taking decisions, as an invasion of privacy".

<sup>22</sup> such a practice is common in urban favelas, where space is restricted cf Cavalcanti, Motta 2014

<sup>23</sup> This is however a specificity of these 3 settlements, in part due to the fact that they made a common deal with one construction material firm, managing to obtain interesting conditions (and a bonus for the leaders). In fact, it seems

housing in the settlement, giving credibility to the prediction by the former boss that the plantation, if expropriated, would turn into a “rural favela”. In other cases, gaining access to a house was in fact the main motive for people to become beneficiaries. Thus, when a new couple was formed in the family of the president of the association, they would ask to become beneficiaries and take hold of the plot of someone willing to give up his (for various reasons, from illness to matrimonial crisis). In fact, they did not plant anything on the plot.

At the Bonito meeting mentioned in the introduction, one beneficiary complained about the fact that tiles had been stolen at the house built by her son in his plot (*parcela*), who was now working as a lorry driver in the new port of Suape. Fal then told why, having recently become a beneficiary within the Land Reform Program, he had been offered a loan of 20 000 reais by INCRA for an agricultural project to develop his plot, which was virtually uncultivated, but finally opted for turning it down. First of all, he said, “my house is not in my plot but here in the *agrovila*. (...) Here you can’t raise animals, because people take them away [steal]. I will only be in a condition to take up a project [loan] when I get out from here to build my house on the plot. If everybody had one’s house on ones’ plot, life would be different! Everyone would take care of one’s own!”. Fal’s statement was met with approval from his companions, who lamented the choice made back in 1999 to have built the *agrovila*. In that case, this early choice of locating the brick house built with the INCRA credit is widely seen as having sealed off the fate of the *parcelas*, because of the distance. Phrases such as “He who does not live in the *parcela* is not a *dono*” (because people will keep stealing his goods) or “a [real] peasant lives in the *sítio*” express the belief that ideally residence and production should be located at the same spot.

The dream of the *sítio* was frustrated for a number of beneficiaries by what proved to be a fateful decision, which can be understood as expressive of a conflict between the logic of *oikonomia* and the obligations of *politikè*: in Bonito, many beneficiaries told me that they had reluctantly followed the leaders’ and INCRA’ advice to build in the *agrovila*, largely because they felt “obligated” towards them for “giving them the land”<sup>24</sup>. Some of them chose to build a second house (often of mud) in the plot and live there, but the

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that INCRA agents objected to the size of houses, and changed the rules, resulting in smaller houses in other settlements.

<sup>24</sup> Inquiries in other settlements confirm that INCRA agents favorize the building of agrovillage, presenting it as the only option to guarantee access to piped water, electric power, medical care and education, while beneficiaries bitterly complained about this (e.g. Caniello & Duqué, 2006).



majority lived in the agrovila. The choice, made “collectively” to construct the house in the agrovila or in the plots durably shaped the field of opportunities for each family.

In Pedra Azul, were virtually all beneficiaries already lived in the *engenbo*, all built their house on the parcel. Many beneficiaries who as children were raised on a *sítio*, claim an affective/aesthetic link to the *sítio* contrast it favourably with the difficulties of coexistence in the conjugated lodgings of the *engenbo*. The value of autonomy is expressed by Gambota, a Pedra Azul beneficiary: “At least the *sítio*, the *casa*, this is a good way of living together for us (*convivência*), better than the *arruado*, live conjugated with somebody! Here, one is more apart (*reservado*), better.”

The need to make a living (what is usually framed under the label of ‘economic’), what Aristotle called *krematistiké* (supplying the necessities for life) is also imbued with a strong moral value, and local expectations as to what makes a “good person” and a “good life” (cf Woortmann). The expectation is that the man’s responsibility as “family father” (*pai de família*) is to “sustain the house”, being responsible for its building and maintenance, and providing raw food. Be a good man implies responsibility toward the house by bringing in the “money for the market” (*dinheiro da feira*)<sup>25</sup>. This can be done either by his agricultural work or by getting wages. A man who is not able to feed his family, because of illness for example, feels humiliated and fails to earn respect by other. The wife’s obligation as *dona de casa* (literally she-master of the house) is to take care of the house and transform into food what is brought by the man<sup>26</sup>, feeding the children, and in many cases, grand-children<sup>27</sup>. Each time I visit Dona Maria, whatever the hour, she starts by making a list of all the house chores she performed during the day. While self-sufficiency is the ideal, most houses are part of networks or configurations of houses<sup>28</sup>. Many beneficiaries experience the daily struggle to achieve a fragile balance between the striving for autonomy, and the necessary dependence on a network based on *philia*, relatives, neighbours and friends.

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<sup>25</sup> This is more important than faithfulness, for instance : a woman may tolerate her husband’s infidelity as long as he still contributes to the house (Rebhun).

<sup>26</sup> Heredia (1979 : 83) says that the family father has to « bring the products into the house ».

<sup>27</sup> I am often an additional child when visiting, as I am also being fed. However, I contribute to the house by bringing in products ; this occasionally leads to jokes (*brincadeira*) that, by « making market » (*fazendo feira*), I am acting as Maria’s man.

<sup>28</sup> Mc Callum and Bustamante (2012) insist, in the urban context of Salvador, that “the members of a *casa* have a daily need of the help that come from other *casas* to viabilize survival” (232). Speaking about a couple, they “valorize the freedom to take decisions together, with a certain independence in relation to relatives, but at the same time have a daily need of them, and look for them in special moments”.

Judgements passed on the house are also moral judgments on its inhabitants, and, especially, on the moral value of the *dona de casa*. A badly held, house, is seen as epitomizing an untidy life. Thus, Dona Maria's disparaging comments on the dirtiness and broken dishes of Gina's house, her neighbor and fellow Pentecostal church member; are in line with her gossips about her minor grand daughter, who lives with her, being a prostitute and drug addict. Conversely, when Gina once invited me to lunch to thank me for driving her back from the market, the house strongly smelled of bleach, and she insisted that being poor did not mean one had to be unclean.

While for a significant number of beneficiaries (though dwindling over the years), land is essential both as a means of production and as place of dwelling, the latter has become for many the primordial benefit associated with Land reform. In the words of a former president: "This land here does not provide us with the ability to live from it, but it provides a roof. And with a roof, you already have half your trouble resolved". This is of course strictly contrary to the official blueprint for the Land Reform. While the land reform failed to deliver much of what it promised in terms of agricultural and development projects, the one area which was deemed a success was housing. "The only successful project was the houses" said one beneficiary.

### **Conclusion: from "domestic economy" and public polity to *oikonomia* and *politikè***

Notions such as "domestic economy" (Weber, Zelizer), "householding" (Polanyi) or "economy of the house" (Gudeman), while aiming to go beyond standard economics paradigms by showing that "economic" and "social" phenomena are entangled, keep however accepting, explicitly or implicitly, an ontological divide between "the economy" and the rest. This is partly the result of a longing (often frustrated) to demonstrate to economists and policy-makers the 'relevance' of economic anthropology and sociology. Typically one might conduct a research on the consequences of "public policies" on "domestic economies". While this is certainly a worthy undertaking, such approaches nevertheless run a risk of limiting the potential heuristic contribution of ethnography out of excessive respect for "the economy". One problem is that, when we speak of "domestic economy", we have the impression that we already know what it is about. What I advocate is to be bolder and experiment new analytic frameworks: what happens if instead of the usual pair "public policy"/ "domestic economy", we try to frame it in

terms of *oikonomia*, government of the house or by the *dono*, the house master, and *politiké* (government, policy and politics)? This would allow to shift the focus from the « economic » aspect to the « government » aspect.

When discussing Agrarian Reform in Brazil, both in public and academic arenas, the dominant approach is often framed in terms of « economy », that is a concern with the government of population, the management of production and consumption. Defining it as an economic success or failure is a major political issue. Conservatives tend to think that Land reform is a complete economic failure, and that public resources would be better invested in supporting agro-business, while scholars identified with the Left and social movements are highlighting the economic successes and social progress brought by the program, while lamenting the shortcomings of public policies.

*Politiké*, both at the national scale (Government policies), and at the local one, plays indeed a crucial role in the life of beneficiaries, as it is instrumental in shaping the fields of opportunities. Becoming a beneficiary of the land reform program drastically transforms the field of opportunities of those involved. For most of my interlocutors, the house associated with Agrarian Reform is, or has become, often more important than the land itself, to the point that many beneficiaries confess they would be ready to give back their plot if only they could stay in the house they live in the settlement. This of course, is unthinkable from the perspective of INCRA. The house is an object of *politikè*, of government. While there are currently in Brazil some important Federal Housing Programs, such as *Minha casa, minha vida*, the Agrarian Reform is not meant to be part of these. The destination of the house in land reform settlements is to give an adequate shelter to the family considered as basic productive unit for « family agriculture ». However, the Land Reform program ended up being also a *de facto* housing program, and some might argue that, at least in the Nordeste, that's where it has so far been most successful: while most INCRA settlements in the Zona da Mata are agriculturally under-productive, they have become home to many families, often much more than the official number of beneficiaries. Despite the lack of legal security, beneficiaries have appropriated the land as a place for building "homes".

What I have been trying to do here is to reconsider the meaning of « *oikonomia* », arguing it is close to « autonomy », to define one's own rules rather than obeying somebody else's rules, ordering and not being ordered. The government of the *casa* (house/ family) is linked to government of the self. The 'monetary' dimension is important, in so far as the structural lack of money constrains the possibilities. However,

'economic' practices do not correspond to *oikonomia*, but rather to what Aristotle calls *Krematistikè*, the process of providing the "necessities of life" (*kerèmata*), "things indispensable to live and live a good life". *Oikonomia* provides a template, an alternative framework that allows us to look for different vernacular versions. It seems particularly well fitted for a post-slavery society such as Brazil. *Oikonomia* thus allows to understand the logic of the *engenbo*, the traditional plantation, whose masters were not operating within a strictly capitalist framework, but trying to conform themselves to an image of proper rule. The *sítio* is in many ways a reduced version of the *engenbo*. Part of the attraction of the land reform programs to those living on the peripheries of smalltowns, was the "dream of the *sítio*", the perspective of gaining permanent access to some land to "sustain the house", but also to "*liberdade*", which, in a post-slavery context, means the possibility not be "ordered", but to order, to rule as a *dono* over one's house and land. *Oikonomia* provides a partial perspective on the house, foregrounding the ideal of autonomy and mastery from the perspective of the housemaster<sup>29</sup>. *Oikonomia* might also shed light on the centrality of the house/home in other settings, in Brazil (helping to understand both the appeal and the difficulties of housing programs such as *Minha casa, minha vida*), and beyond.

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<sup>29</sup> I had no place here to pay justice to other equally important aspects of *philia* (relational / affective dimension) between house members and within configurations of houses.

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