

**Family livestock farming across the Atlantic:
Shared ruralities and challenges in Andalusia and the Brazilian Pampa**

***A pecuária familiar nos dois lados do Atlântico:
Ruralidades e desafios comuns entre a Andaluzia e o Pampa Brasileiro***

Joélío Farias Maia^{1,2}

Federal University of Pelotas, PPGSPAF. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

Flávio Sacco dos Anjos

Federal University of Pelotas, PPGSPAF. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

Fernando E. Garrido Fernández

Institute for Advanced Social Studies, TRAMAS. Córdoba, Andalusia, Spain

Nádia Velleda Caldas

Federal University of Pelotas, PPGSPAF. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

Juliana Pereira Pino

Federal University of Pelotas, PPGSPAF. Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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Abstract: This article has sought to provide an overview of the current situation of family-run livestock farming in Andalusia (Spain) and the *Pampa Gaúcho* (Brazil), addressing some of the challenges faced in the day-to-day operations of the two regions studied. Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Finally, the data were analyzed using content analysis techniques. A total of 61 family farmers were interviewed (49 in the *Pampa Gaúcho*, Brazil, and 12 in Andalusia, Spain). These are still preliminary analyses of the material collected through testimonies gathered in the years 2024, 2025, and 2026. This is, therefore, an ongoing research project. It has been possible to highlight that family farming in Andalusia and the *Pampa Gaúcho* faces common current challenges—with due regard to scale and context—among which the following stand out: the lack of family succession, which alters rural demographic dynamics; the absence of public policies sensitive to the specificities of the territory's social actors; and recent transformations, which exert pressure on traditional production systems. The combination of these factors is shaping a new agricultural landscape that currently seems to be heading toward a scenario of “agriculture without farmers,” or a region without family-run livestock farms. But they're still there! Despite all the challenges, difficulties, and uncertainties, Family livestock farming in Andalusia and the Pampa Gaúcho are holding on and staying on the land.

Keywords: Family Livestock Farming, Territory, Transformations, Brazil, Spain.

Resumo: Este artigo teve como objetivo estabelecer uma aproximação sobre o cenário em se encontra a pecuária familiar na Andaluzia (Espanha) e no Pampa Gaúcho (Brasil), abordando alguns dos desafios enfrentados nas atividades cotidianas dos dois territórios investigados. Metodologicamente, este estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa e descritiva. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e observação participante. Por fim, os dados foram analisados utilizando técnicas de análise de conteúdo. Um total de 61 agricultores familiares foi entrevistado (49 no Pampa Gaúcho, Brasil, e 12 na Andaluzia, Espanha). Trata-se ainda de análises preliminares do material coletado por meio de depoimentos obtidos nos anos de 2024, 2025 e 2026. Este é, portanto, um projeto de pesquisa em andamento. Foi possível destacar que a pecuária familiar na Andaluzia e no Pampa Gaúcho enfrenta desafios atuais comuns — considerando as devidas proporções e contextos —, entre os quais se destacam: a falta de sucessão familiar, que altera a dinâmica demográfica rural; a ausência de políticas

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² An initial version of this study was presented at the XXVII *Encontro de Pós-graduação* 2025, held at the University of Pelotas (UFPEL) in Brazil.

públicas sensíveis às especificidades dos atores sociais do território; e as recentes transformações nos territórios, que exercem pressão sobre os sistemas de produção tradicionais. A combinação desses fatores está moldando uma nova geografia agrária que, atualmente, parece caminhar para um cenário de “agricultura sem agricultores”, ou seja, um território sem pecuaristas familiares. Todavia, eles continuam lá! Apesar de todos os desafios, dificuldades e incertezas, pecuaristas familiares da Andaluzia e do Pampa Gaúcho resistem e permanecem no campo.

Palavras-chave: Pecuaristas familiares, Território, Transformações, Brasil, Espanha.

1. Introduction

The Atlantic Ocean and more than six thousand miles physically separate the regions of Andalusia, in Spain, from the *Pampa Gaúcho*, in Brazil. In addition to physical distance, there are other differences that place these regions at opposite ends of the spectrum. However, although these two worlds may seem so distant, there are factors that bring them closer and strengthen the ties between the *Pampa Gaúcho* and Andalusia. Through the lens of this study, these factors lie in family livestock farming and its traditional relationship with the territory, interacting and resisting within the contemporary context of the dynamics and transformations taking place in rural areas.

Furthermore, Boff and Machado (2023) highlight similarities between the territories that are expressed in the very cultural formation of the Pampas, marked by Iberian colonization, and, in the case of the gaucho—as a social being—by Hispanic influences, especially from Andalusia, in the establishment of a way of life associated with pastoral practices. According to the authors, these legacies, of Arab-Andalusian origin (such as the horse, clothing, and music), were reinterpreted through interaction with indigenous peoples, retaining features such as mobility, rural identity, and the centrality of the horse. Thus, the Pampas emerges as a space for the recreation of these cultural matrices, highlighting its connection to Andalusia in the formation of the gaucho's way of life.

The *Pampa Gaúcho* is a region located within the Pampa Biome, specifically in its Brazilian portion. In addition to this Brazilian section, the Pampa also extends into other South American countries such as Argentina and Uruguay. In Brazil, the Pampa is located in the far south of the country, where it covers nearly two-thirds of the territory of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, approximately 176,000 km². Beyond these aspects, the Pampa is an important area for biodiversity, culture, and society (Silva; Sacco dos Anjos; González Ruiz, 2019; Maia, 2022).

Andalusia is an autonomous community located in the far south of Spain, covering more than 87,000 km² and accounting for approximately 17.3% of Spain's total land area. Andalusia comprises eight provinces: *Almería*, *Cádiz*, *Córdoba*, *Granada*, *Huelva*, *Jaén*, *Málaga*, and *Seville*. This Spanish region encompasses a mosaic of great environmental, cultural, and

productive diversity, integrating agriculture, livestock farming, and rich natural environments (López Ontiveros, 2003).

Both regions share certain similarities, such as the economic and social importance of agricultural and livestock activities, or the role that rural life and traditional ways of life play in the cultural development of both regions (Boff; Machado, 2023). In small villages and sparsely populated areas, social actors remain whose social reproduction is linked to agri-food production, such as family livestock farmers or “*ganaderos familiares*” in Spain (Álvarez, 2025) or what in Brazil is considered “*pecuaristas familiares*” (Ribeiro, 2009; Ribeiro, 2016; Waquil *et al.*, 2016). This activity develops in close association with the use of natural resources and is based on a legacy of knowledge and experience spanning several generations.

However, both sides of the Atlantic are undergoing profound transformations that threaten the existence of traditional ways of life and production. In the *Pampa Gaúcho*, one of the major drivers of change is what has been termed the “*sojicização*” (soyification) of rural areas (Silva; Sacco dos Anjos; González Ruiz, 2019; Caldas; Sacco dos Anjos; Maia *et al.*, 2025), understood as the relentless expansion of the area cultivated with this oilseed crop. In Spain, meanwhile, there is the dynamic of what has become known as “*La España Vacía*” (Del Molino, 2016), a silent transformation linked, at its origin, to the depopulation of many rural villages and small towns due to the rural exodus of the 1950s to 1970s. This phenomenon, however, is complex and stems from various causes ranging from agricultural modernization and recent changes in the conditions of the production and agri-food systems to a lack of basic services, job opportunities, poor infrastructure (poor connectivity), and demographic aging, making rural areas less attractive to younger people.

In both cases, one could say that this is what Purseigle and Hervieu (2024) have termed “*una agricultura sin agricultores*” (agriculture without farmers), the process of the disappearance of the traditional figure of the farmer or rancher—one who works the land directly and cares for the animals—in contrast to the emergence of new business structures in the countryside, often far removed from the traditional practices and dynamics of rural areas, particularly family farming and ranching.

Given this context, this article sought to provide an overview of the situation faced by extensive family livestock farming in Andalusia (Spain) and the *Pampa Gaúcho* (Brazil), addressing some of the current challenges present in the daily lives of the two regions under investigation. The methodological aspects of the study are presented below.

2. Methodology

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative approach and a descriptive nature. About the approach, the study does not seek numerical representativeness, but rather a deeper understanding of the social reality under investigation. Thus, the study is eminently qualitative, focusing on the central aspects of a given reality—which cannot always be quantified—and seeking to understand the phenomena that arise within the social dynamics and relationships of the investigated subject (Gerhardt; Silveira, 2009). About the proposed objectives, the research is considered descriptive. The study seeks to describe the facts and phenomena of a given reality as a whole and may also establish relationships between some of its attributes (Gerhardt; Silveira, 2009).

Primary data were collected in two ways: through semi-structured interviews and through participant observation, both conducted in person at the family-run production units of the study participants, located in the *Pampa Gaúcho* (Brazil) and Andalusia (Spain). According to Poupart *et al.* (2021, p. 227), an interview can be defined as “the art of getting the other person to speak”³ based on creating a situation in which the interviewee feels at ease expressing their opinions, experiences, and view of reality. Thus, the semi-structured interviews followed a script with predefined questions, but which, throughout the interview, could take on the character of an informal conversation (Boni; Quaresma, 2005).

It should be noted that the excerpts used throughout the study are presented as free translations prepared by the first author, considering the differences and adaptations between Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish—the interviewees’ native languages—and English. Thus, these are free translations adapted to the context of the research, yet they remain faithful to the actual dialogues between the interviewer and the interviewees. The dialogues are presented in the results section of the study.

In turn, participant observation, according to Gil (2008), is a data collection technique in which the researcher seeks to integrate themselves into the group or individual under study, participating in activities or immersing themselves in the social reality in question. In this way, observation allows for the examination of the phenomenon under study with the aim of identifying and understanding factors of which individuals are unaware, but which guide the behavior or even the way of life of the individual or group (Lakatos; Marconi, 2003).

³ Free translation by the first author.

Finally, the data were analyzed using an approach based on content analysis, following Bardin (2010) methodology, in three distinct phases: i) pre-analysis; ii) exploration; and iii) data processing and interpretation.

The study sample consists of 49 interviews with family livestock farmers in the municipalities of *Dom Pedrito* and *Bagé*, in the *Pampa Gaúcho* region (Brazil), and 12 interviews with family livestock farmers in Andalusia (Spain), specifically in four provinces: *Córdoba*, *Seville*, *Málaga*, and *Granada*. Fieldwork was conducted in 2024, 2025, and 2026, and the Spanish portion was made possible by an international research mission (sandwich doctorate—PDSE) funded by CAPES in partnership with the Institute of Advanced Social Studies (IESA-CSIC) in Spain (Córdoba, Andalusia). Although this is still an ongoing study, we present below the partial results of the data collected and analyzed in the study.

3. Analysis and Discussion of Results

The study identified a set of common and specific challenges faced by family livestock farmers practicing extensive livestock farming in Andalusia (Spain) and the *Pampa Gaúcho* (Brazil). While keeping things in perspective and despite the particularities of both contexts, there are some important points of convergence. These points of convergence lie in the significant relationships that exist between family livestock farmers and the role it plays in the social reality of these regions. Figure 1 presents two traditional actors from both territories.

Figure 1 - The *gaúcho* of the Pampas and the *pastor* of Andalusia: so far apart, yet so close.



Source: Fieldwork data (2026). Illustration created by the authors in Microsoft PowerPoint.

Based on the analyzed data, it was possible to identify three central themes for discussing the results, namely: i) *family succession and rural demographic dynamics*; ii) *public policies and social recognition*; and iii) *territorial transformations and pressures on traditional production systems*. Below, these themes will be explored based on the perceptions of the interviewees regarding extensive family livestock farming in Andalusia and the *Pampa Gaúcho*.

In the category of analysis addressing *family succession and rural demographic dynamics*, in the case of the *Pampa Gaúcho*, the interviewees' perceptions relate to the following aspects: skepticism regarding the continuity of family ownership; a lack of opportunities for young people; low expectations for social life; the masculinization of the countryside; the aging of the rural population; the migration of young people; and the risk of abandoning the traditional way of life. As one livestock family farmer illustrates: "*My ranch here—there's no way around it. I'm telling you, but I might be the last one here, right? [...] And I think soybean farming is gaining ground, it's winning out, even over livestock farming*" (PF24 - *Pampa Gaúcho*, Brazil).

In the case of Andalusia, the factors cited are very similar: the migration of young people to urban centers and to other countries in search of better opportunities and quality of life; the aging population; and the bleak prospects for the continuation of livestock farming, with some farmers considering themselves the last generation of their family in the countryside. This perception is found, for example, in an interview with a family farmer from *Loja, Granada*: "*And here, the (Last Name) family, as far as we're concerned, ends right here. It's just my brother and me here. We're the last of the line!*" (GF12 – Andalusia, Spain).

In the category of analysis concerning *public policies and social recognition*, the perceptions of the interviewees in the case of the *Pampa Gaúcho* revolve around the following aspects: the lack of public policies aimed at family livestock farming; difficulty accessing PRONAF⁴ (credit and financing); rural roads in poor condition; impractical transportation during periods of adverse weather; and the dismantling of rural communities (schools, health centers, churches). In the following quote, one can observe the difficulties and bureaucracy inherent in public policies for family livestock farmers in Brazil: "*Everything has to be accompanied by a pile of documentation, of letters, which are sometimes not available on the*

⁴ PRONAF – *Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar*: Funding for operational costs and investments in the establishment, expansion, or modernization of production, processing, manufacturing, and service infrastructure on rural properties or in nearby rural community areas, with the aim of generating income and improving the utilization of family labor (Brasil, 2026, n/p).

farms. It's not that one can't organize all this documentation correctly. Small producers are increasingly cut off from rural credit" (PF41 – Pampa Gaúcho, Brazil).

In the case of Spain, specifically in Andalusia, the analysis of public policies and social recognition focuses on the following points: the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)⁵ lack of sensitivity toward local activities; excessive regulation, including restrictions on land use and traditional practices; difficulties in sustaining these activities; and unequal access to resources, which benefits large landowners. The following quote illustrates the perception of rural development policies held by a family livestock farmer from *Morón de La Frontera, Seville*: "Well, in Europe there are some rural development policies that, in theory, are quite good. But in reality, most rural development policies do not benefit the farmers who are actually doing well" (GF4 – Andalusia, Spain).

Finally, in the case of the Pampa, the analytical framework aimed at understanding *territorial transformations and the pressures on traditional production systems* focuses on: the expansion of soybean cultivation into the Pampa's native areas (*sojicização*); competition for land previously used for extensive livestock farming (a traditional activity in the region); the rise in lease prices; the harm to family ranchers; the risk of the disappearance of the traditional way of life and cultural trades of the Pampa, such as the *aramador*, the *guasqueiro*, the horse trainer, the shearer, the blacksmith, among others.

In other words, current trends in the Pampa Gaúcho region of Brazil threaten the very existence of the gaucho and may be leading to the disappearance of this traditional figure of the Pampa:

In the old days, the gauchos would ride in on horseback, with their bags strapped to the saddle and their shears, pliers, and awls; they carried all of that on wire ropes, looking for temporary work. They would arrive at the farm and ask for a day's work; they worked by the day. These days, sir, you don't see anyone on horseback anymore, nor anyone asking for work, because there isn't even any work left (PF48 – Pampa Gaúcho, Brazil).

For Andalusia, this category of analysis focuses on: the expansion of intensive olive plantations and solar farms; the encroachment on traditional grazing lands and extensive olive groves; the intensive use of synthetic inputs; the ecological imbalance of the territories; the expropriation of natural fields; the unsustainability of traditional practices (such as grazing);

⁵ The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is about food, the environment and the countryside. The CAP is a partnership between society and agriculture that ensures a stable supply of food, safeguards farmers' income, protects the environment and keeps rural areas vibrant (European Commission, 2026, n/p).

and the progressive reduction of grazing areas and the number of shepherds (*pastor*). A Spanish family livestock farmer from *Casalla de La Sierra* (Seville) speaks about the decision to remain in the countryside, even when the family leaves: “*I’m the only one from my family too; there are four of us siblings, but none of us decided we liked the countryside—that’s just how it is—and none of us decided to dedicate ourselves to it, and in the end, it’s always the same story*” (GF6 – Andalusia, Spain).

The information compiled above provides a concise and schematic overview of the two contexts analyzed. Although these are disparate realities in terms of historical, environmental, and sociocultural backgrounds and the factors that have shaped the geography of both contexts, there are elements of convergence in individuals’ perceptions of the threats to their own existence and that of other social actors whose survival is linked to natural resources and productive practices related to extensive family livestock farming.

In the Pampa region, the phenomenon of “*sojicização*” (soyification) is evident, characterized by the expansion of soybean monoculture across vast areas, which contributes to an increasingly depopulated rural landscape, according to Silva, Sacco dos Anjos, and Gonzáles-Ruiz (2019) and Caldas, Sacco dos Anjos, and Maia *et al.* (2025). In Andalusia, similar phenomena are observed, marked by the abandonment of traditional systems and the growing adoption of super-intensive olive cultivation systems, as well as the installation of large solar farms in rural areas.

In both contexts, there is a noticeable gradual loss of the traditional way of life, historically rooted in family livestock farming and local production. Family-run farms are declining, affected by a lack of family succession, the aging of the rural population, and the limited consideration given by public policies to their specific needs. Added to these factors are the ongoing transformations in these regions, which are putting pressure on traditional activities rooted in sociocultural factors and forcing new scenarios focused on productive intensive systems. These dynamics are reshaping the agrarian geography of these regions, revealing land concentration and rural depopulation, both in the *Pampa Gaúcho* (Brazil) and in some parts of Andalusia (Spain), in a scenario approaching “agriculture without farmers” (Purseilge; Hervieu, 2024).

These changes threaten the survival of extensive family livestock farming and, at the same time, weaken local culture and communities’ relationship with their surroundings and the environment, putting traditional figures of these regions—such as the *pastores* (shepherds) of Andalusia and the *gaúchos* of the Pampas—at risk. Furthermore, there is a shared cultural



heritage across these regions that sustains the local way of life, as Boff and Machado (2023) argue, and which is now threatened by these current dynamics.

Despite this adverse situation, the family cattle ranchers who participated in this study are holding on and wish to remain on their farms, motivated by tradition, their career choice, or even a lack of alternatives and opportunities. Expressions such as *“No way! As far as I’m concerned, there’s no deal! I wouldn’t trade this life for anything in the world,”* *“I’m not leaving here,”* *“We’re still here; we’re not dead,”* *“So I would never leave!”* *“I’ll stay here as long as I have the strength,”* and *“I won’t sell or rent,”* illustrate the forms of resistance and the attachment of rural men and women to the productive practices that constitute a way of life, a reason that gives meaning to their very existence, both in the case of the *Pampa Gaúcho* and in the case of Andalusia, revealing that, despite the distance between the territories, the challenges faced by family ranchers are similar.

4. Final remarks

Although it is recognized that the cases analyzed (the Brazilian Pampa and Andalusia) are geographically distant regions with distinct historical and sociocultural contexts—even though, within this dynamic, the Hispanic-Andalusian cultural influence stands out in shaping the way of life of the *gaúcho* of the Pampa—this study reveals that there are aspects of family-based extensive livestock farming that share similarities: the lack of family succession, which alters rural demographic dynamics; the absence of public policies sensitive to the specific characteristics of the territory’s social actors; and recent transformations, which exert pressure on traditional production systems.

On the other hand, real estate speculation destabilizes regions by driving up land prices and forcing families to sell or lease their land, whether for renewable energy projects—such as solar power in Andalusia—or, in the *Pampa Gaúcho*, driven by what might be called the “soybean boom” or *“sojicização,”* a crop that is expanding thanks to a favorable national context and generous subsidies offered by the federal government.

The combination of these factors is shaping a new agricultural landscape that, given the current context and dynamics, appears to be heading toward a scenario of “agriculture without farmers.” In the case of this study, toward a scenario of a territory without family ranchers. But they are still there! Family ranchers in Andalusia and the *Pampa Gaúcho* are resisting and remaining in the countryside. Furthermore, it is suggested that the topic be explored in greater



depth in both territories to better understand the processes resulting from these dynamics, which are fraught with threats and uncertainties.

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