

# Ecological Imperialism and Jair Bolsonaro's Agenda in Brazil

July 10, 2021



As the climate change crisis worsens, due both to lack of appropriate radical action and the maintenance of capitalist business as usual, ecological concerns have become more widespread. Environmentalism comes in many shapes and forms, and some types of discourse have become more mainstream over the years. Campaigns to protect animals and forests and care for the planet make their way into movies, social media, and political speeches. This is generally positive, since one obstacle to change is strong anti-environmental propaganda. However, the majority of mainstream environmentalism tends to focus either on change through individual action or on the very limited approaches put forward by mainstream nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other institutions. These proposals fail to deal with the root causes of the crisis and neglect the level of urgency required to avoid worst-case scenarios. The scale of change necessary to actually curb climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and water pollution is that of systemic action, but these more macro approaches are often perceived as the jobs of heads of state, or even as projects best pursued through alliances between countries and corporations willing to go “greener.” This is environmentalism with a neoliberal face, or better yet, a myriad of empty promises that can be packaged and sold as solutions so that governments and corporations can look more responsible—even as widespread fossil fuel extractivism and destructive vegetable and animal agriculture continue unchecked.

“Business as usual” means that richer countries can pledge to become more “sustainable” and will even invest in important ecological transition areas, such as in the expansion of renewables and electricity-powered public transportation. At the same time, countries that sit at the margins of capitalism and may be considered as “developing” or “underdeveloped” face particular obstacles to ecological transition. The majority of green-technology alternatives are developed in the Global North and tend to be protected by intellectual property rights that make them hard to acquire in the Global South, even though the mineral resources required to build batteries and solar panels often come at the expense of poor communities in Latin America and Africa, and the electronic waste generated by the capitalist system’s rule of planned obsolescence is shipped to large landfills in South Asia.

This scenario exposes two contradictions connected to the idea of development under capitalism, both of which have to do with the unequal relationship between the countries at the center of capitalism and those at the periphery. A system of dependent capitalism ensures that countries rich in natural resources in the Global South continue to offer these resources cheaply, with a special role played by multinational corporations and special trade deals, only to have to import industrialized goods at a much higher rate later on. It also means that those in richer countries that benefit from such an arrangement are likely to try to influence local politics in the South and even to make use of state power to ensure that oil keeps flowing, thus maintaining the usual path of “progress” while extractive resources are also taken to feed those countries’ demand for food, clothing, and even the means of ecological transition.

Imperialism, too, comes in many shapes and forms. It may involve direct intervention in coups d’état, wars, and assassination attempts. It can also influence local political economy such that the natural resources required to keep up the paths of development in the North—both the conventional fossil fuel-dependent one, and neoliberal environmentalism—continue to be extracted and traded. Extraction designed to enrich other countries and corporations amounts to “ecological imperialism,” which sociologists John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark describe as a system “whereby the extraction of resources has often devastated poor countries, which have been faced with the expropriation (appropriation without equivalent or reciprocity) of the ‘free gifts of Nature to capital’ to be found in their territories, along with the ecological costs of extraction.”<sup>1</sup>

It is very convenient for richer countries to maintain a system of industrial extractivism in the South. That way, they secure prime access to the minerals necessary for capitalism to green itself, without hurting the chances of the same old corporations to enrich their shareholders through access to oil and other nonrenewable sources of fuel. Both dirty and “green” capitalism are sustained. This is why it is common for countries in Latin America to feel pressured to privatize national energy and oil companies, and to allow foreign mining in their territory. Because U.S. support for coups in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil is connected to access to natural resources in the region, it is no wonder that Jair Bolsonaro is now in power, and that the Brazilian national oil company, Petrobras, is at risk of falling further into the hands of private capital. This makes Brazil a key area of focus, and one that highlights the importance of the country’s radical ecological movement.

### **Brazil: Authoritarianism at the Service of Ecological Imperialism**

The case of Brazil under Bolsonaro helps to illustrate how authoritarian governments in the Global South see ecological concerns as impediments to capitalist growth. It is symbolic of how the Latin American right wing has no project of development in the region and would rather cut deals with foreign capital to ensure the local elites get rich while multinational corporations and financial institutions get even richer. Recent leftist experiences in Latin America, known as the Pink Tide, focused on resource extraction in partnership with the capitalist class as part of their developmentalist perspective. An authoritarian far-right government like Brazil’s, however, is willing to go to extremes in the destruction of nature to ensure record-high growth for agribusiness and access to sacred indigenous territory for mining companies, with no regard for local consequences.

Bolsonaro has shown willingness to bend rules, change laws, and remove legal enforcement and accountability measures, as well as facilitate access to land and biomes as natural resources to be exploited by foreign companies. Moreover, Bolsonaro’s approach has been defined by disregard for violence against indigenous and traditional communities, easier access to arms for illegal miners and large landowners, criminalization of social movements and environmentalists, and a push toward industrial extractivism with foreign participation.

Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 after a period of renewed anti-leftism in Brazil, which also

contributed to the U.S.-backed coup against the government of Dilma Rousseff and the undue and illegal conviction of former president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva. Lula was Bolsonaro’s main adversary, and without him in the race, the path trailed by *bolsonarismo* to the presidential office became easier. Since his election, the quality of life of Brazilians has decreased. The liberal right supported Bolsonaro for his commitment to the same austerity measures that currently strangle social programs and impact the state’s capacity to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Brazil was already in an economic crisis prior to the pandemic, and the recovery has been slow, with high unemployment rates and large numbers of Brazilians trying to make ends meet with low-level informal jobs. Widespread hunger is back, and food insecurity is now part of the daily life of half of the population. The destruction of nature adds to this scenario, which is sometimes perceived as a matter of Bolsonaro’s “incompetence”—as if he lacked only the ability and intelligence to run a country like Brazil. This reasoning, however, distracts us from drawing the conclusion that the apparent disregard for lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, high rates of deforestation, and the continuing problems with violence in Brazil are part and parcel to the political project led by *bolsonarismo*. It is about ensuring that the state serves, as much as possible, as a facilitator to local and foreign capital, while Bolsonaro’s base relies on him to promote conservative values and measures. For this task, the robbery of nature is key and the destruction of the livelihoods and culture of the peoples involved in protecting Brazilian biomes becomes a necessary task.

The Bolsonaro government is not simply lazy when it comes to environmental issues; rather, it promotes an openly anti-environmental agenda. During his electoral campaign, Bolsonaro repeated old racist statements about indigenous peoples and traditional black *quilombola* communities. He also declared that he would not settle any indigenous territorial claims or agree to agrarian reform. This posture attracted support from the large-landowning class, which is also represented in Congress by the *ruralista* caucus. The caucus promotes pro-agribusiness policies that relax environmental regulations and facilitate access and usage of dangerous agrochemicals.

Currently, the anti-ecological *bolsonarista* agenda relies on a special tripod of ecological degradation: guns, virus, and soy. If colonialism was built on “Guns, germs and steel”, as Jared Diamond suggests, the far-right has slightly updated the tools for plundering people and nature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The first of these is seen in the use of violence, a disregard for workers’ lives, the criminalization of struggle, and the role the military has played in the government, as well as Bolsonaro’s efforts to facilitate gun ownership. During the pandemic, Bolsonaro issued presidential decrees that relaxed gun controls and facilitated access to firearms. A sport shooter can now own up to sixty firearms, and a hunter thirty. Bolsonaro’s decrees would also permit teenagers 14 years and older to shoot firearms in a sporting context, and individuals to carry up to two guns. In the end, these latter initiatives were vetoed by the judiciary because they go against the Brazilian Disarmament Statute.<sup>2</sup>

But Bolsonaro’s pro-gun ideology goes beyond placing firearms in the hands of individuals in a country where gun violence is already alarming. It promotes the militarization of everyday life, with support for police violence, more arrests, and increasing rates of imprisonment in inhumane conditions, all under the motto that “a good criminal is a dead criminal.” The Armed Forces are well entrenched within the Bolsonaro government, leaving open the question of whether they are part of the coup that already took place in 2016, or might participate in another yet to come. This has awakened complicated narratives around democracy and authoritarianism. Brazil still mourns the period of the military dictatorship, but the Bolsonaro government brought back a discourse that praises torture and censorship, while promoting historical revisionism by referring to the 1964 coup as a revolution.

The presence of the armed forces in government runs as deep as the Ministry of Health. General Eduardo Pazuello, who was minister of health between May 2020 and March 2021, helped to

promote pandemic denialism, discredited medical approaches, and slow and contradictory action on vaccine purchases. Generally, the federal government has taken little to no action when it comes to actually fighting the pandemic. It is only now, in April 2021, pursuing vaccination, and Bolsonaro continues to blame governors and mayors for getting in his way, even though vaccine, where it is available, has arrived only on account of autonomous action by those same governors and mayors.

The “virus” in the tripod mentioned above is, of course, COVID-19. Its role emerges clearly in the argument by Ricardo Salles, Bolsonaro’s minister of the environment, that the government should take advantage of everyone’s “distraction” by the pandemic to impose the destructive *bolsonarista* agenda. By the end of April 2021, Brazil had surpassed four hundred thousand official COVID-19-related deaths, with no serious effort by the federal government to turn the situation around. On the contrary, Bolsonaro laughs at accusations of genocide and the instrumentalization of necropolitical power by his government, encourages anti-vaccine and anti-mask behavior, and has managed to sustain, somewhat successfully, the myth that a lockdown would hurt workers, thus relieving himself of the responsibility of providing for the people during periods of intense social distancing. Indeed, the pandemic has been a fruitful scenario for Bolsonaro in which he can advance his agenda without fear of a response in the form of mass mobilizations.

Minister Salles, who was handpicked by Bolsonaro, took leadership of the ministry in spite of his conviction on counts of environmental fraud during his time as part of the São Paulo state government. Salles’ administration is known for its intimidation tactics against public servants who demonstrate concern for environmental protection, and its concerted efforts to stall crucial remedial action while slashing budgets, including those earmarked for the fight against climate change. Salles is now under investigation for alleged links to a scheme involving millions of dollars of illegally sourced wood. Together, Salles and Bolsonaro endeavor to promote lies about their environmental record to international audiences, at the same time that they continue to dismantle environmental protections. In an April 2021 speech at Joe Biden’s climate summit, Bolsonaro pledged to make Brazil carbon neutral by 2050, coinciding with a request from Salles for \$1 billion a year in foreign aid to protect the environment. Yet at the time, four hundred employees of the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), had already denounced Salles for freezing all action connected to environmental law enforcement at the agency. It is not uncommon for Bolsonaro to lie at such events, and in the past, he has even claimed that the bad press his government receives on environmental issues is itself the result of lies by NGOs and environmentalists that want to attract foreign funding for themselves.

There is also what can be called “the Bolsonaro effect” on nature. Ever since he took power, his anti-environmental agenda has signaled to illegal miners and landowners that environmental crimes will not be taken seriously. This has led to an increase in deforestation by 222 percent between 2018 and 2019, and crises such as the fire in the Amazon in 2019 (which began with a “day of fire” celebrated by Bolsonaro supporters), and a loss of 30 percent of the world’s largest tropical wetland area, the Pantanal, in 2020, under similar circumstances. Registered cases of violence against indigenous communities also doubled between 2018 and 2019.

This adds an important layer of context to the great growth and profit experienced by agribusiness in Brazil between 2020 and 2021. Here, the last element in the tripod, “soy,” represents not only the country’s most exported commodity, but also the key role played by extractive industry in transferring natural goods from Latin America to richer countries. Agribusiness is doing quite well in Brazil. The country’s gross domestic product from agribusiness reached a record high of 24.31 percent growth in 2020, a year that also saw record growth in the sale of coffee, cacao, and sugarcane. Soy is the most exported good, and it also generates the most wealth for Brazilian agribusiness.<sup>3</sup> But soy and other crops are grown with extreme quantities of agrochemicals; Russia, for one, has recently complained about the level of glyphosate in the soy it has imported from

Brazil.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that 20 percent of the soy grown in regions of Amazonia and the Cerrado come from deforested areas.<sup>5</sup>

When soy is exported in bulk to satisfy the wants of agribusiness and the financial market, the super exploitation of labor in the Global South is accompanied by an unequal ecological exchange: the depletion of freshwater and soil nutrition, deforestation, and threats to indigenous territories. This combination of effects ensures that Brazil plays a key role in the global commodity chain, which has long contributed to the transfer of raw materials (natural wealth) from poor countries to rich ones.<sup>6</sup> If gold taken from Latin America and Africa during colonization ended up in bank vaults and churches in Europe, today soy from Brazil feeds livestock in China and the European Union, while lithium from Chile and nickel and cobalt from Brazil are used for renewable technologies in the United States, which continues to import petroleum from Ecuador to maintain its growing demand for energy and other resources.

These three elements—guns, virus, and soy—comprise the tripod of ecological degradation under Bolsonaro, and are the logical outcome of a doctrine that treats commodity exports and foreign ownership of natural resources as signs of development. Nature is only valued in the form of natural resources, and if it is to be valued in conservation, then it is up to the population (and corporations!) to join “adopt a park” programs and other initiatives that shift the responsibility from the state to individuals and the market. The other option is to request millionaire donations from other states, in exchange for “conservation,” but there is little chance that these conservation funds will translate into concrete, responsible action by the Ministry of the Environment. Like the elements of colonialism embodied in the “guns, germs, and steel” tripod, Bolsonaro’s project is about controlling the population, eliminating resistance, and reaping as much from nature as possible.

### **Anti-imperialism from the South to the North**

The rise of the far right has mobilized individuals and organizations throughout the world to show support for the opposition in the countries affected. But besides keeping informed about what happens under right-wing governments such as Sebastián Piñera’s government in Chile, Bolsonaro’s in Brazil, and Rodrigo Duterte’s in the Philippines, it is of crucial importance that those living in richer countries and the so-called liberal democracies understand and denounce the ideological and economic linkages between authoritarian governments that act against the interests of people and nature.

One example is seen in the case of the Amazon rainforest. Currently, large portions of the Brazilian Amazon are under threat from fires, illegal logging, and general deforestation. It is common knowledge that while this problem has been created in Brazil, it has global consequences. The Amazonian rainforest is not only a key center of biodiversity, but influences climate patterns across the continent. Forest loss is directly correlated with the intensification of climate change. Thus, we routinely encounter international calls to save or protect the Amazon. The majority of these calls are well intended and reflect a deep concern not only for global climate consequences but also for the ways attacks on the Amazon simultaneously target indigenous and traditional communities in the region. The problem occurs when approaches aimed at identifying the root cause of forest loss tend to single out local governments, ignoring the ways that the Bolsonaro government is not simply anti-ecological, but also tied to a network of powerful actors—local and abroad—that stand to gain from deforestation.

It is easy to pigeonhole environmental struggles in the Global South as the results of bad electoral choices or mistaken ideas about development, but when we connect this widespread destruction to extractivism and commodity creation as dynamics of dependency rooted in capitalism, the responsibility of countries at the center of capitalism becomes clearer.

Scholars Arghiri Emmanuel and Samir Amin helped to popularize the theory of unequal ecological exchange in the 1970s, although its underpinnings can be also found in Karl Marx's discussion of agriculture and soil fertility. When taken into account, it requires that we examine the flow of materials behind something as simple as a particular pattern of deforestation. If there is illegal logging, where do the logs go? If forest loss is due to mining, where are these minerals sent, and where do they gain industrial value before their by-products are sold at a much higher price back to underdeveloped countries? When forests burn to make room for soy monocrops that will be exported to feed livestock elsewhere, how do we consider the many local losses that compound the global ecological crisis? It seems that when losses are both local and global, the interests of ecological imperialism—which is truly anti-ecological—have a way of impacting the most vulnerable everywhere, be it in the center or at the margins of capitalism.

Although work on unequal ecological exchange (also called ecologically unequal exchange) tends to also look for calculations of such unequal transfers, when it comes to matters such as biodiversity loss or impacts on a biome that cannot be easily reversed, it is much harder to quantify. Nonetheless, there are ways of assessing the magnitude of the impact. This level of loss constitutes what Karl Marx called an "irreparable rift" in "social metabolism" in relation to nature, a tendency toward a "metabolic rift" that is central to the capitalist mode of production and its accompanying system of extractive practices around nature that treats natural elements simply as "free gifts."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we are dealing not only with a system that takes from nature at rates and amounts higher than it is possible to give back, but one that translates what it takes away into a chain of value that is organized according to patterns of development, the international division of labor, and colonialism.

This ecological imbalance has a fundamental relationship to the economic inequalities that surround exchanges between countries. As the Amazon is destroyed, it is not enough to simply look at Bolsonaro and hope that the Brazilian people choose differently (and are allowed to do so) in the next elections. It is also definitely one-sided to assume the best approach would be to simply impose sanctions on Brazilian businesses (as involved as they may be in environmental destruction), especially if one does not take into consideration the flow of goods that create an international market so compelling for Brazilian agribusiness that large landowners are willing to burn forests, drench crops in agrochemicals, and even murder indigenous leaders and environmentalists to gain access to territory. Approaches that locate responsibility only locally neglect the role unequal ecological exchange plays in the destruction of one place as a means to meet demands in another. They also tend to neglect the ways imperialist influence is responsible for many of the destructive dealings in the Global South.

The support Bolsonaro received for his association with Donald Trump contributed to the Bolsonaro effect; indeed, Brazil's current inaction on climate change was modeled after Trump's own climate denialism. In fact, Ernesto Araújo, who was foreign minister under Bolsonaro until March 2021, would promote conspiracy theories about globalism and "cultural Marxism," among other narratives that would together indicate the government's subordination to Trump and rejection of international accountability.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, Brazil's minister of mining and energy traveled abroad to attract the interest of foreign companies, and Brazil even sponsored an annual fair hosted by the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada.<sup>9</sup> Canadian mining companies are known for the scale of their operations in Latin America, including Brazil. In fact, Canada's Belo Sun is among the companies to benefit from Bolsonaro's intervention to permit gold mining in indigenous territories.<sup>10</sup> The success of these Canadian companies abroad is also due to support by the Canadian state, helping to facilitate investment and navigate spaces of political opposition to predatory mining.<sup>11</sup> And when it comes to oil, imperialist influence is transparent. There is documentation of the involvement of the U.S. Department of Justice in the Operation Car Wash (Operação Lava Jato) investigation in Brazil, which began in 2014 and would ultimately undermine the operations of Petrobras, the national oil

company, as well as lead to the undue prosecution, condemnation, and imprisonment of former president Lula.<sup>12</sup>

Even China needs to be considered for the role it played in the decline of natural wealth in Latin America; for while its demand for Brazilian commodities (including in the energy sector) may not follow the interventionist approach of Western imperialism, it nevertheless contributes to a pattern of unequal ecological exchange.<sup>13</sup> Add to this the presence of multiple tools of financialization in Brazil's commodity sector—from futures trading to investment packages that can generate rewards from crops grown in stolen land—and the complexity of connections that sustain the web of ecological destruction in the Global South becomes close to overwhelming. This is why it is so important for anti-imperialist efforts to not only be rooted in the affected countries, but also to extend to the places where large corporations and imperialist states orchestrate these profitable initiatives.

In the United States, this demonstrates the limitations of calls for a Green New Deal, so long as they remain constrained to its borders. It is unacceptable—politically or ecologically—to promote transitions away from carbon in one place while its economy continues to fund the destruction of nature elsewhere. Worse yet, what can be said for dreams of a solar-powered society in Europe when the mineral components for panels and batteries are extracted from Africa and Latin America? When ecological imperialism and unequal ecological exchange are taken into consideration, it is impossible to deny that any legitimate concern for what right-wing governments such as Bolsonaro's are doing in their countries also requires an inward examination of the demand for raw materials and the foreign policies of the Global North. Thus, it becomes essential that people in the Global North examine the role of their governments and local corporations in the destruction of other ecosystems, and also how aspirations toward an "imperial mode of living"<sup>14</sup> in the North are sustained by unequal ecological exchange.

The center-periphery system determines where wealth and impact concentrate in the world; and for a very long time, the development of the richer countries has meant that underdevelopment and high costs are borne by poor countries. A consideration of these forces has to take ecology into account, all the more so when it comes to those involved in discussions and actions surrounding ecological transition. When a country like Brazil, whose territory is key to the recuperation of ecological losses, is devastated by an anti-environmental far-right government, analyses and political proposals need to include those who have benefited (and stand to benefit even more) from this destruction. It means, ultimately, that ecological transition demands we adopt the vantage of the South. Such a perspective must posit alternatives to development that break the dynamic of unequal ecological exchange and challenge the way ecological imperialism takes resources, both for "business as usual" and to green part of the world at the expense of another.

## Notes

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14. See Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Limits to Capitalist Nature: Theorizing and Overcoming the Imperial Mode of Living* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).