

# The Amazon Burns and the Politics of Death: Resisting the Commodification of Our Future

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Ceaseless shootings, extrajudicial executions, houses invaded both by the military police and by militias, schools closed, firearms being discharged from the sky, and a country burning: it could be a war scenario, but this has been the day-to-day experience of the poorest Black and Indigenous sections of the Brazilian working class under the Bolsonaro government. The blame - the president states - lies with the NGOs and human rights defenders.

The same lie is told by Rio de Janeiro's governor while he pushes forward his politics of death in public security, and he is responsible for the direct execution of at least 1075 human beings in six months.[1] Eleven days ago, the country was touched by the stories of six black teenagers murdered in less than 80 hours, as a consequence of this politics. One of them, a 17-year-old mother, was in her way to church carrying her one-year-old baby and was hit by ten shots.[2] Although none of them had connections with criminal activities, Governor Wilson Witzel, a former judge and a Bolsonaro supporter, blamed NGOs who allegedly support organized crime, since they defend human rights. With the highest unemployment rate in the country - a record 1.3 million individuals - Rio was filled with resistance to state violence and with riots led by women in the favelas in the first weeks of August, but with little media attention and even less support from the traditional left.

In the middle of this chaos, on August 13, the traditional left, guided by students and teachers' unions, organized massive national demonstrations to defend public higher education from threats of privatization, represented by the new federal government program Future-se. This program aims to radically transform the logic of public universities, reducing public funding and opening them to private enterprise, i.e., commodifying teaching, research and extension activities. The universities are also facing several budget cuts that especially target the student scholarships that might gradually reconfigure their elite character. Affirmative action policies that since 2004 have been guaranteeing access for Blacks, poor people, and Indigenous peoples to universities are also under constant attack by Bolsonaro supporters at the state and federal levels.

At the same time, indigenous women from approximately 115 different ethnic groups from all

regions of the country were marching on Brasília, ending a five-day mobilization to declare that they will not accept the genocidal policies of the Bolsonaro government. They stand against Bolsonaro's measures to dismantle Indigenous education and health, his neglect of the environment and of the demarcation of traditional territories, and his insistent attempts to free up mining in Indigenous lands, including already demarcated areas. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, the march encountered the traditional *Marcha das Margaridas* ("March of the Daisies"), in a historical act. *Marcha das Margaridas*, a mobilization that has occurred since 2000, seeks to gather peasants, rural workers, *quilombolas* (descendants of free hinterland communities of escaped African slaves), riverside, and landless women and this year advocated a country "with Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, Justice, Equality and Freedom from Violence".

Right after this historical meeting that united thousands of women of color, Indigenous peoples from various ethnic groups led a week of mobilization to stop the approval of two constitutional amendments (PEC 187 and PEC 283) which intended to attack their lands by opening them for market production. This process culminated in a day of demonstrations in Brasília on August 21st, and gained a victory, succeeding in postponing the scrutiny of PEC 187. It guaranteed an agreement between parliamentarians to detach it from its worst counterpart, PEC 283. The latter carries out the worst attacks, such as the opening of already demarcated lands for exploitation by farmers and miners.

Through these attempts in Congress, the ruralist caucus seeks to insert Indigenous lands into the capitalist marketplace, in an agribusiness production model. It is important to say that most of the ruralist congressmen's lands are concentrated in the country's last agricultural frontier, *Amazônia Legal*, the Legal Amazon region, a protected area. This is connected to an ongoing increase in the raising of crops for export like soybeans and cattle.[3] It's also shocking that in less than six months, the government has approved the use of 250 new agrotoxins, many of them prohibited in other countries. This is a huge danger for rivers, water reserves and human health, arriving without any public debate or consultation. Considering these moves, the recent declarations of Bolsonaro and his Environment Minister, Ricardo Salles, about their interests in developing the Amazon by monetizing it, are not surprising.[4]

Thus, by the time São Paulo's sky was taken over by a suffocating darkness on the afternoon of August 19, the Bolsonaro government had been ignoring grassroots voices for weeks - including the voices of the forest peoples who denounced the upsurge in attacks on nature reserves and Indigenous lands via illegal economic activities. The black smoke that came from the Amazon was already the result of a 10-day fire, with no action taken to stop it. When experts linked the darkness to the fires in the Amazon, the Minister of Environment said this was nothing but fake news.[5]

On August 10th, the number of fire outbreaks suddenly increased in the Amazon. Evidence shows that the wildfires were the result of intentional human activity. A current investigation by the Federal Public Prosecutors Office in Para State has attempted to uncover those responsible for "Fire Day" - a "protest" by farmers that resulted in an increase in the number of fire outbreaks in several municipalities. Para State leads the country in the number of fires and the rate of deforestation[6], and have some of the agricultural lands most disputed by farmers (not to mention that it is also a great focus for illegal gold mining).

It is already known that more than 70 individuals, among them rural trade unionists, farmers, traders and land grabbers, combined through a WhatsApp group to set fire to the edges of BR-163, the highway that connects this region of Pará to the ports of the Tapajós River and the state of Mato Grosso. Their intent was to show Bolsonaro that they support his ideas about "loosening" IBAMA's[7] oversight and perhaps getting their fines for environmental violations rescinded.[8] There is evidence that the same group also spread fake news saying that IBAMA and ICM-Bio[9]

were intentionally provoking the fire - endorsing the president's narrative. It is evident that this group was encouraged by the public declarations and the overall environmental politics of the Bolsonaro government, going back to his election campaign. It is important to note that the government also hinted that it would regularize illegally occupied areas, diminishing or even abolishing the mandatory legal reserve area in these regions. In a country with the history of *grilagem* (land grabbing) that Brazil has, this is a clear instigation for this kind of action.

In Novo Progresso city (PA), "Fire Day" was reported by a local newspaper even before it happened. The local prosecutor questioned IBAMA and their answer was that they knew about the event, but could do nothing to avoid it since "the inspection actions are hampered by the lack of support from the Military Police, which endangers the safety of the teams on the field"[10]. Here, it is important to highlight that deforestation in the Amazon in July grew by 278% over the same month last year[11]. The data, of which the precision is over 90%, is from Deter (Detection of Real Time Deforestation) a mechanism that belongs to INPE (National Institute for Space Research), an institution that since 2004 helps IBAMA to combat deforestation. This data, uncovered in late July, has opened a crisis between IMPE and Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL), which culminated on August 2 with the dismissal of INPE Director Ricardo Galvão. Bolsonaro declared that "Bad Brazilians" had released "lying numbers" about deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. He replaced Galvão by a military officer and called for the hiring of a private company to do the satellite monitoring of the Amazon.[12] INPE is an internationally recognized institute for scientific research, whose data is collected from satellite images daily and released monthly on its website. Bolsonaro is also threatening to curtail the publication of this data.

If it is true that fires in Brazilian Amazon increased by 82%[13] this year compared to the same period last year, this story is rooted in a longer-term politics guided by the supremacy of production for profit that undermines human life. Brazil reduced the rate of deforestation from 24,000 km<sup>2</sup> per year to 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> between 2004 and 2012, but from 2013 this rate has increased again (now rising to 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>). Since 2016, IBAMA and ICM-Bio are facing a process of criminalization and their functions have been under constant attack. Investment in environmental protection have been continually cut since 2013 and both institutions have been working with lower budgets than needed to carry out their work for a long time now.[14] But in the first six months of the Bolsonaro government, we have seen a drastic deactivation of deforestation prevention policies and the acceleration of the intentional dismantling of the environmental legislation and its enforcement structure. This large legal and administrative structure was built as the result of hard struggles over the last 30 years, and the damage Bolsonaro is carrying out could take decades to repair. In April, Environment Minister Ricardo Salles ordered a 24% cut in IBAMA's annual budget, a figure below its operating costs.

Moreover, the fall in the number of fines applied to environmental offenders coincided with an increase in deforestation and the record outbreaks of forest fires of 2019. Considering all types of environmental infractions throughout the country, IBAMA sanctions decreased by 29.4%[15] compared to the last year. According to civil servants, former civil servants, experts, and environmentalists, the drop in the number of fines is linked to pressure by the federal government since the beginning of the year against allegedly excessive oversight - a promise of Bolsonaro's electoral campaign - and the transfers of professionals at key positions inside the institution. It is scandalous that of IBAMA's 27 superintendencies across Brazil, 19 are currently vacant - that is, without a permanent head. In the nine states of the Legal Amazon, only one - that of Mato Grosso - already has a definitive head. Experts say that if the current rate of dismantling of the enforcement structure and environmental legislation carried out during the first six months of this government is maintained, forest destruction could reach an irreversible limit in 4 to 8 years.

In June 2019, in an interview for BBC News Brazil, Environment Minister Salles revealed the main

intentions of the Bolsonaro government toward the Amazon region: to attract private sector investment and foreign companies in order to expand economic activities in the rainforest. He argued that the way to reduce illegal deforestation, logging, and mining in the Amazon is to generate “economic dynamism” and income for those living in forested areas. This reinforces the recent statements by Bolsonaro after a visit to the United States, to the effect that he intends to propose partnerships to “economically exploit” the Amazon in league with Donald Trump. Salles said his policy for the environment focuses mainly on raising foreign funds for paying for environmental services, that is, remunerating preservation, by paying the landowner an additional fee per hectare to carry out environmental preservation. He wants to allow protected areas in the Amazon and elsewhere to develop ecotourism projects and biotechnology research sites.[16]

Likewise, and recently approved in the Senate, Provisional Measure 881 – the so-called Economic Freedom Act –, whose mission is to establish the “Declaration of the Rights of Economic Freedom,” would allow deforestation by private entities to proceed automatically if environmental agencies delay the issuing of environmental licenses. License applications are also waived completely in so-called “low impact” cases. The impacts on the environment contained in the Measure are irreversible and of huge dimensions, besides violating the Brazilian Constitution, which prohibits the automatic approval of actions that affect the environment. Also, the measure excludes consideration of indirect impacts stemming from environmental licensing processes: only those regions directly affected by a project would be included in the environmental compensation process. In approving a hydroelectric dam, for example, only sites that had their areas covered by a reservoir would be included in the process. The other neighboring municipalities might suffer from the impact of the dam but would not have the power to mitigate them. This is a big attack on the environment. Thinking about the Amazon like this also recalls our struggle against the construction of the Belo Monte dam in the heart of the forest. It is ironic that this same Measure loosens labor safeguards even more than environmental ones.[17]

Hardly anything seems to stop Brazilian capitalists... perhaps only the fear of external economic sanctions. After the threat of an economic boycott from French President Emmanuel Macron (provoked, it’s important to say, by the demonstrations that took place in many cities in Europe), Bolsonaro felt compelled to give an official statement on Brazilian TV on August 21, addressing the situation in Amazon. Afterwards, Bolsonaro for the first time expressed concern about Amazon and announced that measures would be taken to fight the fires. The measure: enacting a decree of exception and sending the military into the region.[18] We also must be attentive to the motives of the G7. Although it does not represent the same forces that support Bolsonaro, it embodies a different fraction of global capital and thus a different imperialist agenda.

Predatory capitalism, accumulation by dispossession, necropolitics... each of these has explanatory strength. But no theoretical category can summarize what we have been experiencing these days and its real impacts on the future of humanity. The Amazon fires are an outrageous sign to the world about what is happening behind the scenes in Brazil. Of how neoliberalism has been connecting together expropriation, exploitation and oppression, carrying out coordinated attacks on all aspects of our existence as human beings. And we all know it can become worse, since this is nothing but the ultimate consequence of capitalism. Bolsonaro’s economic policy is moving us toward returning the focus of the Brazilian economy to the supply of primary agricultural and natural resources to the world economy, carried out through an accelerated accumulation mechanism and an expansion of the agro-industrial complex, pushed forward by financial markets. This is a project that is undermining human life for capital accumulation. Thus, we have a new the possibility to unite several fractions of international working class: Suddenly, demonstrations for the Amazon and against this politics took place in more than 70 cities around the country and in at least in 30 other countries worldwide starting on August 23. These united both the traditional left and the so-called

new social movements.

To confront this, the Brazilian left needs more than ever to develop international connections and to unite around a program that can offer a humanist alternative to this system. Such a program would need to grasp that at the current stage of our social and economic development, we cannot regress to a developmentalist, fossil-fuel-centered industrialization. Such a program needs to be guided by a view from below: from women, Blacks, Indigenous people, and the peoples of the forest.

[1] Last year, during the same semester, we had 899 executions committed by the police. Official data from Public Security Institute (ISP). Deaths by the intervention of state officers. Available at: <http://www.ispvisualizacao.rj.gov.br/> These statistics do not count forced disappearances, a brutal reality in Brazil. Social movements like Fórum Grita baixada, have counted around 3.000 deaths within the same period.

[2] Her baby was also hit and is still in hospital. See: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2019/08/14/jovem-morta-no-rj-sonhava-ser-pm-e-teve-10-perfuracoes-no-corpo.htm>

[3] See: [https://deolhonosruralistas.com.br/2019/05/12/mapa-das-terras-dos-parlamentares-mostra-que-congressistas-acumulam-fazendas-na-amazonia-e-no-matopiba/?fbclid=IwAR2et4vf9\\_KzxbdRoeVUb\\_dB0As6nVHepGbaOZpmlM59J-RvAizpZgRrgLQ](https://deolhonosruralistas.com.br/2019/05/12/mapa-das-terras-dos-parlamentares-mostra-que-congressistas-acumulam-fazendas-na-amazonia-e-no-matopiba/?fbclid=IwAR2et4vf9_KzxbdRoeVUb_dB0As6nVHepGbaOZpmlM59J-RvAizpZgRrgLQ)

[4] Amid growing global mobilization over forest fires and deforestation in the Amazon forest, Brazil's Environment Minister Ricardo Salles said that the solution to illegal logging in the Amazon is to "monetize it" by opening up more areas for commercial development. See <https://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/solucao-para-salvar-amazonia-monetiza-la-afirma-ricardo-salles-23897720>

[5] See <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2019/08/salles-diz-que-relacionar-ceu-escuro-em-sp-a-queimadas-na-amazonia-e-fake-news.shtml>

[6] Four states recorded the highest rates of burns increase in these months of Bolsonaro rule. Mato Grosso do Sul saw the number of fires increase 260% compared to last year and leads the list, followed by Rondônia (198%), Pará (188%) and Acre (176%). Those are also the states with the higher rates of conflict over lands and homicide of Indigenous Peoples.

[7] The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama) was created in 1989 and is the federal agency responsible for applying the National Environment Policy - which guides the government actions for the area. Ibama is linked to the Ministry of Environment (MMA) and has police power in the environmental area, even acting in private areas. Ibama is the branch of the Union responsible for combating environmental crimes, but Brazilian law requires that environmental protection be shared between the federal government, states and municipalities. The obligations of each are outlined in the Environmental Crimes Act of 1998, and also by a 2011 Complementary Law.

[8] See; [https://revistagloborural.globo.com/Noticias/noticia/2019/08/grupo-usou-whatsapp-para-convocar-dia-do-fogo-no-para.html?fbclid=IwAR14kpnqKnJBN2B99UkSUDHnp6JQ6muEoirpKpNn\\_ptCFwt4jXrmYABPm2w](https://revistagloborural.globo.com/Noticias/noticia/2019/08/grupo-usou-whatsapp-para-convocar-dia-do-fogo-no-para.html?fbclid=IwAR14kpnqKnJBN2B99UkSUDHnp6JQ6muEoirpKpNn_ptCFwt4jXrmYABPm2w)

[9] The Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio) was created in 2007 and its function is to take care of federal conservation units (UCs). Within them, ICMBio exercises environmental police power.

[10] See

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2019/08/queimadas-disparam-mas-multas-do-ibama-despenca-sob-bolsonaro.shtml>

[11] See

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2019/08/desmatamento-na-amazonia-em-julho-cresce-278-em-relacao-ao-mesmo-mes-em-2018.shtml>

[12] See

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2019/08/governo-bolsonaro-abre-edital-para-empresa-privada-monitorar-amazonia.shtml>

[13] There were more than 70,000 outbreaks of fire between January and August recorded by INPE in the country. Mato Grosso is the state that leads the list, with over 13,000 fires.

[14] See

[https://www.wwf.org.br/informacoes/noticias\\_meio\\_ambiente\\_e\\_natureza/?63822/uniao-estados-municipios-orcamento-meio-ambiente](https://www.wwf.org.br/informacoes/noticias_meio_ambiente_e_natureza/?63822/uniao-estados-municipios-orcamento-meio-ambiente)

[15] See

[https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49430376?fbclid=IwAR0\\_GRjiGLexsdIkeSFB1tTV-tFkzFjIHRbt1ThVpteFIZsJck9ncd2KWw](https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49430376?fbclid=IwAR0_GRjiGLexsdIkeSFB1tTV-tFkzFjIHRbt1ThVpteFIZsJck9ncd2KWw)

[16] See <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-48642486>

[17] See <https://www.congressonacional.leg.br/materias/medidas-provisorias/-/mpv/136531>

[18] See

<https://epocanegocios.globo.com/Brasil/noticia/2019/08/o-que-e-glo-que-bolsonaro-decretou-para-combater-queimadas-na-amazonia.html>