

**EDITORIAL**

# Land, territory, and Latin America: the challenge of cultivating hope

**Gilberto de Souza Marques<sup>1</sup>**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0400-1337>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Federal do Pará, Instituto de Ciências Sociais Aplicadas, Programa de Pós-graduação em Economia, PA, Brasil

While this issue of *Revista Katálisis* was being prepared, in Jacareacanga – Southwest of Pará, bordering the states of Amazonas and Mato Grosso in Brazil – on May 26, 2021, an audio recording was being disseminated on local social media, quickly reaching other regions. The audio message stated: “They arrived at my house. They’ll burn everything here. A very large group.” The voice was that of Maria Leusa Munduruku, an indigenous leader, who faced loggers, farmers, and, more recently, illegal miners to defend her people’s territory. Her family home was burned down. Shots were fired, but Maria Leusa managed to protect herself.

Before heading to the village, the miners had confronted the federal police who were in the region to fight illegal gold mining. They tried to expel the police and the personnel of IBAMA (the Brazilian government environmental protection agency) from the city. In 2020, Jacareacanga had witnessed the “day of fire”, when landowners and land grabbers set a large number of fires in the forest.

In Roraima, between May 10 and mid-June 2021, indigenous peoples of the Yanomami Land were attacked by miners using gas bombs, rifles, and other weapons.

The attacks in Jacareacanga and Roraima express the political moment that Brazil is going through, where the President encourages land grabbers and miners to destroy the forests and their peoples.

In 2020, the region of Pantanal (Central-West of the country) suffered from intense fires, leaving the biome so destroyed that it will take several years to recover. It was the largest occurrence of fires since the Brazilian National Institute for Space Research (INPE) began monitoring in 1998.

Since the first half of the 2000s, data on deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon had been decreasing, but this dynamic was reversed as of 2013, following Brazil’s political and economic crisis. This shows the predatory-speculative character surrounding deforestation: historically, it grows in moments of instability or the possibility of political transition.

Almost every month of the first half of 2021 registered some deforestation in the Amazon compared to previous years. According to INPE (2021), between January and June 25 of this year, deforestation in the Legal Amazon (North region plus the states of Mato Grosso and Maranhão) was the highest in the last six years, equivalent to twice the area of the city of São Paulo.

According to the Institute of Man and Environment of the Amazon (Imazon, 2021), in June 2021 alone, deforestation in the region (926 km<sup>2</sup>) was almost three times the area of the city of Fortaleza.



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In the previous eleven months, including June, accumulated deforestation (8,381 km<sup>2</sup>) expanded by 51%. Most worrying is that the comparison is with periods where deforestation had already increased.

Imazon also found that 63% of this deforestation occurred on private land or under some stage of ownership, followed by settlements, conservation units, and indigenous lands.

In the first months of 2020, INPE found that approximately 40% of deforestation in the Amazon had been concentrated in conservation areas and indigenous lands. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the government of Pará enacted a decree restricting the movement of people and administrative and commercial activities, published on March 16, 2020. An analysis of data from the publication of the decree until May 13, 2020 (less than two months) showed that 100% of the deforestation in the Amazon occurred in conservation areas and indigenous lands.

What does this data reveal? First, taking advantage of incentives from the Brazilian government (in the form of the dismantling of monitoring agencies such as IBAMA, for example), large landowners expand deforestation beyond that allowed, reducing the legal reserves. Second, taking advantage of COVID-19 (with the reduction of environmental inspection and the self-isolation of traditional communities as protection against the pandemic), land-grabbers advanced on public and indigenous lands. They follow a well-known process: they illegally seize and possess the land, negotiate timber extraction and, obtain temporary legal or forged documentation, sell the land to cattle ranchers (who regularize them under the argument of having acquired them in good faith), whose cattle enter the market, sold to large slaughterhouses.

Land speculation is the anteroom to cattle expansion, which, in turn, contributes to the increased accumulation of capital linked to national and transnational networks for processing and marketing animal protein. Brazil's Legal Amazon is the region with the largest cattle herd in Brazil, with 89,592,473 animals in 2019, excluding buffaloes. The same year, the estimated total resident population of the region, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021), was 28,990,627 people, which means that there are more than three animals for each person living in the Amazon.

In this process, not only the forest is degraded, but the human being too. Native peoples are attacked, and forest clearing in many cases resorts to slave labor (and other forms of degrading work) as a means to reduce the costs of unlawful land seizure and its inclusion in the agribusiness market.

This aggression assumes dimensions of a catastrophe produced by capital. A study of researchers from INPE (Gatti, et al. 2021) estimated that, due to deforestation-fires, the Amazon is already emitting more carbon dioxide than it manages to capture from the atmosphere. This gas has caused the most global warming, which in July 2021 caused British Columbia (Canada), a traditionally cooler region, to reach 49.6° C.

Deforestation occurs in conjunction with conflicts, particularly land tenure. According to the CPT (2021), 2,054 conflicts occurred in the Brazilian countryside in 2020, directly affecting 914,144 people. A decade earlier, in 2011, there had been 1,390 cases and 636,340 people involved. Among the various types, land conflicts stand out. In 2011 there were 818 cases, and in 2020 this number reached 1,576 occurrences. Brazil's Legal Amazon concentrates these conflicts, followed by the Northeast and Southeast regions.

It is happening what Altwater (1995) calls social entropy, an accelerated appropriation of nature that amplifies the contradictions and degradation of society. As dictated by the logic of profit, the pace of exploiting nature accelerates much more than the time it needs to recover. The two rhythms become incompatible, and this is evident in the current global environmental situation.

Land, forests, rivers (in the form of hydroelectric power generation, for example), soil, and subsoil are being consumed at such a rate that their depletion is very fast. This is what happens with the largest mineral province on the planet, Carajás, in Southeast Pará. The company Vale took 23 years to extract its first billion tons of iron from the area, but in 2020 alone, 192.3 million tons were extracted. At an increasing pace, in just five years, 1 billion tons of iron will be extracted.

Harvey (2004), based on Marx (1988), characterized such context as accumulation by dispossession, reinforcing what the Marxist Theory of Dependence defined as "dependency" (MARINI, 2005): a condition in which a nation feeds from (or seizes) part of the value produced by another nation/region. This region, in turn, suffers from the increase in social contradictions and dependence itself. So, dependency begets more dependency.

Except for the state of Amazonas, the trade balance of all the other states in Brazil's Legal Amazon is dominated by basic products, without industrialization, configuring a primary-export economy. Pará and Mato

Grosso are among the largest in the Brazilian trade balance. The exports of Pará, with the predominance of ore, are about 80% comprised of basic products. In Mato Grosso, dominated by soybeans, more than 90% are basic products.

This is not an Amazon exclusivity. Brazil is moving backward in how its production is organized. According to the Ministry of Economy (Brasil, 2021), from January to June 2021, the three products that dominated Brazilian exports were soy (18%), crude iron (16%), and crude oils (11%).

All these ventures carry a promise of development. But for whom? The time has passed for us to question these promises and the theories that support them (Marques, 2019).

Bolsonaro's government and its allies are trying to regularize mining on indigenous lands. While they cannot, they encourage these activities, even if illegally, trying to force changes no matter what.

In the indigenous Munduruku territory, in the southwest of Pará, there are more than 400 locations of illegal gold extraction, some with large machinery. This was the main reason for the attempted assassination of the Munduruku leader: the fight against mining. Maria Leusa is the expression of another Amazon, Brazil, and Latin America, of another society-nature relationship. She expresses struggle, resistance, forest, life, and hope.

While the government led by the Worker's Party (Presidents Lula da Silva 2003-2011, and Dilma Rousseff 2012-2016) sought to build mega-hydroelectric plants on the Tapajós River – delaying the regularization of indigenous lands in the region – the Munduruku people resisted by self-demarcated their territory. In 2017, during the meeting of Munduruku women, it was decided to occupy the construction sites of the São Manoel hydroelectric plant on the Teles Pires River (Mato Grosso), a tributary of the Tapajós, and all the Munduruku people followed them. The reason for the occupation was to obtain reparation and an apology from the company building the plant, which violated their sacred territory, the land where the people's ancestors were buried. The Munduruku sought reparation and wanted the urns with their ancestor's remains back.

Very rich processes of struggle and social organization are underway. The Ka'apor people, in Maranhão, organized their self-defense guard, driving all invaders out of their territory. Other indigenous peoples created similar guards. This is the case of the Guardians of the Forest (Guajajara).

At the end of August 2019, a meeting brought together 14 indigenous and riverside populations from 4 reserves in the Xingu River basin. Some ethnic groups had historically been adversaries, even carrying out wars among themselves. This was the case of Paraná and Kayapó, the latter being the hosts of the meeting. In the end, Mudjire Kayapó summarized the result: "Today we have only one enemy, which is the government of Brazil, the president of Brazil, and the invasions of non-indigenous people. We have internal fights, but to fight this government, we unite" (BBC News, 2019).

In Pará, there is riverside resistance against the construction of the company Cargill's port in the municipality of Abaetetuba and the new logistical projects in Barcarena. There is much indigenous and peasant struggle in other states, as is the League of Poor Peasants of Rondônia.

Mexican, Bolivian, Chilean, Ecuadorian, and Colombian indigenous and peasant populations drive rich processes of social organization, even thinking of society under other paradigms, such as the case of good living. In some countries, these movements played a fundamental role in defeating projects based on coup d'état, as well as right-wing governments and sectors (in Bolivia and Chile, for example).

We do not want to hide the contradictions and the looting processes but rather show that some struggles and phenomena feed our hope.

All these movements, and particularly their leaders, live at risk of murder and other forms of violence. However, they still have a lot to do, to live, and even more to teach us. That is why we can paraphrase the musician from Ceará, Belchior, who in the song *Coração Selvagem* (wild heart) says that his heart is fragile but is in a great hurry to live.

These leaders are in such a hurry. This is the case of Erasmo Alves Theófilo, 33 years old, a wheelchair user and peasant leader from Anapu, in the state of Pará. Anapu is a municipality that gained attention because of the murder of missionary Dorothy Stang in 2005 and is located in the region of Xingu River's Volta Grande, where the Belo Monte hydroelectric plant was built.

Erasmo organizes workers who resist land-grabbers (known as "consortium of death") in the region. He has already been a victim of murder attempts three times. He tells us personally: "I don't want to die. I still have a lot to do". And he really does. In addition to the peasant struggle, he wants to see his youngest

son, Eduardo, who is just four months old, grow up. In the smile of little Eduardo, Erasmo finds the strength to survive the attacks and cultivate hope, even in such arid soil.

What we have exposed here is the background to this issue of *Katálysis*, the main theme of which is Land, Territory, and Latin America, a theme that is very current in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Experiences from Latin American countries, environmental, black, female, peasant, mining, and labor issues are part of the reflections in the featured articles. They are diverse, dense, illustrative, and critical elaborations.

We hope they enrich the debate, our reflections, and our active desire to change the current scenario, allowing us to visualize a horizon of freedom and social equality. We wish you a pleasant read.

Belém-PA, July 30, 2021.

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## Gilberto de Souza Marques

gilsm@ufpa.br

Doutor pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação de Ciências Sociais em Desenvolvimento, Agricultura e

Sociedade da Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro (CPDA/UFRRJ).

Professor da Faculdade e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Economia da Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA).

## UFPA

Rua Augusto Corrêa, 1, Guamá.

Belém –Pará - Brasil.

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