

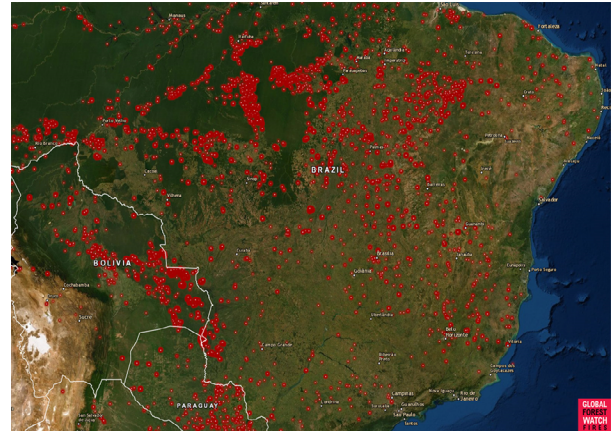
# “A Storm Is Blowing in from Paradise”: Political Ecologies in Latin America and Why They Matter Now

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With the announcement at COP26 that deforestation everywhere in the world would be zeroed by 2030, a project that 130 nations agreed to, it's a good time to review the political ecology of this topic and its dynamics in Latin America, and especially Amazonia, the current champion of deforestation. The Amazonian forest teeters on a tipping point where deforestation will change it so much that it will no longer function ecologically or climatologically as a tropical forest and shift into a savanna woodland. Amazonia is not just a key element in the global carbon system but also acts as a kind of living land-to-atmosphere water pump, the source of South America's atmospheric rivers. These nourish the millions of hectares of rain-fed agriculture in the Brazilian Cerrado, in Paraguay and Argentina, the export agro-industrial engines (and in many ways economic salvation) of these areas. Loss of the mechanisms that feed Andean snows and South America's rains that replenish its major rivers also implies drastic shipping, transport, hydropower, fishing, and urban problems, such as we see at this moment in the Paraná/Plata River basin.<sup>1</sup> Right now, the “southern cone dust bowl” involves crushing drought that is strangling water supplies to South American cities, including Buenos Aires and the megacity of São Paulo. Of the five key tipping points in global climate change, two are polar—the Antarctic ice sheet and Greenland ice sheet—and two are oceanic/atmospheric: the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC), which will dramatically

alter the Atlantic gulf stream and change Europe's weather patterns, and El Niño and the southern oscillation that arises in the Pacific and profoundly affects monsoons and drought patterns globally. Of these key climate triggers, Amazonia is the only place that is actually inhabited, by more than 30 million people. Thus it is one of the areas in the world where direct actions can have profound effects.

**Figure 1. Fires in Brazilian Amazonia from remote sensing, 2021. Global Forest Watch.**



The title of this *Forum* article comes from a description by Walter Benjamin about the drawing *Angelus Novo* by Paul Klee. The drawing was one of Benjamin's most prized possessions and was with him when he committed suicide in Spain, fleeing the Nazis. Benjamin wrote:

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Politi, “An Economic Lifeline in South America, the Paraná River, Is Shriveling,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/04/world/americas/drought-argentina-parana-river.html>.

This is how one pictures the Angel of History. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

The question proposed for this *Forum* is how one makes sense of the rampant destruction that is now afoot, in light of Latin America's history and its future. I would argue that the COP26 pledges in Glasgow on deforestation most certainly need to be taken with a grain of salt, and a jaundiced eye cast on the general fatuousness of what has been called development for Latin America's tropics. The events at COP26 were largely performative for the big global deforesters. Perhaps Indonesia, one of the top global forest destroyers and a country whose forest concessions for palm oil conversion, coal mining, and land clearing have been rife with corruption and human rights abuses, put it best: "Stopping deforestation at the expense of development would be unfair." This statement has an ironic tinge, coming as it does from representatives of a country whose capital, Jakarta, is now sinking beneath the waves, an imperial ruin if there ever was one. It is a flooded future that many tropical cities can look forward to, especially those like the Amazon cities of Belém, Manaus, and Iquitos. There are certainly ways to make sense of the destruction and to imagine how legal clearing could decline while deforestation surged. Brazilian rulers are well-schooled in contradiction, and there is a clear mechanism now for how to do this. It has to do with the language of legal versus illegal deforestation. The idea at Glasgow was perhaps to step up enforcement of environmental crimes. The real strategy was to decriminalize them.

**Figure 2. Forest burning near Porto Velho. Mongabay.**



Brazil had the largest national delegation at the meeting (497), second only to fossil fuel lobbyists, so perhaps it is not surprising that the question of Amazonian deforestation loomed quite large in the negotiations, since EU states had begun to question the terms of the yet-to-be-ratified Mercosur trade agreements. Supply chain politics for meat and leather were increasingly scrutinized not only by activist organizations like Greenpeace, but by national leaders like France's president, Emmanuel Macron. In spite of cries of disbelief and a certain amount of scoffing by social movements, environmental organizations, scientists, and the delegations of native populations about the mendacity of Brazil's position to halt deforestation (no doubt with winks and nods all around among the diplomats), there was a "let's pretend" moment in the solemn ratification. Brazil's deforestation rate in 2021 reached a 15-year high, 22 percent above the previous year, incinerating some 13,235 square kilometers just in this burning season. This does not include how much forest was degraded in this process, a number usually taken to be equal or higher than the land actually cleared and thus a greater contributor to greenhouse gases. Amazonia has been a net CO<sub>2</sub> emitter for some time. Looking at the numbers on their phone calculators, one could imagine the faces of some Brazilian representatives wreathed in smiles at the billions being bandied about for "protection money" of tropical landscapes, through offsets and payment for environmental services on private lands. Much of Brazil's deforestation in areas like the Cerrado and the dry forest known as the Caatinga is on private land, so a new

positional rent is emerging that looks like it could be locked into a financial regime under the rubric of conservation.

In essence, Amazonia could be in a “hostage situation,” waiting to be “ransomed” by climate funding for reducing deforestation, promoting land recuperation, and so forth. What we know from the Green Municipio projects—new ideas of governance and funds for land recuperation and intensification—in the Brazilian state of Pará is that the beneficiaries are often the most wealthy or politically connected locals. Despite these interventions, Pará still has one of the top rates of deforestation in Amazonia.

REDD (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) also remains controversial. Designed with social justice content, especially REDD+, its performance has been uneven (Sunderlin et al. 2017). In addition, many large landholders have significant forest areas for which they could collect handsome checks for carbon offsets, or apply them to development transfer credits (brisk business these days), or use to fund oil palm and pulp plantations (these are trees, after all) in lieu of diverse, high carbon standing forests. Another widely discussed intervention in deforestation control was the idea of environmentally clean commodities through deforestation-free soy and cattle moratoria. In many cases, however, the agro-industrial sector, especially livestock producers, showed what one might call a flair for evading regulation. In any case, the largest market, the Chinese, was/is indifferent to deforestation. Middle Eastern and Soviet markets are also not particularly well known for their environmental attentiveness.

As with much of the writing on hopeful solutions articulated before Bolsonaro’s time in Brazil (beginning in 2019), the deforestation pledge has a charmingly optimistic air belied by the current clearing dynamics, which have increased dramatically every year of Bolsonaro’s reign. On

one level, the posture is a “hangover” from the socio-environmental<sup>2</sup> times, when deforestation rates dropped by over 70 percent between 2004 and 2014, although deforestation in non-Amazon and non-Brazilian biomes continued apace. In that period, which corresponds with Lula da Silva’s mandate, a complex tool box of institutional innovation and governance was deployed for Amazonian protection. These measures included massive designation of new protected areas, expanded forms of local governance, and new jurisdictional forms of policy development. The well-funded (by Germany and Norway) Amazon Pilot Project invested in alternate technologies and monitoring and enforcement of environmental laws. A more general expansion of new forms of governance, including deforestation moratoria, increased support for social movements and rural associations for land as well as recognition and protection of collective holdings. All these were oriented to mobilization for Green markets, green environmentalism, and green governance more generally.

Complex institutionalities were invoked at multiple scales and were successful, but were largely unique to the iconically and ecologically important Amazon and did not apply to the Cerrado, Argentine Chaco, or Bolivian Chiquitania, where forests were falling at accelerating rates. This widely cheered Amazonian eco-dynamic diverted attention away from a newer, environmentally indifferent power dimension: the increasing political expansion and institutional capture of Congress and relevant government agencies by agro-industrial, infrastructural, and mining interests, and an accelerating dependence of the Brazilian market on the global and especially Chinese hunger for Latin American raw materials and agricultural exports like soy. It also masked, for all Amazonian countries, erosion of manufacturing and greater precarity in the service sectors, which was offset by guaranteed wages and anti-poverty initiatives like the

<sup>2</sup> This refers to the forms of development approaches that incorporate equity and environmental sensibility, sustainability, and resilience. It is a much broader concept, however, embracing ideas of environmental justice, distributional issues, ideas like the rights of nature and ontological positions about the unity of beings including nonhumans, and epistemic questions about ways of knowing.

conditional cash transfer known as Bolsa Família, widely imitated throughout Latin America (Layton, Donaghy, and Rennó 2017).

The development discourse from the mid-twentieth century until its end relied on the idea of progress and an urban industrial future. As Marx would put it, and Rostow would echo, the less developed world would see its future as urban and industrial. But the quickest way to foreign exchange after the end of the authoritarian time and the period of neoliberal opening was the reconfiguration of development in the classic form of natural resource and agro exports, since China has made so many of the industrial dreams of the earlier import-substitution period obsolete. Brazil had largely configured itself in natural resources trade for five hundred years, so the embedded skills and institutions were there to be tapped, while its industrial coterie was not up to the task of international competition with the Asian tigers.

### **The Alchemy of Amazonian Ambiguity**

What was missed in the earlier cheering about declining Amazonian deforestation was a hidden dynamic linked to forms of accumulation and a much broader scope for the fungible nature of the “legal.” While neoliberal policies have been part of the story in the transition from authoritarian to various liberal and illiberal democracies in the late twentieth century, the role of the state has remained central to the ecopolitics<sup>3</sup> of transformation throughout the twenty-first century. The state did not disappear but enhanced its importance through large-scale infrastructure construction, sectoral investment, export promotion, and land policies. National states nourished particular coterie for reasons of cronyism and for their roles in the emerging global economies with limited interests in forests except to plunder timber and clear them for other forms of accumulation.

In Amazonian countries, the states themselves retain considerable control over subsurface resources in the allocation of concessions of multiple types and the ability to assign land titles and organize investment and settlements. While the role of the state is generally ambiguous and its presence and policies erratic, it has been the explicit territorial owner and enabler of settlement and exploitation of resources, regardless of other forms of legal or illegal interventions in Amazonian worlds. Its presence or absence is often strategic, and the forms that this presence takes have huge implications for land, water, and now, of course, air.

The central part of the COP26 agreement on the Brazilian side is that *illegal* deforestation would be controlled by 2030. The alchemy of what is legal and illegal is highly mutable in Amazonian land politics and has been since Brazil's beginnings. But legality is the name of the game in the politics of carbon and carbon markets. In Amazonia writ large what is decided as legal and illegal is no longer particularly based on precedent or even settled law and is always available for reconfiguration. Who gets to decide what is legal and illegal can involve a broad cast of characters at multiple levels in the deadly theatre known as Amazonian land and resource law. They can range from a gunslinger or disgruntled rancher to the offices of local states and the Congress itself. Under the magic of this state and its informal and formal actors, it is entirely possible to control “illegal” deforestation even as forest clearing rates soar.

What unfolds in Amazonia now—and this cannot be completely described in a short communique like this—is basically a “natural experiment” that pivots on the idea of the legal. What happens when what had been illegal becomes legal through changing the parameters of what can be done? What happens when what had been understood as a “forever” designation (like a national park) simply changes definition?

<sup>3</sup> By ecopolitics I mean political with ecological implications.



**Figure 3. Demonstration against deforestation.** Mauro Pimentel, Getty Images.



For many *originarios*, *quilombolas*, and other traditional peoples, Amazonia has been the realm of practical utopias, spaces of autonomy and of livelihood support (Florentino and Amantino 2012; Yabeta and Gomes 2013). These are also places imbued with spiritual power and highly meaningful physical and ecological markers of ethnic, spiritual, and social histories and homage to the nonhuman. Biotic and social histories meld into one and are enshrined in the recognition of the rights to historical territories. Research for decades has shown that forest clearance is far higher outside the holdings of traditional peoples, and it's a reality that holds at a planetary level. Protecting these holdings reduces deforestation.

Bolsonaro, however, vowed to not recognize a single Indigenous territory during his time in power, despite the 237 Indigenous territories already in the process of being demarcated and still not officially recognized. Bolsonaro lies about many things, but in this he has been true to his word. Indigenous and traditional territorial holdings have been the consistent sites of threat, clearing, and de facto expropriation, and at least a million hectares of such lands are under siege (Nogueira et al. 2018; Diele-Viegas and Rocha 2020).<sup>4</sup> To be a forest protector these days is to be a target of more dangers than labor leaders face,

which tells you something about the national economies and the importance of natural resources in the current development scenarios.

### The New Legality

Those concerned about protected areas—whether inhabited or in full protection—are justifiably upset. Protected areas that had been sites of new deforestation frontiers are now regularly degazetted—that is, stripped of their legal protections as protected areas—and thus the clearing that occurred there no longer carries sanctions. In a dazzling Catch-22, cleared areas no longer retain their conservation values, so these lands should simply be handed over to the deforesters. Should forests stand in the way of any infrastructural projects (Bernard, Penna, and Araújo 2014; Arima 2016), or even near them in the case of roads, the projects currently proceed without or with only minimal environmental impact reports, in the case of formal roads, and with no constraint at all for informal roads. Because most Amazonian deforestation occurs within 5 kilometers of roads, the damaging impacts of the most widespread infrastructure investments are largely ignored.

Many conservation areas and collective lands were designated by local states rather than federal edict. If local potentates have other uses for such forests rather than as extractive reserves or national forests, they can also rename and redefine the legal context of these systems, whether local judges claim the action legal or otherwise.<sup>5</sup> Invasion of national forests, protected areas, and parks is now rampant, with up to 93 percent of clearing qualifying as illegal, even as considerable amnesty is shown to deforesters. Titles are transferred and holdings reconfigured as legal. Thus, through “Amazonian alchemy,” the illegal becomes legal and serves as an example for all to keep clearing.

<sup>4</sup> Amazon Geo-Referenced Socio-Environmental Information Network (RAISG), <https://www.amazoniasocioambiental.org/en/>.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Camargos, “Half of the State Representatives Who Approved the Reduction of Protected Areas in Rondônia Are Cattle Ranchers or Were Financed by Rural Landowners,” *Repórter Brasil*, May 20, 2021, <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2021/05/half-of-the-state-representatives-who-approved-the-reduction-of-protected-areas-in-rondonia-are-cattle-ranchers-or-were-financed-by-rural-landowners/>.

While there are still laws, to a degree, the environmental enforcement agency Ibama has been so weakened and so demoralized with massive budget cuts that forest lands and public lands as well as collective holdings have in many contexts become an open commons for plunder. A pathetic letter from Ibama employees about the undermining of the institution that they had been devoted to in the name of protecting the Brazilian patrimony speaks to an extraordinary level of demoralization within key institutions.<sup>6</sup> This dynamic only increased in the time of COVID, when environmental actions were largely abandoned. This process has been increasing throughout the Bolsonaro mandate, and there is no evidence of its slowing down.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, most recently, the remote sensing institution INPE (National Institute for Space Research) is largely being defunded, and will no longer track even Cerrado clearing.<sup>8</sup>

There are many other dynamics that an article of this size cannot explore, but merely the legal ledger of reclassification of land, regardless of the specific logics of clearing (and there are many), has the capacity to achieve a tremendous, planetarily horrible paradox: the decline of illegality even as deforestation soars. This is the source of the storms that will be blowing out of Paradise, as rivers dry and forests die, and via an Amazonia where we turn our back to the future.

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<sup>6</sup> Ernesto Londoño and Leticia Casado, "With Amazon on Fire, Environmental Officials in Open Revolt against Bolsonaro," *New York Times*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/world/americas/amazon-fires-brazil.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Rhett A. Butler, "How the Pandemic Impacted Rainforests in 2020: A Year in Review," *Mongabay*, December 29, 2020, <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/how-the-pandemic-impacted-rainforests-in-2020/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jake Spring and Stephen Eisenhammer, "Exclusive: As Fires Race through Amazon, Brazil's Bolsonaro Weakens Environment Agency," *Reuters*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-environment-ibama-exclusive/exclusive-as-fires-race-through-amazon-brazils-bolsonaro-weakens-environment-agency-idUSKCN1V1141>.