
Amazon: Territorial disputes and conflicts

"They consider us the periphery of the periphery"

Before entering into a discussion of the profound changes taking place in the Amazon in recent years – especially after the return to large-scale public and private logistical infrastructure projects (highways, ports, airports, communication systems, riverways, railways, hydroelectric dams, gas and oil pipelines, and others) – we would like to touch on an issue of particular relevance to the region that is not always addressed: the Amazon is the periphery in all of the countries where it is found. If we look closely at the map, we see that in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana and Brazil, the Amazon is the periphery of the periphery. Not a single one of the capitals of these countries or the French colony is found there. It is generally the best preserved area, but also the one most lacking in public policies to benefit the population. It is considered a sparsely populated territory, economically backwards, with no enterprise. And for those very reasons, it needs to be occupied, conquered, dominated, controlled and integrated into capitalist globalization, so that its natural resources can be exploited and exported, primarily benefiting the big political and economic groups in Brazil and abroad.

If many define Brazil as the capitalist periphery, then what is the Amazon? From the viewpoint of the dominators, the only alternative for the Amazon is to remain the periphery of the periphery, a place to which to move economic activities that make intensive use of natural resources (land, water, forests, soil and subsoil), that promote environmental degradation (mining, livestock farming, energy production and logging, among others), and that are essentially geared to export, highly subsidised by the Brazilian government (through tax exemptions and other fiscal incentives) and financed at extremely low interest rates. The polluting industries that Japan, Europe and the United States do not want on their own soil anymore are being moved there, as well as those that require huge amounts of energy for the production of their goods (such as aluminium, for example), or significant quantities of water (such as palm oil and soybean production and mining activities), or other natural resources that are running out in other areas where the foreign companies involved operate (as in the case of Asian timber companies).

Disputes over territories and their resources

Large-scale infrastructure projects in the Amazon serve different objectives. First of all, highways, hydroelectric dams, ports and other major projects are aimed at guaranteeing access, use and control of vast areas of land and the natural resources of the region for powerful national and foreign economic groups. The infrastructure being built in the region is meant to facilitate wholesale plunder. But it turns out that these territories are not “empty” in demographic terms. They are home to different indigenous peoples, riverine communities, extractivist communities, quilombolas (communities made up by the descendants of Africans brought to Brazil as slave labour) and others. They are therefore inhabited territories, in some cases traditionally inhabited, and their inhabitants have a relationship with nature that is qualitatively different from our own, because they do not view nature as a mere commodity. In fact, by opening up these areas to predatory exploitation in order to

satisfy external demands, the governments, companies and their allies are sowing conflict in the Amazon, because traditional, peasant farmer and indigenous communities will not allow their areas to be destroyed without reacting in some way.

Second, Brazil's interest in the integration of infrastructure in South America is motivated by the possibility of lowering the costs of exporting soybeans, minerals, timber, meat and other products to markets on different continents. In addition, this process has enabled Brazilian companies to enter and control the markets of neighbouring countries, with the full support of the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES), other public and private financial institutions, different ministries, the national government, etc. Not to mention the intent of some of the social sectors that control the state to transform Brazil into a hegemonic power in South America.

Third, infrastructure projects are important for the three countries that are currently competing for hegemony in South America, and particularly in the Pan-Amazon region: Brazil, China and the United States. These countries want to ensure that the projects they have planned are effectively implemented. For China, which needs large quantities of minerals and food products, the Amazon has become one of its main suppliers. In addition to economic motivations, the United States wants to consolidate its military presence in this section of the hemisphere. In this regard, Colombia remains the primary "bridgehead" for U.S. interests in our region. While on one hand, the territorial interconnection achieved through infrastructure projects is viewed positively by the governments and transnational companies of Brazil, China and the United States, on the other, it tends to heighten the conflicts between them, because their geopolitical and strategic perspectives differ on several points. How will these conflicts be resolved? That is the question!

Fourth, social movements, NGOs, church movements and other sectors of society that are opposed to this logic of economic development based on the intensive and extensive exploitation of the Amazon's natural resources are not fighting against one company or another, one government or another; their struggle is against an entire bloc of power that is profoundly interconnected from the local to the international level. That power bloc unites governments, corporations (ALCOA, VALE, Suez, Odebrecht, Camargo Corrêa), parliaments, judicial power, communication oligopolies (encompassing TV, radio, internet, press agencies, newspapers, magazines, etc.), banks (Santander, Itaú, Bradesco, BNDES, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others), multilateral agencies (particularly the World Trade Organization), business associations (1), and even a certain sector of social movements and NGOs.

These actors join forces to ensure the public's support for the execution of infrastructure projects – despite the recognized irreversible impacts on the environment, indigenous peoples, traditional communities and urban populations. They also push through legislative reforms for the relaxation of environmental and other legislation, in order to facilitate access by big corporations to indigenous lands, the remnants of quilombolas, preserved natural areas (national forests, parks, extractivist reserves, etc.); and to define mitigation and/or compensation measures to enable the removal of thousands of people from the areas of interest to big capital. We also should not forget the measures aimed at combating all of the sectors that fight back against the strategies of the hegemonic forces, such as the criminalization of leaders and their organizations, political persecution, the financial asphyxiation of organizations, and even the use of physical violence.

Fifth, large-scale infrastructure projects are connected to the strategy of the abovementioned power bloc to transform all elements of nature into *environmental assets*. In other words, we have entered into a phase of capitalism in which a price is placed on nature. Now the discussion revolves around the monetary value of a ton of carbon, the work of pollination carried out by bees, a standing forest,

the potential of rivers to generate energy, the capacity of algae to capture polluting wastes, etc.

Sixth, the construction of all of the infrastructure works of interest to big capital also contributes to maintaining the mechanisms of domination in the hands of that power bloc. Ports, airports, highways, hydroelectric dams and other works are used, for example, to finance the electoral campaigns of members of both the executive and legislative branches. At the same time, by guaranteeing access, use and control of vast territories and their natural resources to powerful business groups, infrastructure projects contribute to enabling the capitalist system to find new ways of feeding and reproducing itself indefinitely.

Seventh, large-scale infrastructure projects are justified on the basis of key concepts that have a profound influence on the popular imaginary. These include the notions of *progress* and *development*. The political and ideological power of these key concepts is considerable. As a result, it is difficult to oppose the dominant discourse, because to some extent we have become prisoners of the hegemonic patterns of thought in our society. This is why we need to open ourselves to other possibilities, such as the concept of '*Buen Vivir*' inspired by the experiences of the Andean indigenous peoples, or even a critical reflection on "neo-extractivism" (2). We need to break the chains that tie us to ideas like progress and development. This is just as important as holding demonstrations to prevent the construction of a hydroelectric dam or the installation of a mining company.

Notes:

(1) Associação Brasileira de Alumínio (ABAL), [Associação Brasileira da Infraestrutura e Indústrias de Base](#) (ABDIB), [Associação Brasileira das Concessionárias de Energia Elétrica](#) (ABCE), Confederação Nacional da Indústria (CNI), Conselho Empresarial Brasil-Estados Unidos, to name a few.

(2) The term "neo-extractivism" or "neo-extractivist" basically refers to the model of development based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources (mining, oil and gas extraction and other activities), controlled by large national or transnational economic groups and with the capacity to cause profound social and environmental damage.

By Guilherme Carvalho (FASE/PA – Brazil)

Email: gcarvalho@fase-pa.org.br