



CIES POLICY BRIEF 4

Darkness at Noon: Deforestation in the new Authoritarian Era

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The dramatic Amazon fires images of August 2019 triggered a geopolitical outcry. Brazilian President Bolsonaro, however, unflinchingly continues to support his destructive model of Amazonian development. This article recalls the extent of the disaster and delves into the reasons behind such disdain for environmental concerns.

It is pretty hard to know many hectares of Amazonian forests you had to burn to shroud this hemisphere's largest megacity, São Paulo, about 2,500 km from the Amazon, in enough smoke to completely darken its skies. But we do have some numbers on fires in Brazil (over 85,000) and Amazonia (close to 44,000).

The area that burned all over Amazonia since the beginning of the year nudges up to over 1.9 million ha (Brazil) and another million in Bolivia, and it's not done yet though heavy rains slowed the fires in Bolivia.

Immolated ecosystems

The images of the vast burnings – a human arson on a more or less unthinkable scale – were dramatically visible from space, from drones and from distressing ground photos which made the heat feel palpable, the apocalypse now. Forest fire smoke, CO₂ and the DNA of the most complex systems on the planet became mere ash, a new kind of urban pollution. The immolated ecosystems swirled into the atmosphere to further bake more greenhouse gases into the sky, reducing its plants and animals to their constituent chemicals in the claggy dust and the charred remains of a world perhaps now gone forever.

The Presidential Response

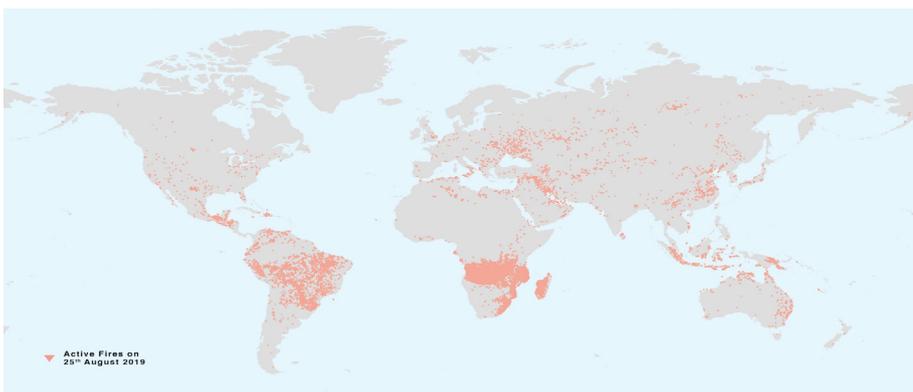
The ghastly images soon triggered a geopolitical outcry. Jair Bolsonaro and his minister for the exterior, Ernesto Araújo, are both climate “sceptics” while his environmental minister, Roberto Salles, widely despised by Brazil's environmental community, views climate as a “secondary issue”.

US President Donald Trump, his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and many of his other appointees are also climate change deniers whose policies can be summed up in the US withdrawal from the Paris climate accord. They all suddenly found that at the G7 meeting in France, Amazon burning and its climate implications had leapt, irritatingly, into an agenda item. Bolsonaro vaulted into action with his usual rebarbative comments. First, he refused the monies offered by the European Union (22 million euros – actually a risible sum given the scale of the burning) because he felt that French President Emmanuel Macron had insulted him. Bolsonaro was, however, willing to take funds from Boris Johnson's United Kingdom, and happy to send in 44,000 troops in a symbolic display of his Amazonian affection and military bona fides.

The reasons behind the disdain for environmental concerns

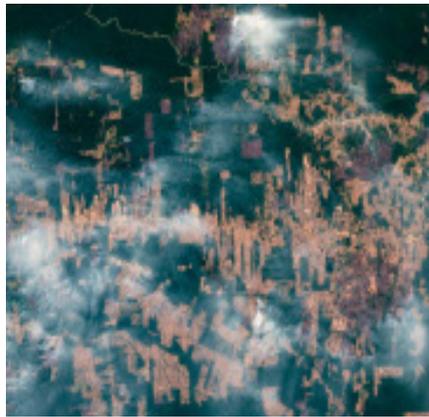
But what was, in fact, triggering deforestation? During his election campaign, Bolsonaro advocated amnesty for deforesters and timber thieves, and this is a promise he has kept. He vowed to open up indigenous and traditional peoples' lands to mining and to curtail their rights over the land. He vowed that not one more centimetre of indigenous lands or Kibombo (runaway slave communities) territories would be demarcated or legalised, and so far that is the case.

Bolsonaro would also shut down Brazil's environmental ministry, relax environmental law enforcement and licensing, and back out of



Map of active fires in the world on 25 August 2019. Source: EFFIS – Copernicus | [Ver. 2.3.3], © OpenStreetMap

the Paris climate accord. He has not been able to do exactly that, but his environmental minister, Ricardo Salles, shortly after taking the reins, attacked the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA). He dismissed 27 of its 29 regional agency heads, replacing them with military men, slashed its budget by more than 24% and fired many of its field people. Even as IBAMA's trucks and office were going up in flames, and their ability to carry out any enforcement was made impossible through Salles's draconian cuts, Bolsonaro continued to derogate and insult the institution and its workers.



High resolution satellite image of slash-and-burn fires and smoke clouds in the Amazon rain forest in August 2019, Amazon basin, Mato Grosso, Brazil, contains modified Copernicus Sentinel data [2019]

The new military coterie inhabiting the climate negotiations staff had to be informed that Brazil was due to host a climate summit, COP25. Brazil later cancelled this commitment, and COP 25 will unfold in Madrid. This episode was emblematic of the degree of cluelessness among the inheritors of what had been one of the jewels in the crown of Brazilian diplomacy – and of the indifference to the climate process itself.

What is the meaning or value of stewardship if you believe in the end times, as do Brazil's Evangelical influencers (Bolsonaro is one), who have risen to the top policy strata? The general slogan that integrates the president's constituents, "Bibles, beef and bullets", more or less sums up his coalitions: fundamentalist Christians, agroindustry and the military.

Bolsonaro has de facto decriminalised land grabbing on an unprecedented level, encouraging clearing as a means of claiming – the tried and true method of land capture by fraud and force. After valuable timber is hauled out, there are enormous speculative gains to be made by selling land.

The famously unproductive cattle system, which is now applied in about 80% of Amazon cleared areas, serves more as a means of "place holding" in the creation of an asset by privatising public resources, taking advantage of the initial nutrient flush in the ashes of the burnt forests, and then selling out. Laundering money gained from illegal gold, timber and drugs also features in this process. The

clearing process is attended by a great deal of violence, because these forests are inhabited.

Brazil's agroelites have been perfectly willing to burn up more than 40,000 species of plants to make a habitat for just one – soy – and to immolate a world of more than 100,000 different kinds of animals (an underestimate) to make space for only another species – the cow. This would move our world from the Anthropocene – the age of Man – to what biologist E. O. Wilson has called the Eremocene – the Age of Loneliness – as we preside over the sixth biodiversity extinction and a loss of more than a million species.

The old aphorism has it that we will see the end of the world before we will see the end of capitalism. What we are certainly seeing in Amazonia is what is called locally "capitalism selvagem" ("untamed" or "jungle capitalism"), and for many, their worlds have already gone, the epitaph written in smoke.

Acknowledgement

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