

Neoextractivism and Socio-environmental Conflicts in the Amazon: Is (capitalist) Forest Management a Sustainable Alternative?

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Abstract: This article aims to explain the primary aspects of socio-environmental conflicts that arise from the increase in neo-extractive activities within community territories in the Amazon rainforest. This research aims to define and explain a socio-environmental conflict in the central region of Rondônia, in the Western Amazon, examining the relationships and interactions between the agents directly and indirectly involved in the conflict. Regarding the methodology, political ecology is explored as a field of study for socio-environmental conflicts, following the theoretical and methodological frameworks of Paul E. Little's "ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts" and of Andrew P. Vayda's "progressive contextualization" of phenomena that destabilize ecosystems, forest units, and forest fragments. The article then outlines a specific aspect of forest exploitation imposed as an alternative for resolving socio-environmental conflicts in the Amazon, which instead resulted in a fierce race for land and timber, consequently causing ruptures with old conservationist practices.

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Introduction

The concept of sustainable development debunks the myth of modern economic rationality. In response, the environmental crisis is often attributed to humanity's metabolic interactions with nature. A growing body of research uses the concept of social metabolism to explain environmental phenomena related to the human-nature relationship and corresponding instabilities. These studies are informed by notions such as the widely discussed Anthropocene, Econocene (Norgaard, 2013), Misanthropocene (Patel, 2013), Anthrobscene (Parikka, 2014), Technocene (Hornborg, 2015), Urbanocene (Chwałczyk, 2020).

Furthermore, “the behavioral study of humans would be greatly diminished today without the influence of animal behavior research” (Snowdon, 1999, p. 367). Charles Darwin's work on natural selection of species has influenced various areas of human sciences that study the behavioral relations/interactions between humans and nature. In human ecology, – Morán (1990), for example argues that investigations about human interactions with nature take into account behavioral aspects of human adaptability to the environmental conditions of ecosystems inhabited by communities, and how they develop processes of socialization of *habitus* in the face of variations in location, climate, relief, vegetation, fertility and soil problems, availability of fruits, hunting, fishing, etc.

However, environmental degradation extends beyond issues of human adaptability to environmental conditions. It reflects hierarchies, conflicts, inequalities, power relations, and class structures that are deeply entangled with the operations of capital, forming part of a global web of causes, interactions, and effects — or, as Jason Moore (2013; 2022) frames it, a situated, multi-species *world-ecology*, capitalized as cheap nature.

The environmental crisis suggests a widening process of the capital's metabolic rupture over nature (Porto-Gonçalves, 2016; 2020; Matos, 2023). Neo-extractivism – one of many apparatuses of green capitalism – operates according to this process. A *neo-extractivist offensive* advances upon Latin America and drives conflicts over community groups, also provoking the destruction of nature, territories, and modes of expanded reproduction of life (Svampa, 2019; Suárez; Ruggerio, 2018; Ruggerio; Suárez, 2019; Ruggerio *et al.*, 2022; Navarro; Gaona; Montezuma, 2024). According to a predatory dialectic in epistemic crisis (Porto-Gonçalves, 2015), neo-extractivist activities are advanced in the Brazilian Amazon. They evince plundering regimes typical of persistent primitive accumulation, ranging from capitalist and colonialist expansion and invasion (Malheiro; Porto-Gonçalves; Michelotti, 2021) to expropriatory enclosures against community groups (Matos, 2024a; 2024b) and their bodies and territories. This phenomenon is intricately linked to a state of exception that facilitates the establishment of bio/necropolitical governance over the territory in this region (Malheiro; Cruz, 2019; Malheiro, 2022).

Addressing the environmental crisis, therefore, requires recognizing the role of class hierarchies, hegemonic groups, and social movements, which are taken into consideration in their role of either exacerbating or offering alternatives to overcome the issues driving this crisis. The costs of environmental degradation cannot be a sum of values distributed equally to everyone, as if everyone shared the same contribution to the devastation. It is

essential to specify the role of each agent in this complex *world-ecology*.

As part of a broader discussion aimed at deepening the debate on the transformation of nature into a cheap commodity under capitalism (Moore, 2013a; 2022b), this article seeks to highlight the main — and current — aspects of the socio-environmental conflicts arising from the imposition of the *neo-extractivist offensive* on community territories in the Amazon. This research focuses on the complex socio-environmental conflict surrounding the natural resources of the “Legal Reserve *em bloco*”¹ of the Margarida Alves Settlement Project (PA)², located in the central region of Rondônia.

Through an interdisciplinary approach grounded in political ecology, we demonstrate how forest management — an instrument of neo-extractivist offensive — was imposed on rural families as an alleged solution to socio-environmental conflicts. It was an exogenous force that intensified the predation³ on natural resources and exacerbated conflicts over the settlement. More specifically, the research analyzes this socio-environmental conflict by investigating the relationships between the agents involved, both directly and indirectly.

The complexity of socio-environmental conflicts

Our approach is based on a larger debate that sustains that the environmental crisis is a crisis of capitalism, in which the category of socio-environmental conflicts is, among other emerging issues and paradigms, an effect of the contradictions of sustainable development as an alternative to contemporary colonization/exploitation of strategic natural resources. Socio-environmental conflicts have emerged as a contradiction of the sustainable development adopted in recent decades, demonstrating the unsustainability of a productivist model of development. In addition to its unsustainability, the capitalist model is also authoritarian because it is based on the expansion of inequality, separation, and the exploitation of both nature and social groups. Among socio-environmental conflicts, some factors stand out in their complexity, such as the lack of mediation/arbitration, the mechanism for resolving conflicts (Silva; Sato, 2012), and the impotence of social groups with disadvantaged power quotas (Little, 2006).

Dispute over land, territory, and nature resources have been some of the most evident forms of conflicts in the 21st century (Brito *et al.*, 2011; Suárez; Ruggerio, 2018 ; Ruggerio; Suárez, 2019 ; Ruggerio *et al.*, 2022) and should represent the core of the environmental crisis in countries rich in natural resources. These conflicts are generally common between individuals and social movements, institutional agents, and hegemonic groups. The last two agents of conflict seek to justify environmental impacts

1 - “Legal Reserve *em bloco*” or “coletiva” is a Legal Reserve model created by the Brazilian National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCRA). In this text, we are going to refer to it from now on as “Legal Reserve”.

2 - In Brazil, the Settlement Projects (PA - Projeto de Assentamento) are the result of the mobilization of rural social movements advocating for land rights, combined with the State’s slow implementation of agrarian reform policies. It will be abbreviated as “SP” throughout the text.

3 - The term predation (rapinagem) is often used to discuss primitive accumulation. It also functions as a powerful metaphor for ecological and social relations in which certain actors survive by extracting value from the destruction or dispossession of others.

through economic value. There are also social actors disconnected from community groups, who are driven by economic rationality in their human/nature relations.

Thus, socio-environmental conflicts are produced by different worldviews, rationalities, representations, and dissonant symbolizations about society and nature (Viégas, 2009). In sum, they represent a clash of valuations (Martínez-Alier, 2018). These are complicated, unclear, and stressful situations, involving landowners, agro-militias (farmers armed with weapons), political and economic groups working together. Thus, socio-environmental conflicts are driven by an unequal struggle of hegemonic interests, allied, above all, to the interests of agrarian and neo-extractive capital. This phenomenon is frequently reinforced by the capitalized State of coalitions of productivist/economicist forces, which often leads to the destruction of the natural environment.

Given the diffuse and often conflicting interests they involve, socio-environmental conflicts must be subject to mediation/arbitration in the public sphere, simultaneously, in the negotiation arena between hegemonic groups and the social actors involved. This simultaneous approach to social, cultural, and political dimensions implies a sociology of socio-environmental conflicts (Alonso; Costa, 2000), as these are structured around generally divergent interests, perceptions, worldviews, values, and ways of life.

According to Viégas (2009), power relations between those directly or indirectly involved in conflicts over natural resources are established through varying levels of power within the conflict arena, which provide those agents a range of alternatives to be pursued. Socio-environmental conflicts have varied characteristics and causes; the confrontations between the parties. In turn, they assume, albeit provisionally, the need to mediate/arbitrate the different interests.

Although it is not possible to conceive a definitive resolution for all conflicts, various types of socio-environmental conflicts can be pacified (Vargas, 2007). This means that there is no single answer for analysis, interpretation, and mediation. This allows for the establishment of different frameworks for analysis in conflict resolution relations and the multiple forms of theoretical-methodological approaches, which, in turn, demand studies that speak directly to public policy makers.

This must be a role of political ecology, the field of study of socio-environmental conflicts (Little, 2006). Miranda (2012) notes that approaches to socio-environmental conflicts unfold into two main fields: social political ecology, which advocates for environmental preservation and environmental justice; and analytical political ecology, which focuses on the theoretical-methodological effort to analyze conflicts as the result of political, economic, and social competition for natural resources.

The social field is rooted in the environmental thought and action matrix (Porto-Gonçalves, 2012), which brings together intellectuals, ecologists, quilombolas, social and environmental activists, community leaders, social movements, Indigenous peoples, riverside communities, and others. Their main concerns, claims, and forms of engagement are primarily focused on ways of life, local cultures and identities, local use of natural resources, and so on. This is almost always supported by alternative rationalities, knowledges, cosmopolitics, agroecological approaches, etc., which, in turn, articulate

different forms of re-existence, which are antagonistic to the telluric forces of primitive accumulation of hegemonic groups.

Although social political ecology is important in community groups' agendas, analytical political ecology also contributes to the approach of these conflicts. This field arises from new theoretical perspectives of understanding and contributing to ecological studies, specifically those that do not consider the phenomena produced by social interactions and the biophysical environment. Vayda (1983) refers to these as 'neofunctional studies,' characterizing them as a form of romanticism. This romanticism is evident in self-regulating and self-organizing systems theories, alongside the supposed instability and preservation of untouched ecosystems. These approaches tend to disregard theoretical discussions aimed at explaining the causes of social and ecological change, focusing instead on a practice that emphasizes political-economic events without addressing their significance in the broader context of social, political, ecological, and economic changes.

Vayda (1983) highlights the importance of studies in political ecology that not only explain phenomena but also engage with a perspective accessible to policymakers. On another occasion, Vayda and Walters (1999) propose a form of political ecology as an alternative to what they call apolitical ecology; the latter is based on ambitions of political control studies or competitions over the use of natural resources, carried out by political ecologists since the 1960s. According to the authors' perspective, there is a need to explain cause and effect, and how natural resources are affected by political control and competition. Hence, the research focus becomes what the authors call the occurrence of environmental events.

In light of this basic premise, issues involving the instability of ecosystems or units and socio-environmental conflicts must be addressed through an approach that not only explains but also prioritizes these occurrences from the perspective of the phenomenon. Occupations or invasions of conservation units, the division of areas, and the conflicts are examples of occurrences that can be addressed using an approach that allows for the recognition of social and cultural divides and variables (class differences, lifestyles), or at least that is the most appropriate for these approaches.

Theoretical and methodological bases of political ecology

Ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts

In his "ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts", Little (2006) emphasizes the importance of multiple disciplinary fields and approaches in political ecology, and identifies elements that must be observed due to their capacity to create conflicts: these are, natural resources, forestry, fishing, hydroelectric dams, values and ways of life (Little, 2006). The "ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts" allows for identification and differentiation, and incorporates multiple points of view and diverse interests of the groups being researched. This approach requires mapping on different levels and access to historical documentation of the conflict (its alliances, negotiations, accommodations, and

ruptures). According to the author, the “ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts” suggests that the focus must not be on the way of life of those involved or of a specific social group. Instead, the crux of the matter should be the analysis of socio-environmental conflicts and their multiple social and natural relationships/interactions, which distinguish those conflicts from those of other natures.

In this context, the role of the researcher is to understand the internal dynamics of the conflicts and their different positions and strategies, mapping them within the multiple relationships, interactions, and coalitions, to “also identify the different conflicting discourses and their respective bases of cultural and political legitimacy, whether explicit or implicit” (Little, 2006, p. 93). Hence, the ethnography of social conflicts fits squarely within the ecological paradigm, which focuses on the relationships, employing a processual methodology that contextualizes the knowledge produced” (Little, 2006, p. 92), thereby becoming a guide for addressing distributive, territorial, and spatial socio-environmental conflicts.

The “ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts” refers specifically to a multi-actor ethnography. This approach differentiates social, ecological, and natural agents, operating according to multiple outlined spatial and temporal levels of analysis, therefore allowing the creation of a social map of the conflict. Little (2006) suggests an analysis of various tactics and strategies used by social groups, including different forms of resolution, alliances and coalitions, mobilizations, management projects, and the sustainable use of environmental resources. This step must be carried out based on historical documentation of the conflict. Multi-actor ethnography refers to a network of interconnected agents at local, regional, national, and even global levels, who are involved, directly or indirectly, in the complex web of interactive causes surrounding socio-environmental conflicts. Multi-actor ethnography allows for mapping the portion or scale of power of those involved in the conflict. Little (2006) also notes the need to account for both formal and informal powers (attempts at domination, threats, murders and torture, vandalism, and attempts to cause terror in disadvantaged social groups).

The progressive contextualization method

The chosen research method follows theoretical and methodological contributions of Vayda (1983), following the basis of “progressive contextualization”, within the perspective of political ecology. This method focuses on person-environment/man-nature interaction and identifies the main exogenous forces that contribute to locally driven events within a complex web of causes and interactions.

The method of “progressive contextualization” is recommended for approaches that involve human-nature and people-environment relations/interactions, which aim to establish a broader or more detailed progressive context for the research. This method is characterized as a guide for analyzing relations/interactions based on rationalities and the knowledge of specific contexts to systematize unusual elements of the research. To understand the forces that contribute to the phenomenon, the researcher starts his investigation by asking broader questions. Then, he/she positions himself in local activi-

ties, people, and specific occasions, opting for the combination of quantitative methods (techniques) followed by qualitative methods (techniques) (Vayda, 1983).

The researcher uses a strategy called “progressive contextualization” to study these relationships. This strategy involves identifying and analyzing social relations and environmental factors in human-nature/people-environment relations. This professional also investigates how such relations result in certain consequences (such as the effects of deviations from the purposes of a unit, an ecosystem, or a forest fragment). Thus, the researcher must commit to a holistic premise, understanding that an adequate understanding of the observed problems can only be obtained if it is seen as part of a complex of interactive causes and effects (Vayda, 1983).

Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Vayda (1983), Schmink (1999) analyzes concrete cases of outreach programs, applied research, and participatory management activities involving rural communities in and around protected areas in Latin America. He demonstrates how a focus on gender and community participation has contributed to the management of environmental resources. For the author, the value of this approach lies in the specificity of a location or a certain social group. This approach is also highly sensitive to how outside forces not tied to a particular location influence local outcomes.

Vayda (1983) further emphasizes that, when using “progressive contextualization”, it is important that the researcher centers himself in the development of questions of interest to those with power to influence public policies. When under this principle, the researcher leans on this holistic premise, which recognizes that socio-environmental problems can only be understood when their complexes of interactive causes and effects are taken into consideration. In this sense, the “progressive contextualization” of problems must create useful results that can be readily communicated to political decision-makers at different levels.

The conceptual field of political ecologists guides both Vayda (1983) and Little (2006). In line with this field, these authors propose an intense inter-transdisciplinary dialogue between Social Sciences and Natural Sciences, to produce “a truly ecological science”. This research framework focuses on the biodynamic relationship between the biophysical and the social, which are inserted in the paradigm of the crisis of capital. Capitalist crisis requires certain paradigmatic changes in scientific practice, in epistemological horizon, and in theoretical and methodological aspects. Ethnographing/contextualizing socio-environmental conflicts allows identification and differentiation, and requires the mapping of the different levels and historical documentation of the conflict (its alliances, negotiation, accommodation, ruptures), a move which enables the mapping of the multiple points of view and diverse interests motivating those involved in the dispute and the identification of the main exogenous forces that contribute to the formation of conflicts.

Immersion and data collection

The approach combines *ad hoc* quantitative methods (procedures) followed by qualitative methods (procedures), involving immersion in the Margarida Alves Settle-

ment Project, the “Legal Reserve em bloco”, on convenient occasions, and positioning in specific places, moments and situations, to search for the “chosen ones”, that is, those directly linked to the conflict. This was the quantitative stage of this approach. The qualitative stage, in turn, does not consider specific scripts or interviews, since our objective, when adopting this methodology, is to expect the unexpected, to capture unusual questions in the study.

We employed procedural approach of “progressive contextualization” positioning ourselves within specific activities, locations, and moments. These included strategic immersion in the Margarida Alves Settlement Project, access to the interior of the em bloco reserve, and the identification of key events during meetings and assemblies organized by the settlers. Guided by the “ethnography of socio-environmental conflicts”, we accessed on the same occasion as the historical documentation of the conflict, to map the different positions, beliefs, perceptions, projections, power quotas, alliances, coalitions, ruptures, etc. We also collected Documents relating to legal proceedings, police operations, seizures, and news from regional and national media, the forest management plan, and documents from the Margarida Alves project’s cooperative association.

The presence of individuals affiliated with the group known as “the powerful” (comprised of mercenaries, loggers, politicians, landowners, gunmen, among others) posed a significant challenge during the research process. The people who make up this group did not agree to be part of the study, given the risk of exposure due to their positions in the unfolding of conflicts. Despite this obstacle, every possible effort was made to catalogue the different positions of those involved in the conflict, through access to documents, participant observation, interviews, and informal dialogues, to ensure clarity in the greatest possible way.

Explaining a socio-environmental conflict in the Brazilian Amazon

Margarida Alves Settlement Project: A complex of interactive causes and effects.

The locus unit of this study is located in the central region of the state of Rondônia. The legal reserve of the Margarida Alves Settlement Project is grouped in the vicinity of five municipalities: Nova União, Ouro Preto do Oeste, Mirante da Serra, Urupá, and Teixeiraópolis. Additionally, there is a second legal reserve area located in the Padre Ezequiel settlement project, which is linked to those same municipalities. The two areas have more than 10,000 hectares, which makes up half of the area allocated to each settlement.

Map 1– The socio-spatial formation of the Margarida Alves Project is composed of plots of land, initially divided into lots to settle peasant families distributed across seven plots



Source: INCRA and IBGE. Developed by Marcelo Pires Negrão. Angers, France, 2020.

The socio-spatial configuration of the Margarida Alves Settlement Project consists of land divisions initially parceled into seven plots intended for the settlement of rural families. Plots 1, 2, and 3 were subdivided using a traditional format, nicknamed “dumb square”⁴ by the settlers. In contrast, Plots 4, 5, 6, and 7 followed a more radical design, commonly called the “bicycle radius”⁵ and/or “agrovilas” (Map 1). The latter plots are more dynamic from the point of view of the environmental landscape to socio-religious relations. They are organized in the form of housing units, on lots that begin in what is called the “social area”, where the houses surround these places formed by churches, football pitches, party sheds, meetings and assemblies, bars, cooperative headquarters, forest fragments, etc.

4 - Term coined by social movements to question the conventional spatial model for creating INCRA Settlement Projects in which lots are distributed based only on the number of hectares in square meters, making community relations typical of the peasant way of life (festivals, religious practices, etc.) difficult due to the distance between lots, residences, and spaces for community relations.

5 - The term “bicycle spoke” or agro-villages are settlement models suggested by social movements in response to the conventional model. In this spatial model, lots are distributed in a triangular shape, clustered close to each other and with an area designated for community use in the center, where all the lots meet. The similarity to the wheels of a bicycle – a circular object fixed by spokes and fixed around an axis in the center – gives this spatial model its name, “bicycle spoke” or agro-villages. Due to the proximity between lots and the occurrence of areas designated for community use in the center, all community relations are facilitated.

The Margarida Alves Settlement Project, our study area, was created in 1997, after the expropriation of the Fisher (also called Firasa) and Aninga farms, whose size exceeded 22,000 hectares. The settlement is an achievement resulting from the struggle for land, territories, and nature by Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST).

Originally, 258 families were settled in the Margarida Alves Settlement Project, on lots of 24 hectares, on average. At the same time, two other nearby settlements were also created: Padre Ezequiel Settlement Project, in Mirante da Serra, and Palmares Settlement Project, in Nova União, Rondônia. Nowadays, the three settlement projects house around a thousand families settled across 30,000 hectares of land.

Among all the settlements located in the central region of the state of Rondônia (Margarida; Padre Ezequiel; Palmares), only Margarida Alves Project and Padre Ezequiel Project have a Legal Reserve equivalent to 50% of the settlement area located in the geographic formation of each settlement. Margarida Alves Settlement Project legal reserve has the largest portion of the area designated for preservation, around six thousand hectares.

The state of Rondônia contains 11 legal reserves demarcated by the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária – INCRA), which spread across the municipalities of Nova União, Mirante da Serra, Corumbiara, Theobroma, Machadinho do Oeste, Urupá, and Ariquemes. These areas have become the stage for intense conflicts over their natural resources. In the Central Region of Rondônia, there are three important legal reserves: Margarida Alves (Nova União), Padre Ezequiel (Mirante da Serra), and Martin Pescador (Urupá).

TABLE 1 – network of agents directly and indirectly involved in the socio-environmental conflict of the Margarida Alves SP

Agents directly and indirectly involved in the conflict	Definition and <i>modus operandi</i>
Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST)	Mass social movement fighting for land reform through the social reappropriation of land, territories, and nature.
Mixed Cooperative for Extractivism, Family Farming, Ecologism, and Provision of Services (Coomeafes)	A cooperative formed by settlers that managed projects in the Margarida Alves SP and legal reserve. Filed for bankruptcy in 2022.
Environmental Military Police	Special unit of the Brazilian military police, in the state level, instructed to protect the environment. It carries out operations in the legal reserve.

National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Incra)	Federal institution for the Administration and Management of Agrarian Issues. It works on the reintegration of possession, preparation of the forest management plan, and dialogue with settlers and squatters.
Federal Police	The Federal law enforcement agency of Brazil and one of the three national police forces. Carries out mega-operations at Margarida Alves SP and legal reserve.
Civil Police	The Civil Police of Brazil is the country's investigative state police force. It ran investigations and operations against agromilitias.
Association of Alternative Producers of Ouro Preto do Oeste (APA)	APA was involved in the development of sustainable agricultural alternatives through agroforestry systems (SAFs), plant extractivism, and forest management. It declared bankruptcy in 2005.
Agrosilvopastoral Sanitary Defense Agency of the State of Rondônia (Idaron)	Idaron operates in the surveillance of animals raised by settlers in the legal reserve area.
State Secretariat for Environmental Development of Rondônia (Sedam)	Sedam was involved in the approval and oversight of forest management.
Nova União - RO City government	Executive branch of the municipality of Nova União. It leads both dialogue and conflict, depending on the political stance of the elected officials (right-wing or left-wing).
Agromilitias	Mercenary soldiers, hired gunmen, large landowners, loggers, lawyers, and public officials. They carry out land enclosures and expropriation efforts.
Judiciary	The judiciary operates at the state, regional, and federal levels in the mediation and arbitration of conflicts.
Pilot Program for the Protection of the Tropical Forests of Brazil (PPG-7)	Allocated funds for the implementation of projects in the Margarida Alves Settlement Project.

Source: Field study. Author (org.), 2024.

The creation of these areas was based on the possibility of encouraging ecotourism in settlements and sustainable extractivism practices among settled families. In the Margarida Alves Settlement Project, APA promoted and supported plant-based extractivism

during the first community forest management plan made within the legal reserve, carried out in 2002–2003 — a rare case within MST territories. Although the State does not recognize the formulation of specific legislation to guarantee the due protection of this type of Protected Area in the Amazon, which made deviations from ecological purposes more flexible, for many years, legal reserves have demonstrated effectiveness in nature conservation by settled families. However, due to the action of external forces and, above all, the impotence of the settled families in the face of the predatory actions conducted by agro-militias and loggers, there were ruptures with all previously established conservationist practices (Matos, 2024). Previously, settled families carried out activities such as extracting and collecting vines for handicrafts, collecting fruits (nuts, tucumã, açaí, etc.), subsistence rural hunting, etc. The legal reserve was also a space for tourism and leisure for settled families, especially for young people. As the conflicts unfolded, all these community relationships/interactions with the legal reserve were replaced by pasture fields for cattle raising (Matos, 2024).

With the strengthening of the actions of the agro-militias, the settled families became powerless in the face of the methods of expropriation and enclosures. This pattern of predation is documented in legal registers and is also highlighted in an interview with a community leader from Margarida Alves SP:

This OCRIM [Criminal Organization] aimed to invade Union property and expel, through acts of violence, the people who were legally settled in the location and who economically and legally exploited the legal reserve area of the aforementioned Rural Settlement through the Rural Workers' Cooperative of the Margarida Alves Settlement (MPF: Federal Prosecution Office, 2017).

Investigations indicated that the group that invaded Margarida Alves Settlement hired (sic) militia (group of armed individuals) from the city of Ariquemes/RO (Rondônia), to supply weapons and a team of people to make the actions possible; (MPF, 2017).

With all efforts, deforesting, demarcating property lines on their own. We put a team of settlers to watch over the reserve, The “tractor” [nickname of a settler] was caught and tortured; he was disoriented for over a month and then depressed. (Community leader of the Margarida Alves Settlement Project, 02/04/2019).

Is forest management a sustainable alternative?

Despite being a distribution of 50% of the total profits among settled families, forest management in the Margarida Alves SP could be characterized as of an entrepreneurial/capitalist type since the activities were coordinated by economic groups (logging companies and engineering offices). Through a contract with the settlers' cooperative, the

remaining 50% of profits went to a forestry engineering company located in Porto Velho, the capital of Rondônia. Three logging companies operating in the Amazon coordinated the entire timber extraction process. Some of the main characteristics of these extraction experiences are as follows: the co-optation of the settlement's community leaders; methods of expropriation and enclosures typical of primitive accumulation; internal conflicts between the settled families themselves; and, finally, a factor of greater instability, the greed of external agromilitia groups in disputes over land and timber.

Two attempts at forest management were made on the legal reserve. The first occasion took place between 2000-2003. In that occasion, the Association of Alternative Producers of Ouro Preto (APA) – an agent directly involved in the conflicts (figure 1) – achieved the first forest management plan accepted by INCRA and the Ministry of Environment (Ministério do Meio Ambiente – MMA), through the National Environmental Fund and the Pilot Program for the conservation of tropical forests in Brazil, PPG7. This plan was created to encourage extractivism among settled families and to inhibit external invaders, notably agromilitias (Matos, 2024a; 2024b). It was also a means to guarantee inspections in the area, preventing invasions and ending conflicts.

This first experience of imposed forest management as an alternative to resolving conflicts did not last long. It proved itself to be a real disaster. The families were unprepared (untrained) and had no interest in working in timber exploitation. APA had to find people from outside the settlement to work in wood extraction, as great portion of the settlers did not engage in these activities.

Contact with outsiders created a sense of unease among the settlers and workers involved in forest management activities. During this period, murders and persecutions targeted families who opposed logging. Between 2002 and 2003, outsiders connected to agro-militia groups in the region began a major invasion, taking advantage of the ongoing tensions among the settlers themselves. All these occurrences, along with the definitive bankruptcy of APA in 2005 (Kohler et al., 2011), led the settled families to abandon their activities.

From 2010 onwards, a second attempt at forest management was requested by the association of settlers of Margarida Alves SP, called Mixed Cooperative for Extractivism, Family Farming, Ecologism, and Service Provision and Provision of Services – COO-MEAFES – an agent directly involved in the conflict (Figure 1). The second forest management plan for the area was approved as an alternative to blocking new invasion movements, and also due to incentives from INCRA and community leaders, since most of the wood was already being removed illegally.

Figura 1 – Billboard with propaganda for the forest management in the legal reserve SP Margarida Alves



Source: Field study. Author (org.), 2021.

Three large timber companies operating in the Amazon extracted wood in the Margarida Alves SP, with the mediation of a forestry engineering office from Porto Velho/RO, which captured 50% of the profits from extraction. The remaining 50% of the profit from extraction was divided into mediocre portions among approximately 157 settled families. This has created new conflicts within the families, who claim this was an unequal distribution of profits. Other accusations were related to the fact that the logging companies did not fulfill the agreed-upon payments. The settlers' association attempted to establish dialogue with the companies to receive the high unpaid amounts. Fearing exposure to fencing methods – which is the practice of logging companies in the Amazon – the families ended up abandoning the demands and gave up on taking the case to court.

Upon entering the legal reserve, it became clear that the infrastructure created to serve timber exploitation caused problems. Regarding the case presented in this article, the infrastructure legally built by logging companies in these areas establishes a connection with the outside world and expands the ramifications of local occurrences to other scales. The construction of roads for legal purposes, such as forest management, both in legal reserve areas and in exploited Conservation Units, facilitates connections with external agents, enabling a greater flow of activities, specifically illegal ones. This infrastructure facilitates invasion movements of illegal loggers, who can reach remote areas that were previously inaccessible. This intensifies clandestine activities that were once confined to the forest's edges. This is what happened with the Margarida Alves SP legal reserve after forest management. The infrastructure built by logging companies for timber extraction

became a route for illegalities established through built roads and land routes, and through deliberate invasions and conflicts. This situation presupposes the existence of networks with different forms of organization in the predation of local natural resources, which configures forest management as a predatory activity in the Amazon.

Another factor of influence for illegal and deliberate removal of wood is the lack of mechanisms, methodologies, or even resources for monitoring extraction activities made by ordinary loggers and loggers with large enterprises and technological equipment, who always find a way to evade inspection. The inefficiency of institutional agents, who, in theory, should inhibit illegal actions, is a factor that contributes to the fragmentation of forests in the Amazon, especially in areas already impacted by forest management. Some landowners who are squatters on public lands and Protected Areas, certain of their impunity, remove and sell all the wood from the area, using the obtained money to divide these areas for pasture and to create infrastructure for raising cattle.

The persistence of forest exploitation after or during forest management activities is another characteristic of timber extraction in the Amazon. It is interesting to note that predatory activities only end with the total removal of all species used for timber purposes, especially those with high commercial value on the illegal market. The trade in wood chips is a common activity in forests where wood is extracted during forest management. As part of this illegal activity, some workers are also recruited from different regions of the Amazon to practice sawing with chainsaws, as sharecroppers or day laborers, which is another expropriatory regime typical of the primitive accumulation of capital. The activity is generally carried out with high-value species, such as itaúba (*Mezilaurus itauba*), pequi (*Caryocar brasiliense*), angelim-amargo (*Vatairea sericea* Ducke), angelim-pedra (*Hymenolobium pulcherrimum* Ducke), ipê-amarelo (*Tabebuia incana* A.H.Gentry), ipê-roxo (*Tabebuia* sp.), cariquara (*Minquartia guianensis* Aubl., *Olacaceae*), mirindiba (*Buchenavia tetraphylla*), and cumaru-ferro (*Dipteryx odorata*); used in the form of chips, stumps, and posts for building corrals and fences. Castanheira (*Bertholletia excelsa*), cedro rosa (*Cedrela fissilis* *Meliaceae*), jequitibá (*Cariniana*) and garapa (*Apuleia leiocarpa*) are also harvested during this exploration phase; they are used in the form of rulers, slats, planks, rafters, and beams for the construction and finishing of houses, corrals, and furniture manufacturing. Sales are guaranteed, meeting the demand of farmers, smallholders, squatters, and even residents and traders in small towns, districts, and villages. The removal of timber harvested from Protected Areas (and community territories) is always carried out on weekends and in the dead of night; in the most remote regions, this practice is deliberate. All these dynamics seem to come from forest management, which imposes fixed structures on the forests, providing access to the most remote parts, creating connections with other agents, and increasing illegality and total degradation in these areas.

Conclusions

Neo-extractivism is an inherently predatory approach to natural resource use, driven by expropriatory enclosure regimes, and constitutes an exogenous force imposed upon nature and community territories in the Amazon. Ways of life, endogenous ter-

ritorial coherences, community relations with forests and knowledge about it, previously prescribed by collective relations of expanded reproduction of life, are destroyed with the imposition of the *neo-extractivist offensive*.

The case of Margarida Alves SP demonstrates, in addition to all the environmental devastation attributed to this predatory activity, that corporate/capitalist forest management has expanded and affected even the most remote parts of the Amazon, inhabited by diverse community groups (farmers, indigenous, extractive communities, etc.). Entire ecosystems are destroyed by logging activities carried out by logging groups.

Forest management, in its neo-extractivist mode of operation, has expanded throughout the Amazon in recent years and, due to its various forms of impact, brought to light a set of contradictions, evident from the extraction arrangements – which resemble a spider’s web – to the complete fragmentation of managed areas. In addition to extraction methodologies, forest management reveals the expropriative regimes of enclosure imposed on nature and the community groups that inhabit it.

In the case of Margarida Alves SP, forest management was an exogenous force imposed through co-optation, lobbying, and persuasion of community leaders and other community members. It affected the settlement by introducing instability to the legal reserve, intensifying conflicts – even between the settled families themselves – and contributing to the complete degradation of the area. This form of corporate forest management is directly linked to environmental devastation in the Amazon.

This shows that the Capitalized State — shaped by coalitions of economic forces — has increasingly aligned with neo-extractivist capital. The Capitalized State understands the exploitation of natural resources as an alternative means of sustaining an economy that “justifies” environmental degradation as a cost to be paid by nature and the people who inhabit it. Across the political spectrum, from left to right-wing, this was and has been the belief in the unnecessary strengthening of productive forces in the Amazon.

As crises driven by new spaces for capital investment intensify, as evidenced in the ongoing transformation of nature into a cheap commodity (Moore, 2013; 2022), it becomes increasingly questionable whether green capitalism and the agrarian bourgeoisie merit the political incentives granted to them under the current neoliberal agenda of bio- and necropolitical governance of natural resources. What is certain, however, is that cases such as large-scale livestock farming, the expansion of agribusiness over the Cerrado and the Amazon, and large infrastructure projects (e.g., hydroelectric dams) did not deserve such incentives, as is already known.

Within this same context of predation, expropriation, and enclosures, we observe forms of re-existence of community groups in the Amazon supported by strategies of social reappropriation of land, territories, and nature. Many of these strategies of re-existence, which are established due to the new forms of capital articulation to transform nature into a cheap commodity, have been, in a context of disruptions, an opposition to the new forms of domination/exploitation, to neoliberal environmentalism’s discourse of “sustainable development”, and, finally, to regimes of expropriatory enclosures over nature and over community territories, as we have observed in this case as well as in others seen in the

Amazon. Community groups have been demanding to collect this economic, ecological, and social debt generated by the commodification of nature as an external investment frontier for large capital currently undergoing an epistemic crisis. This demand is also evident in the ruptures with institutional agents of capital and their neoliberal environmentalist discourse, even if this rupture is with old conservationist practices previously developed by communities, as has also been occurring.

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Neoextrativismo e Conflitos Socioambientais na Amazônia: O Manejo Florestal (capitalista) como Alternativa de Sustentabilidade?

Lucas Ramos de Matos

Resumo: Este artigo tem a finalidade de explicitar os principais (e atuais) aspectos dos conflitos socioambientais resultantes da expansão de atividades neoextrativistas sobre os territórios comunitários na Amazônia. O objetivo da pesquisa é recortar e explicar um conflito socioambiental e analisar relações/interações entre agentes envolvidos direta e indiretamente na história do conflito, que está localizado na região central de Rondônia, Amazônia Ocidental. Em relação à metodologia adotada, explora-se a ecologia política como campo de estudo dos conflitos socioambientais e seguem-se os dispositivos teórico-metodológicos da “etnografia dos conflitos socioambientais” de Paul E. Little e a “contextualização progressiva” de fenômenos que impulsionam a instabilidade de ecossistemas, unidades e fragmentos florestais, de Andrew P. Vayda. Em seguida, o artigo recorta uma especificidade da exploração florestal na Amazônia, imposta como alternativa de resolução de conflitos socioambientais, mas que resultou em uma corrida acirrada por terra e madeira e rupturas com antigas práticas conservacionistas.

Palavras-chave: Neoextrativismo, manejo florestal, conflitos socioambientais, ecologia política, Amazônia.

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Amazônia

Neoextrativismo y Conflictos Socioambientales en la Amazonía: Manejo Forestal (capitalista) como Alternativa de Sostenibilidad?

Lucas Ramos de Matos

Resumen: Este artículo tiene como objetivo explicar los principales (y actuales) aspectos de los conflictos socioambientales derivados de la expansión de las actividades neoextractivas en territorios comunitarios de la Amazonía. El objetivo de la investigación es delinear y explicar un conflicto socioambiental y analizar las relaciones/interacciones entre agentes involucrados directa e indirectamente en la historia del conflicto, que se ubica en la región central de Rondônia, Amazonía occidental. En relación a la metodología adoptada, se explora la ecología política como campo de estudio de los conflictos socioambientales, y los dispositivos teórico-metodológicos de la “etnografía de los conflictos socioambientales” de Paul E. Little y la “progresiva contextualización” de los fenómenos que impulsan la inestabilidad de los ecosistemas, unidades y fragmentos de bosque, por Andrew P. Vayda. A continuación, el artículo destaca un aspecto específico de la explotación forestal en la Amazonía, impuesta como alternativa para la resolución de conflictos socioambientales, pero que resultó en una feroz carrera por la tierra y la madera y rupturas con viejas prácticas conservacionistas.

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