



Does Amazonia Belong to the World?

*The policy of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and his government is to deforest the region.
What right do other nations have to give it legally protected
status and intervene to enforce that?*

Renaud Lambert

French president Emmanuel Macron thinks of himself as leading the resistance to his illiberal counterparts in other countries.¹ He started with Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, and moved on to Matteo Salvini, head of Italy's (Northern) League. The wildfires that have been destroying the Amazonian rainforest this year gave him an ideal new adversary: Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, misogynist, homophobic and climate sceptic. In August, *Science* magazine established a link between the smoke that darkens Brazil's skies as far as São Paulo and its government's policy of deforestation.² Macron suggested the rainforest should be given protected status under international law 'if a sovereign state took concrete actions that clearly went against the interest of the planet'.³



Photo credit: [Recep Tayyip Çelik](#) in Pexels

¹ ↩ See Serge Halimi and Pierre Rimbart, 'Not the world order we wanted', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, September 2018.

² ↩ See Herton Escobar, 'There's no doubt that Brazil's fires are linked to deforestation, scientists say', *Science*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington DC, 26 August 2019.

³ ↩ Agence France-Presse (AFP), 29 August 2019.

Can this ancient forest be saved by mobilising everyone it benefits? Macron sees our world as the planet Pandora in James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009), and himself as the Na'vi, the blue-skinned natives resisting colonisation. But most Brazilians, even those who oppose Bolsonaro, are unlikely to favour his idea. It is too like many past projects that have threatened to deprive Brazil of its sovereignty over the region the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) called Hylea.

Gunsmiths and Buccaneers

Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-73), director of the US Naval Observatory in Washington DC, once suggested that racial problems in the US could be solved by colonising Amazonia and moving black Americans there; the first stage would be to open up the Amazon to navigation. Brazilian historian Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira writes, 'The press backed his campaign unanimously. Supporters of slavery, gunsmiths, traders and buccaneers came together to defend what Maury presented as a trade policy that was in the interests of science'.⁴

In 1849 Brazil's representative in Washington (equivalent to an ambassador) warned that granting Americans permission to sail up the Amazon 'would open the way for the establishment of American trading posts, for immigration on a massive scale and, consequently, for a manoeuvre similar to that which allowed [the US] to lay its hands on Texas.' A letter written by Maury in 1853, published in the Brazilian press,⁵ showed these concerns were not unjustified: 'Let us try to persuade our partners by diplomatic means for we may be able to obtain the opening up [of Amazonia] ... peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must.' The plan came to nothing.

In 1948 Unesco established the International Institute of Hylean Amazonia (IIHA). This was intended to be an international centre for research in the natural sciences, but soon made the economic development of the region a major axis of its activities, as Unesco researcher Malcolm Hadley reported. Brazilians who favoured its establishment were then 'accused of compromising the national security of the country, by permitting an international institute to be set up in the "natural defence zone" of Amazonia'.⁶ Former Brazilian president Artur Bernardes warned the lower house of the Brazilian parliament on 24 January 1950 that the rainforest could become a 'condominium of nations' that would end up 'sharing out the region as colonies'.⁷

The IIHA collapsed, but other ideas followed, one of the craziest from the Hudson Institute in Washington DC. In 1967 its director Herman Kahn proposed damming the Amazon to create a great lake that would help circulation between bordering countries and allow huge amounts of electricity to be generated. Geographer Hervé Théry dismissed this as absurd: 'It would require a dam many kilometres long, and the waters would drown a large part of the population of Amazonia'.⁸ Yet the Brazilian military, in power since a coup in 1964, took the idea very seriously; it encouraged them to formulate their own doctrine — 'Integration [of the territory] to avoid dispossession'.

The dictatorship began a series of huge civil engineering projects designed to take possession of a region until then

⁴ ↩ Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, *Presença dos Estados Unidos no Brasil, Civilização Brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro, 2007.

⁵ ↩ *Correio Mercantil*, Rio de Janeiro, 12 September 1853.

⁶ ↩ Malcolm Hadley, 'Nature to the Fore: the early years of Unesco's environmental programme, 1945-1965' in *Sixty Years of Science at Unesco 1945-2005*, Unesco, Paris, 2006.

⁷ ↩ Taketomi, 'Artur Bernardes, a luta contra os EUA e a internacionalização da Amazônia' (Artur Bernardes: the struggle against the USA and the internationalisation of Amazonia), 24 September 2017.

⁸ ↩ Hervé Théry, 'Pourquoi l'Amazonie? Présentation d'une recherche et d'un espace' (Why Amazonia?), *Bulletin de l'Association de géographes français*, no 441-442, Paris, March-April 1977.

considered empty. The Trans-Amazonian Highway was a motorway stretching more than 4,000km from Cabelo in Brazil's Northeast region to Lábrea in the state of Amazonas, near the Bolivian border. Though never completed, it was officially opened in 1972 with the stated aim of giving Brazil's poorest greater access to land, while avoiding agrarian reform, which the military opposed. The official slogan was 'People without land for a land without people.'

Economic Opening Up

This assertion of sovereignty over the Amazonian region facilitated the economic opening up of Brazil, which the government was trying to promote. The great forest, seen as an inexhaustible source of wealth, attracted multinationals, which brought with them the capital and technology the country lacked.

Asserting sovereignty over the territory to hand it over to foreign exploiters paradoxically undermined the first mission the dictatorship had set itself — guaranteeing national security — to further its other mission of promoting economic development. But the cold war allowed the dictatorship to overcome this problem by linking geographical borders to ideological ones. 'The world was then divided between the Christian West and the Communist East,' writes international relations expert Ana Cristina da Matta Furniel. 'This allowed the armed forces to solve two problems: security (through alliances with the West) and development (through investment from the West).'⁹ Signing contracts with multinationals and hunting guerrillas in the rainforest could then both be presented as defending Brazilian sovereignty.

Brazil returned to democracy in 1985 amid growing international concern over the environment and the rights of indigenous peoples. This is clear from the new constitution, in which article 231 states, 'The ... original rights [of Indians] to the lands they traditionally occupy [are recognised]. The Union has the responsibility to delineate these lands and to protect [them].' In 1988 the murder of trade unionist Francisco Alves 'Chico' Mendes, an advocate for the rights of rubber tappers, provoked an international campaign. Studies suggested that 10 million hectares of rainforest had been converted to pasture during the 1970s; this was condemned internationally. US senator Al Gore declared in 1989, 'Contrary to what Brazilians think, the Amazon is not their property, it belongs to all of us'.¹⁰ French president François Mitterrand said, 'Brazil should accept a limited sovereignty over Amazonia'.¹¹

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Over the years, democratic governments have tried to deflect what they see as foreign greed by incorporating environmental and indigenous issues into their plans. Brazil's first ever ministry responsible for the environment was established in 1992, and ahead of that year's Earth Summit in Rio, President Fernando Collor de Mello announced the creation of a 9.4 million-hectare reserve for the Yanomami people. The Brazilian government was basically saying that since its development policy was sustainable and respected the rights of indigenous peoples, there was no point in encroaching on its sovereignty.

⁹ ↩ Ana Cristina da Matta Furniel, 'Amazônia: A ocupação de um espaço: internacionalização x soberania nacional (1960-1990)' (Amazonia: the occupation of a space), masters dissertation, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, 14 December 1993.

¹⁰ ↩ Alexei Barrionuevo, 'Whose rain forest is this, anyway?', *The New York Times*, 18 May 2008. Al Gore has denied making this statement.

¹¹ ↩ Quoted in Chantal Rayes, 'Amazonie: Bolsonaro répond à la pression internationale' (Amazonia: Bolsonaro responds to international pressure), *Libération*, Paris, 24 August 2019.

The military, though out of power, were still concerned. They saw reserves for indigenous peoples as the prelude to a Balkanisation of Amazonia that would create pockets of indigenous territory easy for rich countries to manipulate; environmental demands would facilitate 'international norms far removed from the ancient principles of equality of sovereign states before the law, non-intervention and the self-determination of peoples'.¹² The old enemies had changed their appearance but not gone away. On 10 December 1991, former armed forces minister Leônidas Pires Gonçalves told the *Folha de S Paulo* that the environment minister inspired in him 'the same hatred [he] used to feel for the Communist leader Luís Carlos Preste'.

In picking Ricardo Salles, former director of the Brazilian Rural Society (a bastion of agribusiness) as environment minister, Bolsonaro has returned to the military vision. He has forgotten his predecessors' promises to pursue sustainable development and protect the environment and sees the rainforest as a source of wealth to be defended, in order to be exploited. Bolsonaro's attitude has made it possible for the pressure to internationalise Amazonia to resurface, which has in turn aroused deeply entrenched suspicion at home. The Brazilian government knows that the great powers which insist the countries of the South prioritise protecting the environment usually aren't doing the same. In 2007 the international community ignored Ecuador's offer to protect its Yasuní national park if it were paid compensation equal to half the amount it could make by exploiting the park's oil reserves. But millions of Brazilians are disgusted with Bolsonaro and regard his suspicions as paranoid nonsense.

A Global Problem

Macron argues that the destruction of the rainforest is a global problem and challenges anyone to claim that it is 'a matter that concerns [Brazil] alone' (Twitter, 26 August 2019). At the 2019 UN climate change conference in Santiago, Chile, in December (COP 25), he will propose a long-term strategy to secure the wellbeing of Amazonian peoples and ensure sustainable and ecological development in the region. This is the re-emergence of the idea of a right to intervene on climate issues, similar to the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds invoked to justify military interventions in Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994) and the former Yugoslavia (1999).

Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, director of Isrem (Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire, attached to France's defence ministry) wrote in *Le Monde* on 27 August, 'The UN Security Council might ... decide that, because it

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Cristovam Buarque

contributes to climate change, the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest constitutes a threat to international peace and security that would allow it to take coercive action. [Talk of the] use of force — a military intervention to establish a defensive perimeter and prevent deforestation ... seems bizarre and dangerous, since using force would certainly be

counterproductive, but one cannot exclude the possibility that the question will arise in 10 or 20 years' time, if the [rainforest] issue is then seen as vital.'

During a university debate in the US in 2000, Cristovam Buarque, then a leader of Brazil's leftwing Workers' Party, was asked by a student what he thought about internationalising Amazonia. His reply became a legend in Brazil: 'If the US

¹² ↩ Documents from Brazil's Agulhas Negras Military Academy quoted in Adriana Aparecida Marques, 'Amazônia: pensamento e presença militar' (Amazonia: military thinking and presence), thesis submitted for doctorate in political science, University of São Paulo, 2007.

wishes to internationalise Amazonia so as not to run the risk of abandoning it to Brazil's sole responsibility, then let us also internationalise the US's nuclear arsenal. If only because the US has already shown that it is capable of using that arsenal, causing destruction on a far greater scale than the fires ... that we are seeing in Brazil'.¹³

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¹³ ↩ 'A internacionalização da Amazônia' (The internationalisation of Amazonia), *O Globo*, Rio de Janeiro, 23 October 2000.

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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