

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/140379/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Ioris, Antonio A. R. 2023. Making the Amazon a frontier: where less space is more. *Distinktion* 24 (1) , pp. 64-86. 10.1080/1600910X.2021.1884579

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2021.1884579>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## **Making the Amazon a Frontier: Where Less Space is More**

accepted on 24 Jan 2021 for publication in the journal *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*

DOI:10.1080/1600910X.2021.1884579

**Antonio A.R. Ioris**

Cardiff University, School of Geography and Planning,

Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, Wales, UK, CF10 3WA

E-mail: IorisA@cardiff.ac.uk

**Abstract:** Frontier-making has always been fundamental for the circulation and accumulation of capital. The perennity of frontier-making is not only due to the demand for minerals, land or other resources, or because frontiers represent fresh market opportunities, but crucially because it operates as compensation for the saturation of the existing capitalist relations in core areas. At the frontier, the conventional sequence of time and space is suspended and reconfigured, allowing room for the decompression of tensions and contradictions. Consequently, spatial frontiers function as a mirror, where the most explicit features of capitalism are vividly exposed. This article examines the meaning and immanence of spatial frontiers, considering them as a laboratory of historical and geographical agency. It entails a reflection upon the necessity, the configuration and the contestation of spatial frontiers, paying particular attention to the economic and territorial incorporation of the Amazon region and the prospects of political resistance.

**Keywords:** agribusiness; capitalism; Mato Grosso; political economy; resistance; soybean

### **Spatial Frontiers: Global Frontspaces**

Capitalism is often perceived and felt as the elephant in the room. 'It' (i.e. the capitalist relations of production, reproduction and legitimisation) is not, however, a docile Disney-like animal, but moves uncontrollably and causes great damage, although only a few people seem to pay serious attention. Those who do notice the beast cannot figure out exactly how to contain it or remove it from of the room. And the animal and the people carry on regardless... This crude comparison could go a little further if we imagine an indolent pachyderm wandering around in the room, producing more and more dung, intolerably constrained and longing for more space. (Think about the discomfort of an impounded animal that in its native Africa requires approximately 100 hectares per individual). The metaphor is illustrative for our purposes here because capitalism is notoriously harmful, expansionist and strives to take hold of the entire

planet.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the golden age of Portuguese navigation, capitalism has systematically and purposefully expanded out of Europe as an unstoppable project with global repercussions. Capitalist activity has taken over continents, locations, cultures and practices throughout the world. In this intense geographical process, frontier-making became a central pillar of the circulation and accumulation of capital (Nevins and Peluso 2008). More than that, newly created social and spatial frontiers function as a mirror and a magnifying glass, where the bare and explicit features of capitalism are exposed through the formation of site-specific mechanisms of resource extraction, economic production and political justification. Because of these interdependent relations between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ through joint processes of exploitation, realignment and reinforcement in both old and new areas, it can be argued that capitalism also fundamentally depends on accumulation by frontier-making (Ioris 2018a).

Our aim here is to reflect upon the meaning and fundamental features of spatial frontiers, considering them as a field of controversy and a laboratory of historical and geographical agency. The analysis is based on impressions accumulated over a decade long research in the Amazon Region and, in particular, lessons learned from regular engagement with peasant, farming and Indigenous communities, and the systematic observation of localities and economic sectors. Such valuable experience, combined with the relevant academic literature, motivated a reconsideration of the basis of capitalist frontier-making and its persistence in the contemporary, globalised world. This exercise will involve reflecting on the necessity, the configuration and the contestation of spatial frontiers, beyond the conventional descriptive and quantitative assessments of land use change, resource extraction or commodity production. We also follow the suggestion of Pacheco de Oliveira (2016) that frontier can be a heuristic analytical method to inquire into the past and present of national socio-political changes. The uneven development of capitalism and the production of frontiers has been the object of a long debate and occupied critical scholars working in several different disciplines for more than a century. The spaces of capitalist frontiers have been repeatedly studied and interpretations range from neoclassical enthusiasm about the economic outcomes of new frontiers to critical voices discussing growing proletarianisation and acts of resistance following the penetration of capitalism. Although often used interchangeably, Watts (2018) differentiates between ‘frontier’ as a zone of socio-economic advance and ‘border’ as a line of demarcation between national territories or administrative units. Lund and Rachman (2018) also make a distinction between frontier dynamics (the frontier is a free resource zone, where social order is eliminated, property is disrupted and social contracts dissolved) and territorialisation (when spaces acquire new systems of authority and regulation). Departing from such conceptualisation, our focus on these pages is on the political ontology of frontspaces (i.e. the spaces of the frontier), that is, the locales, landscapes and places undergoing changes because of the advance of new socio-economic processes that are dialectically connected with wider spatial trends at broader scales.

We are especially concerned with spatial frontier as an area that is undergoing rapid transformations because of the migration of people and the opening of new economic opportunities, and where authority and governance are circumstantially diluted and distorted. Frontiers happened to be more than ‘liminal or transient spaces’, but are important politico-economic zones characterised by in-between-ness and fraught with possibilities to ‘start over’ again (McDowell and Crooke 2019; Murphy and McDowell 2019), which are nonetheless limited by the economic and ideological subordination of the frontier to central, relatively consolidated areas. Frontspaces are projections of the institutions and relations of central politico-economic areas, in other words, they are the centre being reasserted and gradually incorporating the margins in the same ontological project. Frontiers are, thus, relational spaces with the imprint of

---

<sup>1</sup> And even beyond the Earth, as there have been serious attempts to bring capitalist relations to outer space, bypassing the 1967 international treaty, in order to mine asteroids and other planets (The Guardian 2015)

political asymmetries and shaped by the practices of engagement between different social groups and their multiple responses, or reactions, to power-laden relations (Barney 2009). In the modern world, those socio-spatial interconnections are decisively influenced by the capitalist basis of production and reproduction. Marx argued that capitalism is not merely the movement of exchange values, because circulation alone can never realise capital (considering that the mere exchange of equivalents extinguishes value, and the circulation of money and commodity cannot lead to self-renewal). The success of circulation requires mediation of the total economic process, including geographical connections and socio-ideological aspects, as in the case of new sites for extracting resources and producing commodities. “Commodities constantly have to be thrown into it anew from the outside, like fuel into a fire” (Marx 1973: 255). New spatial frontiers are therefore required to accommodate economic and social demands and divert attention away from home-grown problems. There is always a demand for materials and resources, new markets and business opportunities, for compensating socio-ecological degradation and reducing economic and demographic tensions through migration. Marx (1976: 794) observes that some workers emigrate, but “in fact they are merely following capital, which has itself emigrated”. According to the Marxian terminology, a frontier is an area experiencing the development of the conditions and presuppositions for the emergence (and the becoming) of capital.

Informed by the characterisation of frontier as a contested and unsettled space, this text will propose a summary of the theorisation of frontier-making – consolidated as ‘five main claims’ – after a brief discussion of the highly emblematic example of the Amazon Region, particularly the recent developments under the expansion of intense agribusiness farming in its southern and eastern tracts. The empirical section is specifically based on successive concentrated fieldwork campaigns between 2013 and 2018, which involved repeated visits to cropping areas and peasant communities in the northern part of the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, around the cities of Sinop and Sorriso, benefiting from the generous help of academics and students of the local campuses of the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) and the State University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT), among other scientific centres and organisations. Stakeholder contacts were complemented with the analysis of documents, statistics, websites, leaflets, reports and newspaper articles found in university libraries and in the archives of public agencies and private organisations. After the mapping of sectors and organisations, their discourse and stated aims, it was possible to compare intra- and inter-group differences and the range of alliances or disputes (ranging from those strongly against to others fiercely in favour of the prevailing agri-food system). Based on empirical information and making use of relevant publications, the phenomenon of frontier-making in the Amazon Region was assessed and is presented next.

### **Amazon: The Perennial Frontier**

In the following pages we will make reference to various relevant examples of frontier-making, such as Australia and the U.S. Midwest, but the South American Amazon will be our main focus. The Amazon is relevant not only because of the scale and intensity of territorialised change, or its extraordinary culture and biodiversity, but because the region has been condemned, first by Europeans and then by national elites, to be a perennial frontier. The Amazon has not become a perpetual frontier because it is huge and remote, rather it has remained distant and alien because it has been perennially misunderstood, devalued and treated as a frontier to be conquered. This is particularly true for the Brazilian section of the Amazon, which comprises around 80% of the region. The whole history of colonisation and nation building over the last five centuries in the Brazilian Amazon has fundamentally unfolded as the production and reinstatement of frontiers. Bunker (1984) describes the Amazon as an ‘extreme periphery’ where the economic system is based almost exclusively on the exchange of extracted

commodities. Foweraker (1981) defines the Amazon as the ‘last great frontier’ demonstrating the evolution of the frontier as the gradual advance of capitalist relations and the appropriation of surplus by the rest of the Brazilian national economy. This echoes Heckenberger (2005), who refers to the Amazon as one of the last frontiers of modern imagination. Even more interesting is the claim by Little (2001) that in the Amazon frontier-making is a perennial phenomenon; the frontier has been opened and closed, and reopened and reclosed, many times, also branching off into numerous sub-regional frontiers and fractal territories.

It is remarkable how recurrently the Amazon has been associated with frontier in historical, literary, scientific and official documents. The treatment of the Amazon as a frontier has been common practice since the early territorial incursions of the 16th century, through the harvesting of plant and animal products in the following centuries, and reaching a peak before World War I with the collection of plant latex (mainly for tyre production). Frontier meant exploration, conquest, migration and dispute with other nations over frontiers projects. It must be noted that the five European powers with stakes in the Americas all maintained territorial interests in the Amazon (Spain, France, Britain, Holland and Portugal, with the last conquering much more territory and establishing a much longer border in the Amazon than the other four nations combined). In 1889 Brazil became a republic, after more than eight decades under Braganza kings, and had to resolve significant border demarcation problems with its **Spanish-speaking** neighbours. One of the key players in that process was the military engineer, geographer and writer Euclides da Cunha, appointed head of the commission in charge of the Peru-Brazil borders around the Upper Purus River (1904-1905). In his books and unpublished notes, he refers to humans as “intruders”, not really part of a reality that is still “incomplete” and “under preparation” (Bolle 2005; Cunha 2018a; Santana 2000). Euclides, in beginning of the last century, famously described the Amazon as “a page of Genesis still to be written” and placed the region “at the borders of history” (Cunha 2018b).

The sensibility of Euclides da Cunha and his attempts to use the cutting-edge geographical and sociological thinking of his time to interpret the remote, forgotten corners of Brazil, suggest what is fundamentally a double estrangement: humans struggling to understand and appreciate the Amazon (obviously Euclides represented the white outsiders who disregarded the knowledge and culture of those groups already living there) and, for its part, the region rejecting pre-conceived technologies and procedures (because of its lavish ecosystems, large distances, small workforce, tropical diseases and hydrological cycle). This fundamental estrangement, which Euclides recorded during his epic travels (Hecht 2013) but that was also recurrent in the narratives of generations of explorers, is what maintains the Amazon in its condition of permanent frontier. Such preconceptions and prejudices, which are self-reinforcing, have obviously informed government initiatives and public policy. In the 1930s, the federal Brazilian government launched the ‘March towards the West’, aiming to explore, occupy and ‘fill the gaps’ in the national map (gaps which, of course, were already occupied by Indigenous tribes, who were never considered or consulted). Between the 1940s and 1960s, successive initiatives and government plans built public infrastructure and encouraged the economic development of the Centre-West region (culminating with the shift of the national capital to Brasília) and paved the way for the ‘final’ subjugation of the Amazon. Typically in these situations, the national state first expunged the rights of originary, Indigenous peoples, established state rights and then paved the way for private acquisition and concentration of large-scale rural properties (Kelly and Peluso 2015). The process of change was of course enormously complex and cannot be schematically reduced to simple explanations related to the manipulation of big capital or the protagonism of individuals and peasants (Léna 1986), but requires the grasp of the full range of material, ideological and discursive traits.

The conversion of the Amazon into a business-friendly environment escalated in the 1970s under the military dictatorship’s megalomaniac programme of national integration, fuelled by temporarily cheap international credit and the Cold War ideology of national security. As

observed by Eilenberg (2014), frontier development accelerates when national discourses of security and sovereignty, combined with infrastructure and agrarian expansion, as in the case of the development programmed advanced by the Brazilian generals, intersect along national borders. The advance of military technocracy and geopolitical fantasy over the Amazon is a well-known story (see, among many others, Ioris et al. 2020; Posey and Balick 2006; Rivero and Jayme Jr. 2008; Schmink and Wood 1984; Théry 1997) does not need further elaboration for the purposes of the current discussion. More important is to verify that something has changed in the last three decades, as regional development has become firmly rooted in the semiotics of free-market ideology and the pursuit of efficiency and market globalisation. The authority, rights and hegemonies of the recent past have been challenged by new enclosures, novel property regimes and different territorialisations, as well as labour and production processes (Peluso and Lund 2011), as a sort of frontier within the frontier. As a result, additional areas were opened (deforested) and previous frontiers were renovated to comply with more flexible production procedures. In a context of neoliberal reforms (in the 1990s) and neoliberal-developmentalism (under populist, left-wing administration between 2003 and 2016), large mining, hydropower, timber, road and navigation projects have been implemented by private companies (often making use of public funds). In parallel, socio-environmental legislation expanded, but also became increasingly informed by the tenets of ecological modernisation (particularly adopting the language of market solutions to environmental problems).

The most extensive and influential case has been the expansion of agribusiness activity to previously forested zones (e.g. the Brazilian states of Mato Grosso, Rondônia and Amazonas) and former latex production areas (e.g. Acre and Pará). Agribusiness, especially cattle and soybean production, is now the main mechanism for further embedding the Amazon in the sphere of frontier-making. The agribusiness frontier builds on a long trajectory of frontier-making, particularly the developmentalist, state-centred process during the dictatorship in the 1970s. Moreover, the failures and excesses of that nationalistic period (which are generally attributed to inadequate state interventions and a lack of entrepreneurialism, ignoring the actual difficulty of establishing production and trade in the region) are now considered to have been overcome because of the market rationality and productivity of neoliberalised interventions. The renovated frontiers of agribusiness in the Amazon, described and praised as the redemption of past developmental mistakes, therefore constitute a large-scale experiment of the influence of liberalising ideologies promoted and supported by the state apparatus (Ioris 2017a). Agro-neoliberalism is a multifaceted, context-specific phenomenon which aims to remove the constraints of Keynesian and Fordist approaches, create new political and economic prospects and reinforce class-based hegemony. The neoliberalisation of agri-food largely follows the fetishism of free-market relations while at the same time perpetuating or even amplifying calls for state mediation aimed, for instance, at mitigating price oscillations and preventing over-production. Agro-neoliberalism is essentially the result of a contingent convergence of various production and commercialisation practices organised according to a socio-political construct that privileges market-based policies and the intensification of capital circulation and accumulation, without ever removing the decisive role of the state apparatus (Ioris 2017b).

The contemporary Brazilian economy, increasingly deindustrialised and reliant on imports from China, depends on the constant movement of agribusiness to new areas to produce primary commodities that can be sold in international markets (hence raising dollars to pay for more imported goods and serve the public debt). The reification and the over-reliance on agribusiness have prevented many people from realising that agriculture has been transformed into something beyond mere food production. Due to the focus on profit and accumulation, agriculture has incorporated so-called modern techniques (digital technology, satellite and internet based precision machines, genetically modified crops, powerful pesticides, etc.) and significant amounts of capital (both in direct production and in infrastructure) to sustain and legitimise politico-economic hegemonies (exacerbated after the election of a neo-fascist Brazilian



government in 2018). In other words, the constant formation of new agribusiness frontiers helps to conceal the range of interests and the acute asymmetries that characterise regional and national development. It is because of supposed success and innovation of neoliberalised agribusiness that more labour, land and ecosystems can be mobilised and exploited. The deepening of capitalist relations of production and reproduction reshapes landscapes by legal and illegal entrepreneurs that wrest land from previous owners to maximise the production of goods and the exportation of resources (Tsing 2005). However, those claims of modernisation and entrepreneurship need to be carefully considered. There have been repeated attempts to contrast the supposed victory of neoliberalised agribusiness – increasingly dominated by transnational corporations and aiming to sell ultra-processed, profit-maximising food – with the previous extractivist, primitive basis of the Amazon economy, but in effect the frontier continues to be largely defined by rent-extraction processes and the production of an image of modernity that conceals elements of the colonial past (unrestrained exploitation, racism, slavery, etc.).

Despite the apparent rationality and success of the agribusiness frontier in the Amazon, praised daily by political groups and the mass media, it is in fact a largely irrational form of economic development. On the one hand, the Brazilian economy is increasingly dependent on the formation of new frontiers. A Financial Times article on 16 Jan 2018 summarises the macroeconomic role of agribusiness exports, which accounts for 42% of national exports (mainly driven by Chinese demand for soybean). This translates into decisive political power for the agribusiness sector; 44% of the members of the House of Representatives are involved and represent the industry. Because of their influence, a number of legal adjustments have been introduced or considered in recent years to increase flexibility in the forest code, reduce protection for conservation reserves, adopt ecological modernisation tools (such as payment for ecosystem services), facilitate access for foreign investors and be lenient over land grabbing. Associated with the power of agribusiness, illegal deforestation in the Amazon continues to advance, and currently accounts for 95% of forest losses in Brazil. The perverse logic of Amazonian agribusiness frontiers is also demonstrated by the enormous investment opportunities made available to the economic elites, particularly investment banks, by left-wing politicians who have championed an idiosyncratic form of populist neoliberalism over the last two decades, particularly in the state of Mato Grosso, as examined below.

### **The Frontier of Agribusiness Expansion in Mato Grosso**

This section is aimed at concentrating on one specific portion of the Amazon, the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, where the processes of frontier-making has been greatly invigorated by the advance of export-led agribusiness, in particular soybean production. The more recent phase under the influence of agribusiness reflects important adjustments in national development policies mentioned above, from a developmentalist period in the 1970s, when the federal government stimulated large private colonisation projects and facilitated the access to public subsidies, to a more recent phase, since the late 1990s, increasingly shaped by the presence of transnational corporations, foreign investors and liberalising pressures (Ioris 2017b). Mato Grosso has become one of the main hubs of soybean farming in the world with the cultivation of more than 10 million of hectares in areas previously covered by savannah and forest ecosystems. From being a region with a relatively isolated economic activity, Mato Grosso is now at the core of national economic life and plays a key role in Brazilian exports and global agri-food markets (the state is responsible for around 10% of global soybean production, for example). However, despite claims of economic success and technological efficiency, the fundamental features of frontier-making remain unaffected. Although Mato Grosso has been transformed by the expansion and gradual consolidation of agribusiness in recent decades, it remains a material and symbolic frontier. While the neoliberalised agribusiness sector has succeeded in crafting a positive image of technological and economic success, the national government and the wider business community have become

highly dependent on the export of primary commodities and on the reaffirmation of frontier-making situations, as in the case of the Mato Grosso and the Amazon more broadly.

The reconfiguration of the patterns of agricultural production in Mato Grosso constitutes an emblematic example of the evolving, but resilient, mechanisms and the ideology of frontier-making. In the 1950s, in the context of national developmentalism and import substitution industrialisation, the state government sold large plots of extremely cheap land (typically plots with 200,000 hectares) to secure revenues to run the public sector. In that way, huge extensions were transferred to colonisation companies that waited for several decades until the conditions for selling land to private farmers and other land speculators. The original residents of the areas, Indigenous peoples and subsistence farmers, were basically ignored or attacked by the police or private militias. In many cases, common land was grabbed using false documents, with the assistance of corrupt civil servants and allied political leaders. It was during the military dictatorship that this conservative agrarian transition took a new turn and frontier-making intensified. The government introduced new roads (e.g. the motorways BR-163 and BR-364), warehouses and other related infrastructure, which attracted thousands of farmers and labourers from the south and northeast of Brazil (Ioris 2013). The official discourse used by the national governments of the time defined these locations as ‘no man’s land’ or ‘empty territory’ waiting to be explored.

Despite the enthusiasm of the newcomers, the first two decades of the new agriculture frontier were hardly an economic success. On the contrary, farmers struggled to produce due to the lack of adapted technology, insufficient preparation for different agro-ecological conditions, difficulty selling their products and erratic government support. Technical and socio-ecological barriers faced by the new farmers coincided with the national economic crisis of the 1980s, when the public sector ran out of cash and defaulted on its payments. Many had to leave production areas in Mato Grosso, either returning to their original home states or moving further into the Amazon region. The late 1980s and early 1990s was a period fraught with turbulence and uncertainty about the future of the agriculture frontier. Crucially, it was through the reinvention of the agriculture frontier along the lines of a neoliberalised agricultural frontier that production managed to recover and ended up expanding at an unanticipated pace. The recovery of the agricultural frontier was the result of a lucky convergence of political determination in the farming sector, the renewed interest of transnational corporations in the region, favourable commodity prices and, critically, the growing macro-economic importance of crop exports for the balance of trade. According to an interview with the association of crop producers, in “soybean production in Mato Grosso is synonymous with technology. Our producers are renowned for using the most up-to-date technology, from planting to harvesting crops.” And, as claimed by the national agribusiness association ABAG, soybean production was born modern and it is a good example of the best the country can offer (Furtado 2002).

The apparent economic and technological success of the renewed face of the agricultural frontier in Mato Grosso has been also characterised by organised attempts to influence policy-making and conceal risks and impacts associated with a narrow production basis (i.e. exports increasingly concentrated on a small range of commodities, soybean in particular). That illustrates how the neoliberalised version of agribusiness has flourished in a context of market-centred solutions and regulatory flexibility, but also that it demands novel forms of government support and relies on some of the oldest political traditions (e.g. aggressive manipulation of party politics, lack of transparency, deceitful claims of progress and elements of racism). The advance of neoliberalised agribusiness in Mato Grosso has been the embodiment of the most technologically advanced and socio-ecologically regressive elements of a national economy on the periphery of globalised capitalism. In the recently opened areas of agribusiness production in Mato Grosso it is possible to find expensive, cutting-edge tractors, airplanes, drones and agrochemicals used in the same farms where repeated environmental and labour crimes are committed (for instance, contemporary slavery situations were found even on the properties



belonging to Eraí Maggi Scheffer, the largest producer of soybean in the country with more than 230,000 hectares and cousin of the former Mato Grosso Governor and Minister of Agriculture Blairo Maggi, another soybean magnate; in 2008, forty-one people were liberated after a government inspection of Scheffer's farms, reported by *Folha de São Paulo*, 25 January 2008). As rightly pointed out by Haggmann and Korf (2012), economic peripheries are a prime locus for 'inclusionary exclusions' that follow the violent grabbing of land and resources. The image of success is daily reaffirmed by sector representatives and endorsed by the national government in its effort to gain political support and maintain the export revenues generated by agribusiness. The result is a nuanced and highly contested situation that connects, often in unexpected ways, different scales, sectors and public policies. The various techno-economic innovations adopted by agribusiness players – including land and gene grabs, biotechnology and GMOs, dispossession of common land, financialisation and administration of production by transnational corporations – are all strategies that emerge from business and political interactions, which combine old and new features of the capitalist economy. All this requires appropriate interpretative approaches able to unpack the idiosyncratic combination of incremental innovations in a context of hegemonic market globalisation.

Furthermore, the regional experience suggests that neoliberalised agribusiness makes evident its most profound abilities, contradictions and, ultimately, failures of frontier-making under the sphere of capitalist relations of production and reproduction. Agribusiness is especially successful at the agriculture frontier because it is in itself an economic, ecological and ethical frontier, in which interpersonal and intersectoral relations have a particular configuration that allows authorities to deceive the population and impose undemocratic measures due to the primacy of production and the emphasis on rapid accumulation (Ioris 2019). The space of the frontier constitutes a favourable arena for rehearsing the flexible mechanisms of accumulation and re-regulation promoted under the neoliberalising rhetoric. The advance of agribusiness depends on the perpetual re-enactment of dreams (merged with novel forms of violence and frustration) related to the promises of rapid wealth accumulation and social prestige. High expectations are needed to motivate the conquest and transformation of territory to make way for crop production. The peculiar dialectics taking place at the frontier, including processes of transnationalisation, displacement and mystification, are firmly mediated by structures inherited from the past, which create a complex pattern, spatially and temporally heterogeneous. The curious attacks on the apparatus of the state by agribusiness farmers – who have been major beneficiaries of state investments and regional development policies – are emblematic examples of an inbuilt opportunism and peculiar production rationality located between the demands of the state and those of transnational corporations.

The agribusiness frontier in Mato Grosso has provided opportunities for both the renovation of capitalist institutions (i.e. globalised transactions, exploitation of territorial resources, novel forms of political legitimisation) and the reintroduction or reinforcement of old practices of the pre-industrial or early industrial phase of capitalism. At the frontier, the politico-economic institutions of neoliberalism could expand and take on, to some extent, a life of their own. Similar to the expansion to the west of the United States more than a century ago, ethical and legal safeguards tend to be suspended or overlooked due to the alleged need to occupy the 'wild' territory and then sustain the production of the most marketable and profitable goods. The consolidation of agribusiness in Mato Grosso involved constant innovation and new players, who retained old, vicious practices that have never disappeared. Reflecting upon the centrality of frontiers in general, and the perennial status of Mato Grosso, in the southern tracts of the Amazon, as a triple frontier (of the colonial project, of nation building and now of globalised markets) in particular, the next section will bring together critical concepts and ontological points to advance the interpretation of frontier-making today.

### **Theorising Frontiers: The Time-spaces of Capitalism**

The analysis so far has served to demonstrate that spatial frontiers exist not only because they provide economic and social opportunities that may be more difficult to access elsewhere, but because problems accumulated in central areas are responsible for frontier-making (insofar as this constitutes a fundamental endeavour to renovate the whole economic system). At the frontier the new remains tamed, subordinate, relativised as genuine economic creativity, because the ontic reality of the frontier is fundamentally shaped by the transplantation of exogenous socio-economic relations. The empirical discussion above helps to illustrate the projection of the situation of the politico-economic centre on the frontier. For more than four hundred years, there were limited and only sporadic attempts to develop productive activities in the Amazon, due to the more compelling possibility of collecting and exploiting the region's abundant resources, resulting in its perennial frontier status (Bunker 1984). In the middle of the last century, due to the complexification of the Brazilian economy and mounting tensions in the eastern core areas, the Amazon entered a new phase of economic development which, nevertheless, did not change its status as a frontier-maker. On the contrary, the new phase of frontier-making was predicated upon the old: the time was ripe for a focus on production (at least the image of production) and for a new language of modernity. Since the 1960s, the region has been a target for the construction of hydropower schemes, roads, mega timber processing plants, navigation infrastructure, the industrial pole of Manaus, and, most importantly, for the advance of agribusiness. **Still a frontier, despite looking ever more like a centre (and even more of a frontier precisely because of that).**

Consequently, in order to interrogate frontier-making one has to simultaneously comprehend the achievements and contradictions of the most developed (central) economic areas. We can benefit from the methodology adopted by Marx to describe the evolution of capitalism and from his claim that the bourgeois economy supplies the key to the ancient economies that preceded it. Marx (1973: 105) argues that the anatomy of humans “contains a key to the anatomy of the ape”, that is, “the intimations of higher development in the less developed systems “can be understood only after the higher development is already known”. To understand the interpenetration between past and present, Marx specifically warns that one must progress carefully because similarities and differences must be examined in detail, avoiding simplistic, non-critical associations. That is certainly useful, but we need first to reverse the chronological direction of Marx's analysis, from the centre to the (more recent) frontier. The reason is that, although the frontier obviously emerged after the economy evolved in central areas, it nonetheless always revisits the basic elements of the centre's economic past. This is the case regarding, for example, processes of primitive accumulation, dispossession, unregulated appropriation of resources and labour exploitation, ideological argumentation of progress and the imposition of a bourgeois order and associated values. Starting from the realisation that frontiers are predicated and constrained by the lingering failures of the areas where migrants and business people originally came from, the controversial and politicised dynamics that emerge can be schematically summarised in five main points, which are relevant not only for the Amazon, but for the examination of other contemporary frontiers around the world.

*The first main claim is that frontier-making may appear as a social and spatial dislocation, as distanced from the centre, while in effect the centre is being projected, restated and restored.* There is no essential disconnection between the socio-economy in the consolidated (central) and the new (frontier) areas, but actually a coherent continuity between the centre and the frontier. Global connectivity, as well as dysconnectivity, result from the politicised territoriality of the local spheres of interaction (Opitz and Tellmann 2012). Frontiers are therefore more than ‘zones of incorporation’ of an expanding world system (cf. Wallerstein 1974); they play a key role in the reorganisation and revitalisation of the centre. There is no spatial contradiction between the centre and the new areas, but in reality the frontier is presupposed in the ambiguities and conflicts of the centre itself and functions as a mechanism to mitigate those tensions and prolong

the existence of the centre. In this way, the areas where capitalism keeps expanding are, from the outset, loaded with the practices, realisations and vices of the old areas. The European colonisation of the Americas transferred to the new continent socio-political hierarchies, values and ideologies that underpinned metropolitan societies in Europe. The Americas contained not only riches and resources, but became catalysts for controlled, top-down reforms in the centre. Similar processes were present in the 18th century when colonisation expanded in India, and in the 19th century during the Scramble for Africa and the partition of the continent among European colonial powers. Simultaneously, other parts of Asia and Oceania were turned into spatial frontiers. In more recent decades several of these former colonies have been recolonised, this time particularly under the rhetoric of market globalisation, foreign investment (often in the form of land, water and nature grabbing) and international development.

In this way, the social, economic and spatial configuration of frontiers fundamentally replicates the mechanisms of exploitation and exclusion that define capitalist nations (with all their contradictions and frictions). For instance, the political claims to the territory by the state become entangled with the growing commodification of social relations and new habits of the local population (Korf et al. 2015). The frontier is more than a spatial fix, as argued by Harvey (2006), that is, a location where capital can be diverted and invested in infrastructure and real estate in order to respond to problems of over-accumulation. Frontiers are areas where time and space are reconfigured and that in theory could result in something new but because of their subordinate status rapidly assume a configuration that largely mimics the core areas. That is, time and space are transfigured but retain the properties they had in the original, central areas. The experiences accumulated in the core areas are partially transferred and somehow mixed with the past and ongoing developments in the frontier, what precipitates technological and institutional changes and, more important, sets in motion novel, hybrid socio-spatial trajectories. In that way, chronological time is disturbed both in core and frontier areas, which have their future affected by the new tensions, collaboration and antagonisms established because of the interactions between locations and economic sectors. The frontier is where the trajectory of time and space (as established in the central area) is disrupted, creating a realm of potentialities, but then, due to the dynamics of frontier-making, the new area is retained within the sphere of influence of the centre. The geography of the frontier fundamentally unfolds around the troublesome gap between the possibility of the new and the concrete reproduction of key features of the (older) centre. As theorised in Aristotle's *Physics*, change requires the existence of potentiality, which is actualised and realised according to specific circumstances but without full independence. The end-state of the process of change depends on the specific properties of the system and its potentiality for change. The frontier is less fixed, more tentative and to some extent open, but the previous order there is only superficially and temporarily interrupted, and then rapidly and effectively reconfigured according to what existed before in the centre. The reasons for the stymied potentiality of frontier activity are located in the controlling power of the processes of expropriation, enrichment and authority, which empower some sections of society and establish a new spatial order that only partially, asymmetrically incorporates the majority of the frontier population.

The centre must be upheld (to safeguard dominant interests and political power) through the production of new peripheries, but only to the extent that the periphery mirrors the decisive politico-economic features of the centre. (That is the crucial difference between frontiers in a capitalist economy and refugees from the advance of capitalism, as in the case of alternative communities and isolated Indigenous tribes). Although the mind-set of frontier people may still not be strictly capitalist (in the sense of efficient realisation of profit and maximisation of economic outputs), the logic of the frontier is indirectly associated with capitalist tendencies operating at different scales. While Harvey (2006) did not pay special attention to the lived processes at the frontiers of capital expansion, his observation that location is an active element in the overall circulation and accumulation of capital is spot-on: frontier still have a fluid and

unsettled organisation, but which from the outset have very favourable conditions for supporting the centre and creating new spaces for capital to flourish. The new spatial frontiers emerge out of the contradictions and constraints of consolidated areas, but also with limited freedom to reconstitute social and economic relations much beyond the given hegemonic conditions. The strategic role of frontier situations is not simply to recirculate capital, but to mitigate mounting social tensions (such as unemployment and political unrest, e.g. Scottish and Irish migrants to British colonies or ex-colonies), release the value of natural resources hitherto beyond economic use (minerals, water, land, labour power, etc.) and pave the way for new cycles of investment and circulation. Frontiers may be located in either urban or rural areas; in some cases the movement is from conflict-prone rural areas towards the periphery of large cities, as has typically happened in Latin America (the case of Lima's *barriadas* is paradigmatic, exacerbated by Peru's civil war in the 1980s and the liberalising reforms in the 1990s).

Our *second main claim is about the production of frontiers through the reinforcement of the multiple and interconnected dualisms* that characterise Western culture and the Westernised pattern of economic development. Many authors have identified the origins of Western dualisms in Hebrew theology and Greek philosophy, sustained through the Christian polarity of good-evil and the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy that permeate Western patterns of thought and associated scientific knowledge. The result is a situation in which interpersonal dualisms (male/female, white/non-white, learned/traditional, archaic/modern, unproductive/productive, etc.) are deeply rooted in, and help to reinforce, Western culture and its socio-economic structures (Mellor, 2000). These ingrained dualisms are forced upon spatial frontiers by dominant interest groups as part of the attempt to consolidate new relations of production and reproduction. The long chain of dualisms derives from the fundamental dichotomy between core and frontier, which is nurtured by the supposed superiority of the centre and the alleged deficiencies of the frontier. The fabricated contrast between 'superior' people in central areas and 'second-class' frontier inhabitants is instrumental both for the institutionalisation of the new frontier and for upholding the authority of the centre. The typical narrative of frontier-making replicates the hierarchical differentiation between core and frontier and reinforces the message that activities at the frontier must reproduce social roles and institutions imported from consolidated areas.

Dualistic thinking has been put to work to further the advance and legitimisation of frontier-making in different parts of the world. Australian settler culture vividly illustrates the superposition of various dualisms; this society was highly racist, anti-native and hierarchical, permeated by a masculine discourse about the supremacy of the free white settler (Woollacott 2015). Australian frontier-making has also been denounced for the recurrent practice of frontier genocide. As described by Rogers and Bain (2016), between 1788 and 1928, extreme brutality was rationalised through the melding of Darwinian ideas about the survival of the fittest (i.e. the white, male settlers) with notions of inferior races that would inevitably die out. That led to a perverse combination of extinction and extermination, due to the impossibility of pastoralism coexisting with indigenous prairie management. Despite this tragic history, so far there has been limited academic interest in frontier genocide, which Stanner (1968, mentioned by Rogers and Bain 2016) calls the 'great Australian silence.' There are still unresolved questions about who should be considered responsible for genocidal colonisation, considering the impact of white settlers, local authorities and, ultimately, the British colonial masters in London. Evans (2007) details the full extent of this genocide, the result of a coordinated onslaught on lives, land and culture, which was central to the evolution of capitalism from the age of mercantilist colonisation to the time of industrialisation. Of course, the Aboriginal peoples tried to resist, sometimes violently, but this "does not change the fact that genocide occurred" (Rogers and Bain 2016: 90).

The self-professed supremacy of white, Western society, and its self-granted permission to conquer and exploit, were potentialised during colonisation by strategic scientific developments (navigation, firearms, production tools, etc.) and the application of scientific and religious knowledge (for instance, geography to support imperialist projects, biology and geology

to identify valuable resources, and Christian morality to disempower and subjugate the locals). However, old dualisms have continued to reverberate, resulting in accumulated dualities, long after the end of colonialism. The tension between the advance of novel social and economic relations and the persistence of the old values and institutions is one of the main characteristics of frontier-making. The range of interconnected dualisms was felt intensely in the Amazon, where the culture, knowledge and skills of traditional peoples, including those who migrated to the region after the 1970s and their families, were systematically devalued to pave the way for the commodification of production and consumption practices. Barbier (2012) asserts that the expansion of the Amazon frontier was in itself dualist, split between agribusiness farms and family agriculture units, while in fact the agricultural frontier is multiple and the different categories of farming are materially and socio-culturally interdependent. Nonetheless, the promise of a better life for the large majority of impoverished migrants was never fulfilled in the new reality dominated by large-scale farmers and transnational corporations. The appeal of the modern world, at the expense of social traditions and community life, is also illustrated by the ongoing advance of processed, frozen food into the most remote corners of the region (with all the associated problems for health and the local economy), as in the case of the upper Negro River Basin on the border between Brazil and Colombia.

The *third ontic feature of spatial frontiers is dialectically related to the previous two: time and space at the frontier are compressed, reconfigured and launched in different directions*. Spatial and temporal changes do not necessarily progress in the linear and sequential manner typical of core areas; at the frontier the basic mechanisms of expropriation, commodification, proletarianisation, etc. will follow unique patterns (obviously connected with the wider socio-economic trends and structures). The frontier has different phases, which normally begin slowly and then, when circumstances are favourable, accelerate rapidly. The frontier's very existence is never guaranteed, but one frontier can open and close several times on different occasions. Any particular area that was considered a functional frontier for the purpose of capitalist relations can suddenly lose that status, for instance due to competition from new products or production areas. Then, after some time, what had become an obsolete frontier can be recreated and incorporated into new rounds of migration and production as new opportunities and additional technologies become available (e.g. the handling of new products and goods in spaces previously used for others). This means that old frontiers are excavated through the redeployment of knowledge and practices that, once again, are externally imposed from the centre – if the frontier could re-emerge independently of the centre it would no longer be a frontier. Not only can old frontiers be supplanted by new ones, but different 'frontier moments' can be both imposed and superposed on previous socio-spatial experiences. Ultimately, "frontier is not space itself. It is something that happens *in and to* space. Frontiers *take* pace. Literally" (Rasmussen and Lund 2018: 388).

New socio-spatial relations are built upon past experiences, not necessarily improving practices or procedures; in fact, a spatial frontier may be new in historical terms, while still replicating some of the oldest and vilest relations and institutions. At the frontier, capitalism is renewed through novel technologies and productive platforms, but is also virtually free to reinstate elements of violence, exploitation, dispossession, racism and other injustices that characterised previous historical periods. This has been the case with the Amazon region, which was a frontier of biodiversity and mineral extraction during colonial times, then the main source of plant latex at the time of the Second Industrial Revolution and, more recently, due to the demand for agribusiness goods, has become a dynamic frontier for plantation production and export. Violence was employed as a central element of colonisation strategy, and the expanding frontiers pushed forward by the invading Europeans did not in fact advance civilisation, but rather destroyed social groups and their sophisticated knowledge and art (Hemming 1987). One of the most notorious examples was the legislation introduced by the Marquis of Pombal, prime minister of Portugal, in 1757 (called *Directorio*) which forced Indigenous peoples in the Amazon to

move to settlements managed by a ‘director’ [*diretor*] where racial assimilation was encouraged and cultural and linguistic identity subsumed. During the rubber extraction period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the existence of Indigenous groups was ignored and contingents of very poor migrants were attracted to the region to collect latex, which in the end served to enrich a very small elite in Manaus and Belém while satisfying the growing industrial demand for natural rubber. This exemplifies how genocide, slavery and violence were not sporadic incidents, but constituted an ongoing, systematic and transnational phenomenon underpinning frontier-making.

The *fourth element of our conceptualisation is the mystification of the benefits and opportunities available at the frontier*. The condition of the frontier is always highly hierarchical and often manipulated to serve mainly the interests of those in more favourable positions (which include land speculators, rural development companies, intermediaries and fixers, opportunistic investors, traders who receive and export goods produced by a large number of individual agents, etc.), but these asymmetries are disguised by the appearance of accessibility and better prospects for earning a living. The mystification of what frontier areas are really offering is based on deliberate misrepresentations or omissions. There exists a fetishism of the frontier that is nourished by ambiguous evidence of success and vague stories about people who thrived. Turner (1920) misrepresented the frontier as a conduit of democracy and equality, and his account exemplifies the positive narrative constructed by those who gain from the frontier. Along similar lines, Bowman (1927: 64) argued in his work on ‘pioneer fringes’ that a “changing environment breeds liberalism if the resources are abundant enough to support close settlements and the development of independent social and political institutions.” However, instead of a political vacuum, the frontier is a space of social control where autonomy was a clear strategy for governing the territory (Hogan 1985). The mystification of the frontier also determines that success is measured according to the values of central areas and Western standards. Failures are seldom attributed to frontier conditions; rather, the blame is placed on the incompetence of migrants and pioneers who failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them.

The memories of those who migrated from the south of Brazil to the Amazon were populated by images of courage associated with their Italian and German ancestors (who moved to South America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the mythology of bravery related to the consolidation of international borders with the Spaniards, and later the Argentineans. Wealthy landowners, subsistence farmers and workers were all products of the same agrarian past lived in the south of the country, but the symbolism of the frontier was appropriated differently by different social groups. The rhetoric of victory and anticipated success was repeatedly invoked by those who led the opening of new agricultural areas in the Amazon in the 1970s, which helped to downplay the obstacles faced by the newcomers and the crude reality of socio-ecological exploitation. The plan of the military dictatorship was to allocate land to impoverished peasants and landless people (considered trouble-makers in their areas of origin), but it was a monumental disappointment as it largely failed to foster agrarian capitalism in the region (Rivière d’Arc and Apestéguy 1978). The majority of those who migrated to the Amazon did not have the means to secure or maintain land and ended up as proletarians in urban or rural areas. In practice, the frontier was less epic and more a daily fight for survival (a significant proportion of migrants did not find success and returned, even more impoverished, to their areas of origin in the south, where many took part in other forms of protest and land occupation).

The Australian frontier-making experience, which has significant differences from that of the Amazon and other parts of South America, is frequently associated with an image of conquest and triumph, but this is largely explained by the construction of a new society that mirrored British values and social hierarchies. Australia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a major destination for convicts and ex-convicts (who the authorities wished to remove from the motherland) and then, after the 1840s, a target for free settlers, encouraged to move to the colony to take control of ‘free land’, in fact the land of the Aboriginal peoples (Woollacott 2015). As far back as 1834, an Australian settler argued that those who colonise a new area “are sure to

enjoy a greater degree of consideration and importance among their companions than they could reasonably have hoped to attain in the older society” (Wakefield 1967: 327). Inequalities were not only found between settlers and Indigenous Australians; a small squatter elite (described as a ‘squattocracy’, and including, among others, members of the Melbourne Club, established in 1839) controlled most of the land and limited access to new migrant contingents. This created serious resentments and pressure for land reform. New legislation was introduced, such as the 1860 Nicholson Land Act, but its effectiveness was limited, as the powerful squatter elite could still purchase whatever land they required through the use of ‘dummy bidders’. Wealthy squatters also used their knowledge of the land to buy up the best locations, leaving only the least fertile ground for less privileged settlers.

The mystification of frontier opportunities was also an important feature of the conquest of the American Midwest around Chicago. After 1833, the regional population and the economy grew rapidly due to the activity of settlers, investors and speculators. These so-called ‘boosters’ advanced economic theories and well-crafted rhetoric about the natural endowments of the Chicago area (minimising the obvious need to invest in infrastructure and logistics to make the frontier really flourish). Their actions were typically loaded with enthusiastic exaggeration and self-interested promotion. Due to improvements in rail and boat transportation, their promotion of the frontier became a self-fulfilling prophecy and during the 19th century Chicago became a main trade centre for grain, timber and meat (Cronon, 1992). The accomplishments of the frontier were internationally celebrated, culminating with the staging of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago to applaud the progress of American civilisation and the fulfilment of Columbus’ dreams four centuries earlier (obviously discounting the immense social and environmental impacts). It is interesting that, while mystification and ideological pressures were extremely powerful, these phenomena also flourished because people in their daily struggle for survival are often led to express conservative views and put up with the current state of affairs. The most vulnerable and disorganised groups at the frontier tend to have serious difficulty developing coordinated opposition, despite their actual level of consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

Fifth, even in a globalised and highly interconnected world frontier dynamics will not die out. On the contrary, *frontier-making will continue to expand and flourish around the world either through the incorporation of new areas hitherto subject to less capitalist influence, or with the replacement of previous frontier-making activity with novel rounds of capitalist relations of production and reproduction.* Accelerated market fluxes and population mobility do not dispense with spatial frontiers, because the modern Western world persistently strives for new places and landscapes to conquer (Ioris 2018b). One of the decisive features of capitalist modernity is how it aims to standardise location specific processes and incorporate them into the same market-centred rationality. Frontier situations favour the reaffirmation of Western modernity because existing socio-ecological elements of their reality are typically disorganised and thus easily replaced with new features associated with the Global North. However, it is important to realise also that capitalism does not need frontiers merely to renew itself, but, on the contrary, frontier-making helps the centre to remain largely as it has always been (see above). At the spatial frontiers, capitalism can be more capitalistic, in the sense that it is less constrained and more potentialised by the unique conditions of frontiers.

There exists a necessity for new spatial frontiers to work as opportunities to try to erase socio-ecologies and produce novel spaces or new socio-economic relations under the influence of capitalist modernity. Frontier-making is intrinsic in the peculiar trajectory of capitalism that combines dualisms and accumulates tensions between old and new, exploitation and production, particularities and universalisms. But the necessity for spatial frontiers needs to be understood in

---

<sup>2</sup> In his study on territorial conquest and European border disputes, Namier (1942: 69-70) perspicaciously observed that: “One would expect people to remember the past and to imagine the future. But in fact, when discussing or writing about history, they imagine it in terms of their own experience, and when trying to gauge the future they cite supposed analogies from the past: till, by a double process of repetition, they imagine the past and remember the future.”



dialectical and non-prescriptive terms. Žižek (2011) claims that historical necessity is really a convergence of contingencies. He argues that the Hegelian notions of totality and historical necessity are in fact elements of flexible reasoning that imply a radically open contingency of history. The relation between contingency and necessity is dialectical, in the sense that there is a necessity for contingencies and, more radically, a contingency of necessities (i.e. things became necessary only in a contingent way). The relation between past and present is also dialectical, as the present is obviously influenced by the past, but the past is also reinterpreted and reconstructed by the present. As also observed by Bukharin (1929), necessity is really a chain of historical events that connect cause and effect. Rather than the trends of history being determined a priori by some overpowering force, historical necessities can only be explained retrospectively. In this way, Hegelian necessity should be seen not as a cause, but as the central property of the process of change (Mann 2008). The notions of historical necessity and dialectics are particularly relevant to understanding the Hegelian theorisation of global trends and the interventions of the state apparatus (Ioris 2014), as much as to the search for alternatives to capitalist frontiers, as examined next.

### **Main Lessons, Conclusions and Perspectives**

The five main ontic features of the trajectory of frontier-making discussed above constitute an attempt to identify, if only schematically, the basis for the insertion of new areas and reinsertion of old ones into the sphere of influence of Western, capitalist modernity. Spatial frontiers continue to expand, including processes of production, extraction and politico-ideological containment, not only because of favourable economic opportunities, but mainly due to the need to stabilise and invigorate core economic and political trends. At its frontiers capitalism can reassert hegemony with much lower costs and fewer restrictions. At the frontier, order, authority and convention are suspended, time and space acquire new meanings, excesses are committed – Martins (2009: 09) describes the frontier expanding into the Amazon as the “scenery of intolerance, ambition and death” – but the compelling symbolism of abundance, potential wealth and a bright future represents a powerful legitimisation tool. Such process has not been interrupted by market-based globalisation, because frontier-making continues to be predicated in rising tensions in central economic areas and their unstoppable demand for goods and services. This inexorable interdependency between centre and frontier is clearly a process with major ideological and political significance. The evolution of the frontier could hypothetically take any direction and lead to different social arrangements, but in practice there is a great deal of constraint due the hegemony of capitalist relations. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy normally recounted only by the winners. The success of frontier-making, from the perspective of Western economists and policy-makers, depends on the consolidation of private property, the ability to exploit socionature, incentives for the circulation of capital and widespread commodification and financialisation. Experiences that deviate from this model are considered anomalies and curiosities rather than genuine, viable frontiers.

The organisation of capitalist frontiers effects the maintenance of what Rancière describes as the police order, a symbolic constitution of the social that both fragments and incorporates, insists on homogenisation and pushes for consensus. The individual must passively comply, circulate in a space emptied of politics, as “the space of circulation is nothing other than the space of circulation” [*l'espace de la circulation n'est que l'espace de la circulation*] (Rancière 1998: 242). In agribusiness frontiers such as the Amazon, crop monoculture has disturbing material and symbolic parallels with political and cultural monocultures that permeate highly hierarchical and exclusionary societies. The result is a consensus on the inegalitarian order [*consensus sur l'ordre inégalitaire*] (Rancière 1998: 74), which can and must be disrupted with the emergence of politics (which for Rancière means, fundamentally, emancipation and radical equality). If the frontier spatial relations are unique in terms of potentiality and transformation being contained by the

hegemony of capitalist prerogatives, these mechanisms of control and legitimisation are not absolute. On the contrary, because of the fluid boundaries and high mobility of newcomers, the frontier contains interstices in which political consciousness and reactions can emerge. Resistance to the capitalist logic of the frontier is not something that flares up by chance, but is located in the very constitution of the frontier that nurtures those interstices. The frontier has multiple time-space discontinuities as much as it shows rugosity (which are leftover characteristics from prior periods, according to Santos 1985) and it is in this context that opposition, almost always silent, but sometimes intense, erupts.

Resistance is therefore also related to the complex translocation of economic and social patterns from the centre to the frontier, considering that both migrants and established residents retain complex memories and experiences from pre-frontier times that allow them, depending on circumstances, the possibility to imagine some form of alternative. Durkheim (*On Suicide*) demonstrated that the most personal problems have sociological bases and spatial expressions; in our case, the frontier is a sociological process subject to significant individual forces. Resistance and reactions are informed and fuelled by past individual and collective experiences, such as previous conflicts or repression elsewhere. Depending on how people became involved and were relocated to the frontier (spontaneously or via government agencies), they will be more or less willing to question authority and risk whatever they have. The past is mobilised and influences the present because of cultural proclivities and subjective attitudes related to particular experiences which ensure that particular kinds of historical consciousness become meaningful (Whitehead 2003). Frontier-making is a cross-scale process that arises from national and international pressures, but the interplay between culture and history (beyond any false dichotomy between these) is resolved at the level of landscape change. The crafting of landscapes encapsulates historical and political consciousness that help to shape group identity. In the case of the Amazon, the landscape of large agribusiness areas is the consequence of multiple agencies that both converge and diverge, as the heavy machinery of wealthy landowners contrasts with pockets of family agriculture and those living along roads and in marginalised areas.

The socio-cultural construction of the frontier as a space of opportunity and likely rewards for those who persevere helps to maintain social inequalities, under the assumption that social mobility merely depends on hard work (and a bit of luck). Although open rebellion and confrontation are rare, the main form of resistance is a silent process that happens through various forms of practices and positions (Scott 1985). Figure 1 illustrates the multiple agencies inscribed in the landscape of the agribusiness frontier in the Amazon. It is possible to contrast the heavily modified space of the grain processing plant, with its warehouses, planted trees and sentry boxes, with the background hills of the space that ‘was there before’. The main focus of the painting is the most forgotten, least important character in the whole soybean industry: the *catador de soja* (soybean collector), someone who survives by cleaning the floor of the lorries that have recently discharged their cargo. Normally men, these individuals spend most of the day collecting discarded grains that have become only waste. These are marginalised people who work in the lowest fringes of the regional economy, filling a bag with grain and selling it for some food at the end of a long journey.<sup>3</sup> The artist, Wander Melo, makes a very compelling point and the painting is certainly thought-provoking: who is really holding historical agency here? The

---

<sup>3</sup> It reminds us of those destitute people in the north of England who collected pieces of coal from the mining operation to mitigate unemployment and have some fuel, famously described by George Orwell. “All day long over those strange grey mountains you see people wondering to and fro with sacks and baskets among the sulphurous smoke (many slag-heaps are on fire under the surface), prising out the tiny nuggets of coal which are buried here and there. (...) In Wigan the competition among unemployed people for the waste coal has become so fierce that it has led to an extraordinary custom called ‘scrambling for the coal’, which is well worth seeing. (...) Technically it is stealing but, as everybody knows, if the coal were not stolen it would simply be wasted” (Orwell 1989: 93-95).

lorry drivers, the staff of the grain corporations (who barely appear in the image) or the *catador*, the poorest of the poor, but the only one, along with his dog, who actually has autonomy? The image is a wonderful representation of the interstices of the oppressive agribusiness activity, an unexpected moment when the subaltern becomes the protagonist, when the wonders of capitalist modernity are minimised and the underdog (with incidentally another underdog) takes centre stage.

[FIGURE 1 here]

Ultimately, the prospects of consciousness and resistance based on daily survival through the production of new landscapes at the frontier have major implications for a critical research agenda. Interrogating the frontier is a formidable challenge for critical, left-wing thinking (primarily concentrated on justice and equality), considering that frontier-making is by definition a generation and perpetuation of inequalities. Likewise, critical scholars need to develop the ability to work through the political, apparently chaotic process of landscape change and silent resistance through the interstices of the established, taken-for-granted foundations of the frontier. All this requires a serious reflexive commitment and rejection of positivistic, politically void accounts of frontier-making. As advocated by Lacoste (1973, in Quaini 1982), we need to reflect in order to measure, and not measure first to reflect later. That does not mean looking for facts to fit the conceptual model, but rather a firm investigative effort that amalgamates comprehensive empirical data and constant critical thinking. To a certain extent, this line of investigation will pick up the analysis where Marx left off, in the sense that the richness of his investigation, particularly in his final years, was disregarded and did not survive into the 20th century (Jones 2016). Marx struggled to produce a general theory of capitalism and explain the so-called ‘expanded reproduction’ (which was only sketched and left incomplete in *Capital*). At the same time, he increased his geographical sensibility and acknowledged the importance of local circumstances beyond Western Europe, the strategic role of the state and the significance of rural communities and common properties (as in the case of Russia). This opens the door to embrace cultural and institutional complexities and reject linear, pre-conceived trajectories of change (as exemplified by the dogmatism of Leninist-Stalinist formulations). Frontier may be a tentative, uncertain space where capitalist relations more easily prevail, but it can also be seen as a frontier of resistance and of overcoming the perverse socio-spatial consequences of capital’s ascendancy.

## References

- Barbier, E.B. 2012. “Scarcity, Frontiers and Development.” *The Geographical Journal* 178 (2): 110-122.
- Barney, K. 2009. “Laos and the Making of a ‘Relational’ Resource Frontier.” *Geographical Journal* 175 (2): 146-159.
- Bolle, W. 2005. “O Mediterrâneo da América Latina: A Amazônia na Visão de Euclides da Cunha.” *Revista USP* 66: 140-155.
- Bowman, I. 1927. “The Pioneer Fringe.” *Foreign Affairs* 6 (1): 49-66.
- Bukharin, N. 1929 [1917]. *Imperialism and World Economy*. Martin Lawrence: London.
- Bunker, S.G. 1984. “Modes of Extraction, Unequal Exchange, and the Progressive Underdevelopment of an Extreme Periphery: The Brazilian Amazon, 1600-1980.” *American Journal of Sociology* 89 (5): 1017-1064.
- Cronon, W. 1992. *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. Norton and Company: New York.
- Cunha, E.R.P. 2018a. *Ensaio e Inéditos*. Organised by L.M. Bernucci and F.P. Rissato. Unesp: São Paulo.

- Cunha, E.R.P. 2018b [1909]. *À Margem da História*. Editora da Unesp: São Paulo.
- Eilenberg, M. 2014. "Frontier Constellations: Agrarian Expansion and Sovereignty on the Indonesian-Malaysian Border." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41 (2): 157-182.
- Evans, R. 2007. *A History of Queensland*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Financial Times. 2018. Brazil: Rainforest Pays the Price for the Country's Crisis. January 16. <https://www.ft.com/content/971f03aa-f9e0-11e7-9b32-d7d59aace167>.
- Foweraker, J. 1981. *The Struggle for Land*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Jones, G.S. 2016. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. Penguin: London.
- Hagmann, T., and B. Korf. 2012. "Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and Sovereignty in the Ethiopian-Somali Frontier." *Political Geography* 31(4): 205-214.
- Harvey, D. 2006 [1982]. *The Limits to Capital*. New Edition. Verso: London and New York.
- Hecht, S.B. 2013. *The Scramble for the Amazon and the "Lost Paradise" of Euclides da Cunha*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Heckenberger, M. 2005. *The Ecology of Power*. Routledge: Abingdon.
- Hemming, J. 1987. *Amazon Frontier: The Defeat of the Brazilian Indians*. Papermac: London.
- Hogan, R. 1985. "The Frontier as Social Control." *Theory and Society* 14 (1): 35-51.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2013. "Rethinking Brazil's Pantanal Wetland: Beyond Narrow Development and Conservation Debates." *Journal of Environment and Development* 22 (3): 239-260.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2014. *The Political Ecology of the State*. Routledge: London.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2017a. "Places of Agribusiness: Displacement, Replacement, and Misplacement in Mato Grosso, Brazil." *Geographical Review* 107 (3): 452-475.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2017b. *Agribusiness and the Neoliberal Food System in Brazil: Frontiers and Fissures of Agro-neoliberalism*. Routledge: London.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2018a. "Amazon's Dead Ends: Frontier-making the Centre." *Political Geography* 65: 98-106.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2018b. "Place-making at the Frontier of Brazilian Agribusiness." *GeoJournal* 83: 61-72.
- Ioris, A.A.R. 2019. "Peasant Farming in the Southern Tracts of the Amazon: The Reluctant Alterity of Agribusiness." *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 18: 375-400.
- Ioris, A.A.R., R.R. Ioris, and S. Shubin (eds.). 2020. *Frontiers of Development in the Amazon: Riches, Risks and Resistances*. Lexington Books: Lanham, Maryland.
- Kelly, A.B., and N.L. Peluso. 2015. "Frontiers of Commodification: State Lands and Their Formalization." *Society and Natural Resources* 28 (5): 473-495.
- Korf, B., T. Hagmann, and R. Emmenegger. 2015. "Re-spacing African Drylands: Territorialization, Sedentarization and Indigenous Commodification in the Ethiopian Pastoral Frontier." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42 (5): 881-901.
- Léna, P. 1986. "Aspects de la Frontière Amazonienne." *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 22 (3-4): 319-343.
- Little, P. 2001. *Amazonia*. John Hopkins: Baltimore.
- Lund, C., and N.F. Rachman. 2018. "Indirect Recognition. Frontiers and Territorialization around Mount Halimun-Salak National Park, Indonesia." *World Development* 101: 417-428.
- Mann, G. 2008. "A Negative Geography of Necessity." *Antipode* 40 (5): 921-934.
- Martins, J.S. 2009. *Fronteira: A Degradação do Outro nos Confins do Humano*. Contexto: São Paulo.
- Marx, K. 1973. *Grundrisse*. Trans. M. Nicolaus. Penguin: London.
- Marx, K. 1976. *Capital, Volume I*. Trans. B. Fowkes. Penguin: London.
- McDowell, S., and Croke, E. 2019. "Creating Liminal Spaces of Collective Possibility in Divided Societies: Building and Burning the Temple." *Cultural Geographies* 26 (3): 323-339.
- Mellor, M. 2000. "Feminism and Environmental Ethics: A Materialist Perspective." *Ethics and the Environment* 5 (1): 107-123.
- Murphy, J., and McDowell, S. 2019. "Transitional Optics: Exploring Liminal Spaces after Conflict." *Urban Studies* 56 (12): 2499-2514.

- Namier, L.B. 1942. *Conflicts*. Books for Libraries Press: New York.
- Nevins, J., and N.L. Peluso (eds.). 2008. *Taking Southeast Asia to Market: Commodities, Nature, and People in the Neoliberal Age*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London.
- Opitz, S., and U. Tellmann. 2015. "Europe as Infrastructure: Networking the Operative Community." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 (1): 171-190.
- Orwell, G. 1989 [1937]. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Penguin: London.
- Pacheco de Oliveira, J. 2016. *O Nascimento do Brasil e Outros Ensaios*. Contra Capa: Rio de Janeiro.
- Peluso, N.L., and C. Lund. 2011. "New Frontiers of Land Control: Introduction." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (4): 667-681.
- Posey, D.A., and Balick, M.J. (eds). 2006. *Human Impacts on Amazonia*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Rasmussen, M.B., and C. Lund. 2018. "Reconfiguring Frontier Spaces: The Territorialization of Resource Control." *World Development* 101: 388-399.
- Rancière, J. 1998. *Aux Bords du Politique*. Gallimard: Paris.
- Rivero, S., and F.G. Jayme Jr. (eds). 2008. *As Amazônia do Século XXI*. Editora UFPA: Belém.
- Rivière d'Arc, H., and C. Apestéguy. 1978. "Les Nouvelles Franges Pionnières en Amazonie Brésilienne." *Études Rurales* 69: 81-100.
- Rogers, T.J., and S. Bain. 2016. "Genocide and Frontier Violence in Australia." *Journal of Genocide Research* 18 (1): 83-100.
- Quaini, M. 1982 [1974]. *Geography and Marxism*. Trans. A. Braley. Basil Blackwell: Oxford.
- Santana, J.C.B. 2000. "Euclides da Cunha e a Amazônia: Visão Mediada pela Ciência." *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos* 6 (suppl.): 901-917.
- Santos, M. 1985. *Espaço e Método*. Nobel: São Paulo.
- Schmink, M., and C.H. Wood (eds). 1984. *Frontier Expansion in Amazonia*. University of Florida Press: Gainesville.
- Scott, J.C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press: New Heaven and London.
- The Guardian. 2015. Silicon Valley Exploits Time and Space to Extend the Frontiers of Capitalism. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/29/silicon-valley-exploits-space-evgeny-morozov>.
- Théry, H. (ed). 1997. *Environnement et Développement en Amazonie Brésilienne*. Belin: Paris.
- Tsing, A.L. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press, 1060 Princeton and Oxford.
- Turner, F.J. 1920. *The Frontier in American History*. H. Holt and Company: New York.
- Wallerstein, I. 1974. *The Modern World-System I*. Academic Press: New York.
- Watts, M.J. 2018. "Frontiers: Authority, Precarity, and Insurgency at the Edge of the State." *World Development* 101: 477-488.
- Whitehead, N. (ed). 2003. *Histories and Historicities in the Amazon*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London.
- Wakefield, E.G. 1967 [1834]. *England and America*. Augustus M. Kelley: New York.
- Woollacott, A. 2015. *Settler Society in the Australian Colonies*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Žižek, S. 2011. Hegel's Century. In: *Hegel and the Infinite*. Žižek, S., Crockett, C. and Davis, C. (eds.), Columbia University Press: New York. pp. ix-xi.