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# What Is Burning the Amazon?

A Plea from Brazilian Anarchists

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*Another end of the world is possible!*

We have to rediscover revolutionary reference points for self-organized and egalitarian collective life. We need to share examples of real societies that have resisted the state and capitalism, such as the anarchist experiments during the Russian and Ukrainian Revolutions of 1917 and the Spanish Revolution of 1936. We should remember, also, that all of these were ultimately betrayed and crushed by, or with the connivance of, the Bolshevik Party and the Stalinist dictatorship that followed it, which carried out unprecedented industrialization and the mass displacement of agrarian peoples. This illustrates why it is so important to develop a way of imagining that does not simply replicate the visions of capitalist industrialism.

We can also look to contemporary examples like the Zapatista Uprising in Mexico since 1994 and the ongoing revolution in Rojava in northern Syria. But in addition to the examples offered by anarchists or people influenced by anarchist principles, we should learn from the many indigenous nations around us: Guaranis, Mundurukus, Tapajós, Krenaks, and many others who have ceaselessly resisted European and capitalist colonial expansion for five centuries. They are all living examples from whom anarchists can learn about life, organization, and resistance without and against the state.

If there is any fundamental basis for solidarity in response to the attack on the foundation of all life in the Amazon, it is the potential that we can build connections between the social movements, the poor, and excluded of the world and the indigenous and peasant peoples of all Latin America. To put a halt to the deforestation underway in the Amazon and countless similar forms of destruction that are taking place across the planet, we must nourish grassroots movements that reject the neoliberal resource management of soil, forests, waters, and people.

For a solidarity between all peoples and exploited classes, not between paternalism and the colonialism of governments! The only way to address the environmental crisis and global climate change is to abolish capitalism!

As the fires in the Amazon rainforest continue to burn, our comrades in Brazil have sent us this analysis of the causes of the catastrophe and how it should inform our vision of the future.

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“I worry about whether the whites will resist. We have been resisting for 500 years.”

—Ailton Krenak

## Living Dystopia

The scene is gloomy. On August 19, 2019, smoke covers cities across the state of São Paulo, turning day into night at 3 pm. The previous day, in Iceland, people organized the first funeral, complete with a gravestone and a minute of silence, for a glacier declared dead. The smoke that engulfed São Paulo is caused by forest fires in the Amazon Forest far away in the North of Brazil; the glacier has disappeared due to rising temperatures related to the carbon dioxide accumulating in the atmosphere.

These tragic scenes—almost picturesque, almost absurd—could sound comical if they weren’t real. They are so extreme that they remind us of fictional scenarios such as those described in the novel *And Still the Earth*, a Brazilian environmental dystopia by Ignácio de Loyola Brandão. Written in the 1970s during the military dictatorship in Brazil, the book describes a fictitious dictatorial regime known as “Civiltar,” which celebrates cutting down the last tree in the Amazon with a jingoistic declaration that it has created “a desert greater than that of the Sahara.” In this story, all the Brazilian rivers are dead; jugs of water from each of the extinct rivers are displayed in a hydrographic museum. Aluminum can

dunes and highways permanently blocked by the shells of abandoned cars are the backdrop of São Paulo. The city itself suffers from sudden heat pockets capable of killing any unsuspecting person; mysterious diseases consume the citizens, especially the homeless.

The author claims that he was inspired by real events that seemed absurd and unusual at the time. Today, these are becoming ever more ordinary.

News of the increased burning of the Amazon has sent shockwaves around the world. Burns rose 82% in 2019 over the same period last year in Brazil, according to the National Institute for Space Research, and new outbreaks of fire are still being reported as we write. The catastrophic images of destruction have fueled the indignation of people around the world who are concerned about the future of life on earth, seeing how important the Amazon rainforest is for climate regulation and global biodiversity. Images of the fires compelled French President Emmanuel Macron to bring the subject to the G7 summit and to exchange barbs with President Jair Bolsonaro in the media after France offered millions of dollars in funds to fight forest fires.

Since the end of 2018, half a billion bees have been found dead in four Brazilian states. The death of these insects that are essential to fertilizing 75% of the vegetables we eat is linked to the use of pesticides banned in Europe but permitted in Brazil. In August 2019, the court dismissed the charges against a farmer who used pesticides thrown from a plane as a chemical weapon against Guyra Kambi'y indigenous community in Mato Grosso do Sul in 2015. The same month, groups of farmers, "land grabbers" [people who falsify documents in order to obtain ownership of land], union members, and traders used a Whatsapp group to coordinate setting fires in the municipality of Altamira, Pará, the epicenter of fires consuming the Amazon rainforest. As reported in *Folha do Progresso*, the "day of the fire" was organized by people en-

dating the transformation of forests and soil into competitive consumer goods on the global market.

So what is burning the Amazon—and the entire planet? The answer is clear: the pursuit of land, profit (legal or not), and private property. None of this will be changed by any elected or imposed government. The only truly environmental perspective is a revolutionary perspective seeking the end of capitalism and the state itself.

## Exercising Our Ability to Imagine

The dystopian images of *And Still the Earth* and George Orwell's novel *1984* were intended as warnings: exaggerated projections of the worst that can happen if we fail to change the course of history. Today, with cameras around every corner and our own TVs and cell phones carrying out surveillance on us, it is as if these dystopian novels are being used as a handbook for governments and corporations to bring our worst nightmares into reality.

Dystopias are warnings; but utopias, by definition, represent places that do not exist. We need other places, places that are possible. We need to be able to imagine a different world—and to imagine ourselves, our desires, and our relationships being different as well.

We should use the creativity that enables us to picture zombie apocalypses and other literary or cinematic calamities to imagine a reality beyond capitalism right now and begin building it. Today, as reality surpasses fiction, our activities are largely characterized by disbelief and passivity. But you cannot be neutral on a moving train—especially not one that is accelerating on a track into the abyss. Crossing your arms is complicity. Likewise, acting individually is insufficient because it maintains the logic that has brought us here.

It has never worked to demand that governments solve these problems for us—and it never will. This is especially foolish when we are talking about the environmental disasters caused by their own policies. Land seizures and the deforestation of the Amazon are inextricably interlinked with the organized criminal enterprises that smuggle and kill in the countryside. Fully 90% of the timber harvested is contraband supported by a vast apparatus of illegal capitalism involving armed militias and the state itself.

Populist leaders like Bolsonaro aim to benefit from the unfolding ecological catastrophe at the same time that they deny it is occurring. On the one hand, they claim that there is no need for action to curb global warming—alongside Trump, Bolsonaro was the only other leader who threatened to abandon the Paris Agreement, claiming that global warming is a “fable for environmentalists.” This helps to mobilize the far-right base, which admires and celebrates outright dishonesty as a demonstration of political power. On the other hand, as the consequences of climate chaos and environmental imbalances become obvious undeniable facts, these leaders will opportunistically take advantage of environmental crises, product shortages, refugee migrations, and climate disasters such as hurricanes as pretexts to accelerate the implementation of ever more authoritarian measures in the fields of health, transportation and security. Using authoritarian and militarized means to determine who can have access to the resources they need to survive in a context of widespread scarcity is what many theorists have called *ecofascism*.

The intervention of foreign states in the Amazon forests according to their own economic interests is simply the continuation of the colonialism that began in 1492. No government will solve the problem of fires and deforestation. At best, they might slow the impact of the exploitation they have always engaged in. Neoliberal capitalism demands endless growth, man-

couraged by the words of Jair Bolsonaro: “The goal, according to one of the leaders speaking anonymously, is to show the president that they want to work.”

The recent wave of fires linking President Jair Bolsonaro’s policies to attacks against forests, peasant farmers, and indigenous peoples is an intensification of a process as old as the colonization of the Americas. While the Workers’ Party (PT) was still in power, many projects were introduced to expand and accelerate growth, including the construction of the Belo Monte plant, which displaced and impacted indigenous communities and thousands of other people living in the countryside. The approval of the Forest Code in 2012 enabled farmers to advance over indigenous territories and nature reserves with impunity, while suspending the demarcation of new protected lands.

Both left and right governments see nature and human life chiefly as resources with which to produce commodities and profit. The government of Bolsonaro, a declared enemy of the common people, women, and indigenous groups, doesn’t just threaten us with the physical violence of police repression. In declaring that he will no longer recognize any indigenous land, Bolsonaro is intensifying a war on the ecosystems that make human life possible—a war that long precedes him.

## **A 500-Year-Running Disaster**

For centuries, we have struggled to survive the greatest disaster of our time, a disaster that threatens the sustainability of all the biomes and communities on this planet. Its name is capitalism—the cruelest, most inequitable, and destructive economic system in history. This threat is not the result of the inevitable forces of nature. Humans created it and humans can eliminate it.

In Brazil, we have witnessed firsthand how this system exploits people, promotes genocide, and degrades and pollutes

the earth, water, and air. Even if we ultimately manage to abolish it, we will still have to survive the consequences of letting it go on for so long. The destruction of entire ecosystems, the poisons in rivers and in our own bodies, the species that have gone extinct, the glaciers that have disappeared, the forests that have been cut down and paved over—these consequences will remain for many years to come. In the future, we will have to survive by gathering what we need from the ruins and waste that this system has left in its wake. All the material that has been torn from the ground to be strewn across the earth's surface and dumped into the seas will not return overnight to the depths it came from.

Recognizing this should inform how we envision our revolutionary prospects. It is foolish to imagine that the abolition of capitalism will expand the consumer activities that are currently available to the global bourgeoisie to the entire human population; we must stop fantasizing about a regulated post-capitalist world with infinite resources to generate the sort of commodities that capitalist propaganda has led us to desire. Rather, we will have to experiment in ways to share the self-management of our lives amid the recovery of our biomes, our relationships, and our bodies after centuries of aggression and exploitation—organizing life in regions that have become hostile to it.

The ways we organize our resistance today should be informed by the fact that our revolutionary experiments will not be taking place in a world of peace, stability, and balance. We will be struggling to survive in the midst of the consequences of centuries of pollution and environmental degradation. The best-case scenario for the future will look like the situation in Kobanê in 2015: a victorious revolution in a bombed-out city full of mines.

No one need imagine an apocalypse when the worst of dystopias is already part of reality. In the cities of Mariana and Brumadinho, in the state of Minas Gerais, dams managed

by the mining companies Samarco and Vale collapsed due to lack of maintenance and neglect of human life, wildlife, and the environment. In Mariana, 19 people were killed as a consequence of an accident in 2015; In Brumadinho, at least 248 people have died and dozens are still missing following a disaster in January 2019. For the sake of profit, these companies and their managers inflicted one of the worst environmental disasters in the country, affecting thousands of people from the relatives of the dead to the indigenous and rural communities that depend on the rivers that were devastated by the toxic mud that was trapped in the dams.

Such examples make it easy to see that the worst tragedy is not the end of the capitalist order but the fact that it exists in the first place. As Buenaventura Durruti said in an interview during the Spanish Civil War:

“We, the workers, can build others to take their place, and better ones! We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth; there is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing in this minute.”

## **So What Is Burning the Amazon?**

There is a consensus among scientific researchers, government institutions, social movements, and rural and urban peoples regarding the impacts and risks of global warming and increasing industrialization and urbanization. Some of these consequences are about to become irreversible. The deforestation of the Amazon itself may become irreparable if it reaches 40% of its total area.