



Amazon's dead ends: Frontier-making the centre

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ABSTRACT

The spatiality of frontier-making goes beyond the more immediate relocation from 'core' to 'periphery', entailing a deep relational interaction between old and new areas. The article discusses the interdependence between centre and frontier and suggests that this happens through the 'law of scarcity-abundance'. This 'law' synthesizes the general tendency to deal with mounting scarcity in central areas through the pledge of abundance at the frontier, although in practice new rounds of scarcity emerge in both areas due to the internal dynamics of capitalism (notably, the exploitation of society and the rest of nature). This means that the evolution of capitalist relations of production and reproduction is also, and fundamentally, based on accumulation through frontier-making. This conceptual framework is then applied to Brazil, a country largely shaped by territorial conquest and the expansion of internal economic frontiers. The State of Mato Grosso, in the southern tract of the Amazon, has been at the forefront of frontier-making for many centuries, recently accelerated by the spiralling growth of neoliberalized agribusiness. Mato Grosso may have now reached the centre of the national political and economic landscape because of the crucial importance of agribusiness exports, nonetheless it remains a frontier space where abundance and scarcity continue to jointly materialize. Frontier-making never ended in Mato Grosso, but remains a persistent necessity, much more than a simple contingency.

"But the enchanted island of O'Brasil is not always visible, as those rocks are, nor these rocks have always those apparitions."

(O'Flaherty (1846), p. 70)

Realities in the making

There is little doubt that we live a world characterized by mounting dilemmas and fierce controversies. New problems accumulate and old ones deepen while there is limited room for comprehensive, long-term solutions. Instead of addressing the distortions and inequalities associated with mainstream social, political and economic institutions, public policies and private initiatives are often diverted towards the production of new spatial configurations. This movement, away from where the trouble originated, seems to suggest that central areas have become saturated with themselves, prompting the dislocation and reterritorialization of people and enterprises. Attempts to evade and transfer national or location-specific dilemmas to other socio-economic settings seem to be a hallmark of capitalism's unsettling powers and inherent contradictions. Since the European Renaissance, frontier-making has been a favourite response, to poverty, unemployment, land and housing deficits, resource exhaustion, environmental degradation, market saturation and political persecution. The mitigation of socio-economic tensions and the search for novel money-making

opportunities in newly opened spatial frontiers have been crucial for the affirmation of capitalist modernity and the functioning of the modern world (Watts (1992), pp. 116–117). considers frontiers as "particular sorts of spaces" that represent "the first wave of modernity to break on the shores of an uncharted heartland" with "their own territorial form of law and (dis)order".

All this means that capitalism is also, and fundamentally, based on 'accumulation by frontier-making', a concept which needs to be properly theorized and adequately investigated beyond simplistic geographical conceptualizations. The spatiality of frontier-making goes beyond the more immediate relocation from 'core' to 'periphery', entailing a relational interaction and joint processes of exploitation, realignment and reinforcement in both old and new areas. At the frontier, enclosure, extraction and production are recreated and integrated into wider politico-economic arrangements, which are themselves transformed through the emergence of new spatial frontiers. In the end, the incorporation of new territories only temporarily alleviates tensions, and without challenging existing relations of production and reproduction. Problems are naturalized, fragmented and depoliticized, new accumulation mechanisms are activated and reinforced, while those who have been most seriously affected by socio-economic developments are compelled to move or risk being blamed for their own difficulties. The lack of opportunity for some groups and individuals triggers the imagination (of a different reality and a possible better life)

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but without any guarantee of success (there are none).

Our goal here is to theorize frontier-making and associate it with the politics of scale, that is, the shared experience of capitalist relations of production and reproduction occurring at distinct, but interconnected, scales of socio-ecological interaction. “Scale is not necessarily a pre-ordained hierarchical framework for ordering the world – local, regional, national and global. It is instead a contingent outcome of the tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents” (Marston, 2000, p. 220). The politics of scale is directly implicated in the production of space given that scale is constituted and reconstituted through relations of production, reproduction and consumption interwoven with space. The uneven development of the socio-economic forces of capitalism is essentially multiscale and unfolds through the dynamic political economy of old and new regions (Agnew, 2000). Consequently, daily life and class-based differences at the local scale are permeated, and help to shape or transgress wider economic and politico-ideological constructs. Likewise, the “reproduction of the household enterprise is dependent simultaneously on the economic relations of production and on the political relations necessary to protect those relations” (Smith, 1989, p. 24).

In this article we will also revisit what has happened in the Brazilian Amazon, a region notoriously associated with the expansion of internal and external economic frontiers. The symbolism of frontier-making in the Amazon has pervaded the social and scientific imaginary. More recently, the expression ‘agricultural frontier’ has also become prevalent and is extensively used by academics and scientists.¹ Yet, the ongoing encroachment of export-driven agribusiness into the Amazon region is only the most recent chapter in a long history of the pursuit of new economic frontiers in Brazil. In order to understand the long-term drivers of frontier-making it is essential to consider that the opening of new production areas is not the leftover or the excess of national development, but that it has been central to cultural, political and social change throughout the country. Socio-economic inequalities and socio-ecological exploitation have also been managed through the proliferation of frontiers and the prospect ‘of something better elsewhere’ (when ‘here’ is no longer enough). In that way, the responsibility for problems is shifted back to those exploited and marginalized in the core areas, implying that it would be their own fault if they refused to embark on the journey to a more promising reality at the frontier. Contemporary agricultural frontiers in the Amazon re-enact, once again, the dreams of modernity and prosperity that for generations attracted migrants to the Brazilian west (Ioris, 2017a).

To demonstrate the contested politics of scale behind frontier-making in the Amazon we will particularly focus on agribusiness activity in the State of Mato Grosso, in the southern tracts of the Brazilian Amazon. Mato Grosso has been at the forefront of economic and political frontier-making for many centuries, but the process has accelerated in the last few decades due to the spiralling growth of soybean-based agribusiness. This experience vividly illustrates the paradoxes and extravagances associated with frontier-making; Mato Grosso now accounts for around 10% of global soybean production, but the state is an enormous food desert that, like most economic frontiers, still depends for its supply of food on the core, ‘consolidated’ economic areas in the south and southeast of the country. In addition, the intense economic activity and commodity exports in the Amazon have further moved Brazil towards the periphery of market-based globalization and reinforced the old pattern of extractivism and socio-ecological waste (often disguised by calls for efficiency and narratives of sustainable development along the lines of ecological modernization).

Our interpretation is informed by empirical work conducted between 2013 and 2016 that involved various data collection campaigns

¹ For instance, a quick Scopus search for ‘agricultural frontier’ on 12 Sep 2017 came up with a total of 436 publications, with more than half (230) related to Brazil and the Amazon.

and regular visits to different locations in the north of Mato Grosso at the Upper Teles Pires river basin, which is the main soybean production area in Brazil today. Even more revealing, in terms of frontier-making, is that the Upper Teles Pires is situated exactly at the transition between forest and savannah ecosystems. Following Foweraker (1981), our interviews, contacts and observations are ‘absorbed’ into the text and incorporated into the wider analysis without resorting to direct quotations. The study takes on board the recommendation of (Pred and Watts (1992): 2) to consider the “various historical configurations and reconfigurations of capitalism in an effort to understand how difference, connectedness and structure are produced and reproduced within some sort of contradictory global system, within a totality of fragments.” Furthermore, the challenging complexity of the Mato Grosso agribusiness frontier is considered as not only a socio-spatial construction, but also a true analytical tool and a basis for proposing new investigations (Pacheco de Oliveira, 2016).

The most innovative contribution of our investigation is to offer a meta-theoretical framework and an associated reflection on the specific frontier-making experience in order to reconceptualize the wider Amazonian politico-economic trajectory. To achieve that goal, the text is divided into two main parts. In the first, after this brief introduction, a theoretical and interpretative perspective is presented, which goes beyond traditional accounts of frontier-making in order to emphasize socio-spatial interconnections and interlocked scarcity and abundance (consolidated under the ‘law of scarcity-abundance’). In the second part, the evolution of the agribusiness frontier in Mato Grosso and, indirectly, in the rest of the Amazon is critically examined, making reference to the roots of the sustained processes of violence, exclusion and hierarchization that have characterized the long history and contested geography of frontier-making in the region. The case study is followed by overall conclusions and implications for future studies.

Centred frontiers and the law of scarcity-abundance

The emergence of new spatial frontiers remains a ubiquitous process in the contemporary world, considering that the decline of frontier-making is still an unfulfilled aspect of globalization and a post-modernist fantasy (i.e. the proclamation of a borderless world, instantly connected and horizontally networked). Novel spatial settings, distinguished by their own patterns of economic production and socio-ecological organization, continue to appear, with significant repercussions for national and global societies. One main consequence is that the ontological complexity of frontiers persists as a real challenge for social scientists. Imamura (2015) appropriately recommends that the analysis should begin with an inquiry outside academia to observe how the word ‘frontier’ is used in ordinary speech before it is scrutinized by academics. In the United States in particular, the public imaginary is influenced by Frederick J. Turner’s persuasive argument about settlement frontiers, basically the claim that spatial frontiers provided the elemental conditions for freedom and social opportunities in North America (Billington, 1963). However, as in the case of Turner’s, most interpretations seem to miss the multiscale political, social and economic ramifications of frontier-making. Scholars have typically described various types of frontier – political, agricultural, resource, commodity, etc. – but have failed to properly take into consideration the range of interests, social differences and political disputes that help to shape frontier spatiality. For example (Demangeon (1932), p. 636), bluntly considers it “an exceptional fortune” [*une fortune exceptionnelle*] for a country to have pioneering frontiers and Webb (1952) argues that Western European civilization was the fortunate result of the opening up of world economic frontiers, which started with Columbus and continued until the 20th century, but it is rare to find studies that effectively connect local, lived activities with wider politico-economic scales.

On that regard (Hennessy (1978), p. 12), rightly observes that frontiers “have encouraged dichotomies, as they invite Manichean

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