

# Protected Truths: Neoextractivism, Conservation, and the Rise of Posttruth Politics in Brazil

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Recent scholarship links authoritarian populism to environmental governance and changing forms of neoliberalism, yet the central role of the contradiction between territory demarcated for (neo)extractivism and territory demarcated for conservation and protection is heavily understated. This article analyzes the rise of posttruth politics in Brazil as an effort to legitimate unmitigated extractive capitalist growth through a renewed obfuscation of this inherent ecological contradiction. We first demonstrate the concealment of the contradiction through Latin America's "post-neoliberal" period, based in a neoextractivist economic model. Following, we argue that posttruth politics represents a specific attempt to supersede the previous neoliberal consensus in the face of shrinking commodity returns. Designed to downplay, deny, and remove existing public environmental concerns, we view the posttruth of authoritarian populism as a necessarily spatial project, beyond accounts of cultural or institutional politics alone. The article thus furthers understandings of posttruth by centralizing its role in obscuring the extractivism–conservation contradiction in Brazil and beyond, and as such aligns with a critical effort to mobilize alternatives to the untenable reprimarization of Latin American societies. *Key Words:* authoritarian populism, conservation, environmental governance, (neo)extractivism, neoliberalism, posttruth.

The emergence of posttruth politics as constitutive of a new wave of authoritarian populist and extreme-right regimes is a worldwide phenomenon, provoking significant discussion across the social sciences. In this article we move forward political ecology analyses linking authoritarian populism with environmental governance and changes in neoliberal political economy globally (Bruff and Tansel 2019; McCarthy 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021; Menga 2022), and especially in Brazil (Acosta and Gudynas 2018; Pahnke 2018; Taddei, Bulamah, and Schavelzon 2020; Deutsch 2021; Saad-Filho and Boffo 2021). Significantly, rather than locating posttruth as purely discursive, within the domain of cultural politics, we view it as a necessarily spatial, territorializing project, allowing for the unmitigated expansion of resource extraction (Norgaard 2011; Neimark et al. 2019; Cesarino 2020; Büscher 2021; Rajão et al. 2022).

As environmental governance researchers, we explore political ecologies of capitalist resource extraction and policies on protection, and their intricate relations to regime change. We examine the embeddedness of state territorialization in

policies for biodiversity conservation and the development of a public environmental agenda within and alongside the expansion of predatory economic enterprises such as cattle ranching, monocrop agriculture, and mineral extraction. In spatializing posttruth politics, we specifically identify a shift in governance of this "ecological contradiction" between (neo)extractivism and conservation that lies at the heart of capitalist territorialization. Shifting over time, the governmental separation between territories to be exploited or developed and those to be protected or conserved—with all the enforcement of legitimate use, ownership, and access that that implies—has long been theorized as a productive terrain for state power, contradictory in its tacit acknowledgment of the requirement to protect or offset capitalism's ecological degradations elsewhere to avoid threatening the basis of social life (Cronon 1996; Peluso and Lund 2011; Büscher et al. 2012).

Our identification of a new form of authoritarian populist obfuscation of the ecological contradiction draws on analysis of inherent crises within neoliberalization processes. In line with critical authors, we

view neoliberalism as having concealed the contradiction for a period by casting environmental protection as a growth project alongside extractivism, to harness the economic value of conserved nature (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; Fletcher et al. 2019). Although “resource nationalism” (Koch and Perreault 2019) goes some way to explaining authoritarian populism’s rise, we suggest that this underplays the key basis of state territorialization in governing capitalism’s ecological contradiction. Designed to downplay, deny, and remove existing public environmental concerns, we argue that post-truth politics represents an intrinsically spatializing, full-throttle assault on existing environmental governance architecture.

We reach this understanding by mapping the rise, intensification, and deintensification of neoliberal conservation policies in Brazil as a concrete part of the (apparent) postneoliberal scaling up of extractive resource exports to fund state social interventions from the early 2000s. In contrast to predominant uses of the term *extractivism* in Brazil—often equated with sustainable forest-based livelihoods<sup>1</sup>—we follow Brazilian and Latin American political ecologists in mobilizing *neoextractivism* to indicate this new wave of state development model dependency on large-scale extraction of natural resources for global export (Alimonda 2015; Gudynas 2016; Svampa 2019; Acselrad et al. 2021). In conservation terms, by 2006 the progressive advance of indigenous land rights alongside market-based approaches to forest governance indeed succeeded in reducing Amazonian deforestation. Yet rather than indicating postneoliberalism, these reductions accompanied a rapid expansion of neoextractivist operations led by monocrop soy in the Cerrado biome. We argue that an apparent win–win for this growth-centered technocratic consensus and for socioenvironmental responsibility could only be sustained as long as extractive returns watered both state expenditure and elite profit (Fletcher et al. 2019; Fletcher 2020). As the commodity “supercycle” diminished after 2010 and free-fell after 2014 (Jenkins 2015; Brandão and Vogt 2021), the subsequent crisis led to a breakdown in the neoliberal conservation status quo. In short, we view the failure of the neoliberal consensus to continue its concealment of the ecological contradiction as leading to the rise of posttruth politics, in line with neoextractivist expansion. Through analysis of environmental governance at the national

scale in Brazil, we observe significant fluctuations in the neoliberal technocratic consensus on biodiversity conservation over the last two decades. Moreover, this leads us to conclude that, beyond being a discursive program, the conservation–(neo)extractivist contradiction represents a central domain for the emergence and potential reemergence of (new wave) authoritarian populist governments.

Bolsonaro’s undermining of environmental protection was fundamental to his political objectives. The “skeletonizing” of environmental agencies (Deutsch 2021)—the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio)—accompanied the removal of on-the-ground agents and replacement of experts with military figures, and the morale of those left in place reached an all-time low (ASCEMA 2020). Civil society participation in agencies like the Brazilian Council for the Environment (CONAMA) was dissolved or relegated to paper only. A 29 percent increase in Amazon deforestation after 2016 rose rapidly under the far-right regime, with losses of 6,200 km<sup>2</sup> (2019), 8,058 km<sup>2</sup> (2020), and 13,235 km<sup>2</sup> (2021; INPE 2021). To lose so much of the planet’s most biodiverse territories, particularly Amazonia and the Cerrado, is extraordinary at a time of heightened global environmental concern. Yet more extraordinary was Bolsonaro selling abroad a virtual reality geared to legitimizing extractivist growth, with statements at the UN like these: “My government has the solemn commitment of protecting the environment” (UN Digital Library 2019), “Brazil is the leader in rainforest conservation” (UN Digital Library 2020), and “Human and financial resources were increased to make illegal deforestation stop” (UN Digital Library 2021). His administration’s active production of “pseudo-facts” and fake controversies served to undermine environmental knowledge and make up-front lies seem plausible (Rajão et al. 2022). As fire, illegal mining, and agricultural expansion consumed critical biomes at the UN’s Conference of the Parties (COP) talks in 2021 that Brazil would suddenly comply with multilateral promises was nothing short of farcical. A return to pre-Bolsonaro forms of governing neoextractivism and conservation might now be mobilized, but regional and global political economic realities ensure that the ecological contradiction remains central to what follows.

Methodologically, the article's background lies in the authors' long-standing interest and engagement in environmental governance, one of us a Brazilian scholar of the political ecology of conservation and the other a foreign researcher of socioenvironmental crisis and urban governance.<sup>2</sup> Although underpinned by (ethnographic) observation over fifteen years, here our specific materialist reading of posttruth politics draws on analysis of conservation and neextractive policies and data, including our own compendium of media reports on controversies over deforestation data from 2018 to 2022, and, importantly, historical texts on political and environmental change. Our theoretical deductions arise from comparison, intersection, and triangulation of these data with global scholarship on the political-ecological themes identified earlier. We extend theory here through a national case critical to global ecological well-being. Authoritarian populist governments' strong opposition to a change in socioenvironmental direction is of grave concern, not only for inequality and minority rights but for the wider context of the diversity of life on Earth.

The next section reviews existing work on the authoritarian populist turn, neoliberalism, environmental governance, and posttruth politics, and discusses the key importance of the ecological contradiction that forms the basis of our argument. We follow this with a historical exploration of the contradiction in the Brazilian context, especially through the postneoliberal years, that provided such fertile ground for the exclusionary, authoritarian turn. In the penultimate section we identify contours of posttruth politics and demonstrate its discontinuity with the technocratic neoliberal "solution" to extractivist expansion. Showing how the new strategy was inherently spatialized, we draw on media sources highlighting scientific controversies over deforestation data. We conclude by reasserting the argument and by noting the centrality of environmental governance in reacting to the hard-right turn in Brazil and beyond.

## Environmental Governance and Posttruth Politics

Correlations between the rise of a new wave of authoritarian populism, neoliberalism, posttruth politics, and environmental governance are, in part, well documented, including across recent journal special

issues (Bruff and Tansel 2019; McCarthy 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021; Menga 2022). From Mongolia to the Philippines, Hungary to Turkey, the United States to Honduras, and well beyond, authors document a noxious cocktail of violent land grabbing and displacement, plantation and mine expansion, gutting of environmental protection laws and agencies, denial of data on deforestation, and racist exhortations to national territory and the demonization of environment defenders as "state enemies." Just as denials of climate change or ecological degradation appear at the forefront of public discourse, environmental destroyers are now often placed as chief regulators of that very same degradation (McCarthy 2019).

Scholars typically employ authoritarian populism to indicate a form of hegemonic politics that mobilizes calls to "the people" while demobilizing popular and public sectors or (environmental) commons, with legitimation reliant on subversion of democratic institutions and constructed separation and hate around race, gender, ethnicity, and religion (S. Hall 1979; Scoones et al. 2018; McCarthy 2019). In parallel, "authoritarian neoliberalism" points to regimes' simultaneous twisting, not dismantling, of neoliberal governance, to remove constraints on capitalist accumulation (Bruff 2014; Saad-Filho 2021). What Koch and Perreault (2019) termed "resource nationalism" is a central underpinning discourse, in which regimes mobilize (putative) national liberation to validate large increases in natural resource extraction while masking their accompanying ecological and social degradations. Assaults on and elimination of nation-members who do not subscribe to such developmentalism, most clearly environmental activists and indigenous peoples, are, woefully, part and parcel. The sense of intensifying global pressure on shrinking biodiverse spaces and the politics governing them as capitalism advances, in what Büscher and Fletcher (2018) termed "green wars," is profound. Analyzing the rise of authoritarianism without transformations in environmental governance is not only inadequate, but also increasingly spurious.

The following subsections discuss these connections further, to associate posttruth politics with an inherently spatial process that conceals the contradiction between neextractivist capital and environmental protection and conservation. We view neoliberalism itself as a form of obfuscation of the contradiction, and, in turn, posttruth as a response

to neoliberalism's failure to sustain this obfuscation. We first discuss progressive neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism in the Latin American context, before connecting this to state territorialization of the extractivist–conservation contradiction. We go on to explore a shift to authoritarian neoliberalism and posttruth politics in light of that contradiction.

### Neoliberalism, (Neo)Extractivism and Conservation

Scholars widely locate the emergence of new-wave authoritarian populism and posttruth politics in the results (and ruins) of accelerated neoliberalization over the past thirty-plus years (Bruff 2014; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021). Apparent rejections of globalization in the national interest highlight a legacy of crises produced by iconically neoliberal policies associated in many Western countries with deindustrialization, economic inequality, and, in rural areas, a sense of delegitimization in the face of commodity market volatility and a political focus on urban areas (Scoones et al. 2018; Saad-Filho 2021). N. Fraser (2020) influentially cast this process in terms of the processual contradictions within neoliberal hegemony, ensuring that it undermines the resources it needs for its own reproduction, thereby “requiring” an authoritarian populist progression. Progressive neoliberalism, illustrated concretely for Fraser by the Clinton and Obama administrations in the United States, represented an uncomfortable alliance between “symbolic” finance capital (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood) and the recognition of new social movements (feminism, antiracism, multiculturalism, LGBTQ rights). Progressive neoliberalism institutionalized discourses of diversity, meritocracy, and empowerment within an overarching frame of capitalist growth and competition. Its perceived bias toward a “cosmopolitan urban elite” grated fundamentally with the postindustrial, rural, and working-class areas that overwhelmingly voted for Trump.

Turning to Latin America, reaction to two or more decades of Washington Consensus policies instilled significant hope in the nominally postneoliberal or “Pink Tide” governments that swept to power from the late 1990s (Ruckert, Macdonald, and Proulx 2017). Apparently contrary to progressive neoliberalism in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere—and notwithstanding significant differences between

them—Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and others mobilized nationalistic economic and cultural policies alongside Latin American integration, and introduced robust redistribution in contexts of extreme inequality (Ellner 2019). Minimum wage and pension reforms, conditional cash transfers (CCTs), and improvements to health and education accompanied efforts to re-create and liberalize constitutions and to institutionalize affirmative action, citizen participation in political decision-making, and the recognition of indigenous lands and cultures (Ellner 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021). Nonetheless, for Holst (2016), such policies represented “decolonial dreams” that had to contend with the ongoing realities of extractivism. Postneoliberalism represented stronger state control of extractive returns even as income tax reforms usually remained off the table, at least partly due to their unpalatability to elites within government coalitions.

The contradiction of progressively recognizing indigenous lands and cultures while agribusiness, mining, and oil extraction advanced on or next to these demarcations became a fragile and ultimately untenable balancing act (Ruckert, Macdonald, and Proulx 2017). Although environmental agendas gained more space in public debate, Pink Tide governments were unwilling or unable to confront the colonial centering of regional economies and redistributions in large-scale resource extraction (Alimonda 2015). For Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini (2016), this “extractive imperative” meant that antiextractivist positions could, in effect, be crafted as antipoor. In fact, Latin American political ecologists document a neoextractivist development agenda in the twenty-first century, in which extractive capital was empowered through redistributive policies, thereby increasing state dependency on volatile commodity finance markets (Gudynas 2016; Svampa 2019). In Brazil, neoextractivism emerged through a “reprimarization of the economy, characterized by dynamics of deindustrialization and expansion of the share of primary goods and semi-elaborated in the structure of foreign trade” (Acsehrad et al. 2021, 168).

The preceding discussion does much to dissipate formulaic characterizations of neoliberalism around free markets, privatization, and state decline, in favor of nuanced accounts of regulatory “rollouts” favoring corporate-friendly governance or judicially guaranteed market compliance, even in redistributive contexts (Peck and Theodore 2019). Neoliberalization is



moreover a processual state project shifting governance away from the protection of citizens' welfare toward enforcing (elite) market rule within the overall economization of nature and society (Bruff and Tansel 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021). Neoliberal governmentality points to increasing state vigilance over individual production and consumption, ensuring that all social relations well beyond "the economy" are reorganized in favor of capital growth (Schipper 2014).

If extractivism is central to neoliberalization, however, the latter analysis says less about the changing contours of environmental protection that extractive expansion necessitates. Long-standing work casts management of the boundary between resource exploitation and protection or conservation as a central tenet of state territorialization, involving the legitimation, or "rendering legible," of authority over property, use, and access rights (Peluso and Lund 2011; Loftus 2020). For some 150 years, fortress conservation presented a contradictory mirror to the depredations of extractive and industrial capital, a tacit admission that development undertaken in the name of progress and modernization must be accompanied by environmental protection to avoid threatening the very basis of social reproduction (Cronon 1996). The treatment of indigenous peoples is instructive here, violently displaced in programs of (neo)colonial extraction and protected area (PA) creation, while also then finding themselves conserved as constitutive of remaining "unspoiled" landscapes (Ulloa 2005; Igoe 2017).

The neoliberal approach, on the other hand, mystifies the ecological contradiction at the heart of capitalist territorialization by casting environmental protection, too, as a growth project through harnessing the economic value of conserved nature (Fletcher et al. 2019). Neoliberalism in effect represented an attempt to solve the contradiction while manifestly failing to do so. Shared responsibility pacts for PAs between states, corporations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities were intimately tied to neoliberalism's rollout, given that restrictive PAs under the fortress or "fences and fines" model were viewed as an obstacle to capitalist commodification (Igoe and Brockington 2007). Contrary to views of state withdrawal, the decade after 1985 was the zenith of state-led conservation efforts, with growth in myriad types of PAs with outsourced management led by

international NGOs (INGOs), private corporations, and indigenous nations (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008). These united constitutional promises surrounding indigenous land rights with reregulation via new corporate–state–INGO agreements nominally aimed at preserving wildlife (Vaccaro, Beltran, and Paquet 2013).

The difference was their financing via extractive or hydropower agglomerates under agreements for environmental "compensation," enclosing and monetizing conserved areas regardless of the effectiveness of existing land managers in actual protection alongside their livelihoods (Li 2007). New PAs were assessed and mapped to optimize specific species and funding opportunities from tourism or biodiversity and climate agreements (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008). This "evidence-based" model commanded scientific legitimacy on conservation, yet was often evoked by experts at great distance, in repeated disagreement with the perspectives of diverse populations dependent on forest-based livelihoods. This in effect represented a neoliberal environmentality, with the signifier *environment* manipulated into incentivization for the economization and exploitation of forms of planetary life (Fletcher 2020). Dependent on technocratic knowledge, neoliberal decision-making over species or territory conservation is typically made by state agencies and NGOs alongside scientific agencies relying heavily on satellite data, while excluding people living in and around PAs. Local populations are, generally, compensated only in specific economic terms within corporate and conservation enterprise interests (Diegues 2008; Büscher et al. 2012).

Conservation's neoliberalization fomented land appropriation frequently led by the same corporate extractivist actors charged with biodiversity's destruction (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; Büscher et al. 2012). This was a technocratic consensus rationalizing and commodifying territory for production and protection, with the latter based on profitability equal to that of extractivism. The drive for "natural capital" through payments for ecosystem services (PES) schemes like Reduced Emissions through Avoided Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), alongside other forms of tradable offsetting and compensation, presents the paradox that growth should be born out of the very degradations and extinctions conservation aimed to arrest, with burdens passed on to local communities (Fletcher et al. 2019; Skutsch and Turnhout 2020).

Neoliberal conservation promised a win–win for poorer countries for biodiversity, local people, conservation organizations and development, but instead justified “selling nature to save it” (McAfee 1999). The inevitable problem was that neoliberalism’s prescription for resolving the ecological contradiction depended on a fluctuating global marketplace, subject to fundamental instability and crisis (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016; Fletcher 2020).

### Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Posttruth Politics

The point that neoliberalism has always been coercive is perhaps most starkly evidenced by the Chicago Boys<sup>3</sup> coorchestration of the Pinochet dictatorship, with then junior Boy, Paulo Geddes, recruited as Bolsonaro’s finance minister from 2018 to 2022. Hayek’s sinister statement in Chile in 1973, “I prefer a liberal dictator to democratic government lacking liberalism,” accompanied his fundamental belief in extending economization into the hearts and minds of human populations (Marquand 2004). Yet after 2008, Bruff and Tansel (2019) identified a qualitative change from seeking populations’ consent to neoliberal behavior toward manipulating legal and administrative apparatuses “to both legitimize and shield [authoritarian governments] from political and social contestation” (239). Such manipulations include populists’ cooptation of (broadly leftist) framings opposing globalization or the power of elites and mainstream media to mask policies actually geared to maximizing capital accumulation, increasing poverty, and degrading the environmental basis of social reproduction. A realigned authoritarian neoliberalism clearly identified the enemy (globalization, rights, liberal elites, cultural Marxists, political correctness), as its leaders falsely positioned themselves outside the elite and promised action against environmentalism’s curtailment of extractivism for (redefined) national benefit (McCarthy 2019; N. Fraser 2020; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021).

Viewed as a specifically state project, it is easier to conceive of an “authoritarian fix” to problems associated with the extension of neoliberal hegemony (Bruff 2014). Eschewing military coups, neoliberal authoritarians use and manipulate formal democratic institutions to assume or maintain power (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021). Although strategic re- or decentralizations and intimidation of opponents often play a part, such manipulations are

more commonly achieved through science denial (COVID-19, climate change), promotion of “alternative facts,” and capitalizing on “underlying disillusionment with the establishment ... [with promises] calibrated to attract the support of marginalised or disenfranchised groups” (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021, 263). The COVID-19 pandemic is particularly instructive for linkage between neoliberalism and posttruth politics, given authoritarians’ avoidance of regulation casting the state as public protector in favor of attempts to sustain economic exchange by actively hiding and distracting from the risks (Saad-Filho 2021). For many people it is increasingly hard to distinguish truth from lies, whether on vaccinations, climate change, indigenous rights, or agribusiness expansion, and opposition efforts to delineate them as risk “undermining the leader against the will of the majority ... [pushing] a wedge between supporters and critics” (Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021, 264). Trying to “have our facts back” (Marres 2018) appears to strengthen the very authoritarian neoliberalism it seeks to counter.

Deutsch (2021) discussed the (notably odd) fact that most analyses of authoritarian (neoliberal) populism entirely avoid discussion of environmental governance, despite pervasive connections. Posttruth politics can be placed in the same box: As a form of governmental behavior—a strategic and opportunistic extension of apparatuses of discipline and control—it tends to be abstracted from its spatial-material effects and the resources sustaining the actors that employ it. Analysis of the construction of public facts, including through social media “digital populism” (Cesarino 2020), tells us how lies are consumed, disseminated, “liked,” and left unchallenged across families, friends, workplaces, and churches. It tells us less, though, about the policy agendas behind the electoral outcomes these manipulations enable; in effect the why and what of posttruth’s mode of concealment. Environmental scholarship instead turned inward, reflecting on disciplinary knowledge hierarchies (Angermuller 2018), possibilities to regain democratic space without losing a critical stance on science (Neimark et al. 2019), or on improving science communication to mitigate misinformation (Iyengar and Massey 2019).

Exceptions include Büscher (2021), who came closer to our analysis by outlining the intertwining of platform capitalism with productive “truths

about nature,” shared in virtual environments bounded in algorithms that favor circulation over actual content. Attempting to counter posttruth through the same social media that conditioned its rise, without questioning its role in the current stage of capitalism, risks the “unintended effect of reinforcing the structural dynamics responsible for environmental problems” in the first place (Büscher 2021, 18). Also with firmer political economic footings, Lee (2015) and Norgaard (2011) in different ways linked posttruth to socially organized denial and misinformation on environmental governance. Lee (2015) demonstrated how tackling climate change rapidly declined in political prioritization following the 2008 financial crisis, with truth claiming on the issue a matter of convenient discursive maneuvering. Studying Norway’s embeddedness in the fossil fuel economy, Norgaard (2001) detailed how climate change denial could include literal opposition to the science, but more routinely adds “interpretive” or “implicatory” twists, in which either the meaning of scientific facts and events or their political or moral implications are disputed, thus setting the agenda of public discussion and opinion (also Lees et al. 2020). Twisting the science conveniently shifted public debate away from the dropping of emissions caps toward a discursive focus on (strongly neoliberal) emissions trading schemes.

These analyses are important as they link neoliberalism itself to the obfuscation of environmental change by shifting political debate and action away from state responsibility to citizens, and toward market growth and capitalization. Neoliberalism presented a solution to the increasingly obvious ecological contradiction of (late) capitalism by displacing and distracting from environmental problems, pushing them out of sight of public discussion (Norgaard 2011, 221). Posttruth politics thus employs new obfuscatory strategies to authorize continued, unmitigated extractivism. The systematic denial and dismantling of the social legitimacy of scientific truth on environmental problems is imperative, as these strategies rely on creating confusion and false controversies to manipulate public opinion, whether relating to anti-indigenous “blood and soil” claims, climate change, or deforestation data (McCarthy 2019; Neimark et al. 2019; Cesarino 2020). Whereas the technocratic, neoliberal consensus resolved the extraction–conservation contradiction by rationalizing spaces for production and

protection, posttruth politics blurs the existence of the contradiction altogether. Posttruth politics as a form of environmental governance represents a specific denial of the contradiction between extractivism and conservation that the downfall of the existing neoliberal approach reveals. Authoritarian neoliberal populism must be viewed as embedded in ecological and spatial politics, and its employment of posttruth as a governmental strategy to generate deepening extraction and ignorance of degradation.

In Latin America, with the Pink Tide political consensus reoriented to the extractive imperative (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016), it is perhaps easier to understand how resource nationalism became so easily manipulated by authoritarian leaders (Koch and Perreault 2019). Their socially organized denial of extractivism’s extraordinary toll on nature and rural and indigenous peoples is enormously productive for land-owning, agribusiness, and urban financial elites, in and beyond the region. In post-2008 Latin America, maintaining social spending effectively required higher volumes of commodity extraction, which grated against the progressivism of indigenous land and cultural rights. The Latin American decolonial dream, where social responsibility and cultural recognition walked hand-in-hand with the profits of ecological destruction, in effect risked a swift return to colonial nightmare. As we go on to demonstrate, the upshot of economic crisis resulting from Brazil’s neoextractive dependencies and its inability to sustain the progressive neoliberal model necessitated a break with the conservation status quo.

## Extractivism and Neoliberal Conservation in Brazil

From 1985 to 2019, including what is generally considered the main period of neoliberal intensification, Brazil’s agricultural area expanded 2.6 times—especially soy, livestock, and sugar cane—while the country lost 87 million hectares in vegetation cover, almost two thirds of the land area of Western Europe (Mapbiomas Initiative 2020; see Figure 1). By 2020, cattle ranching covered 13 percent of the Brazilian Legal Amazon and was indicated as the main vector of deforestation (Mapbiomas Initiative 2020). Yet this vast expansion of resource extraction and decline in biodiverse life was precisely the period when most PAs were demarcated, a territorializing process that

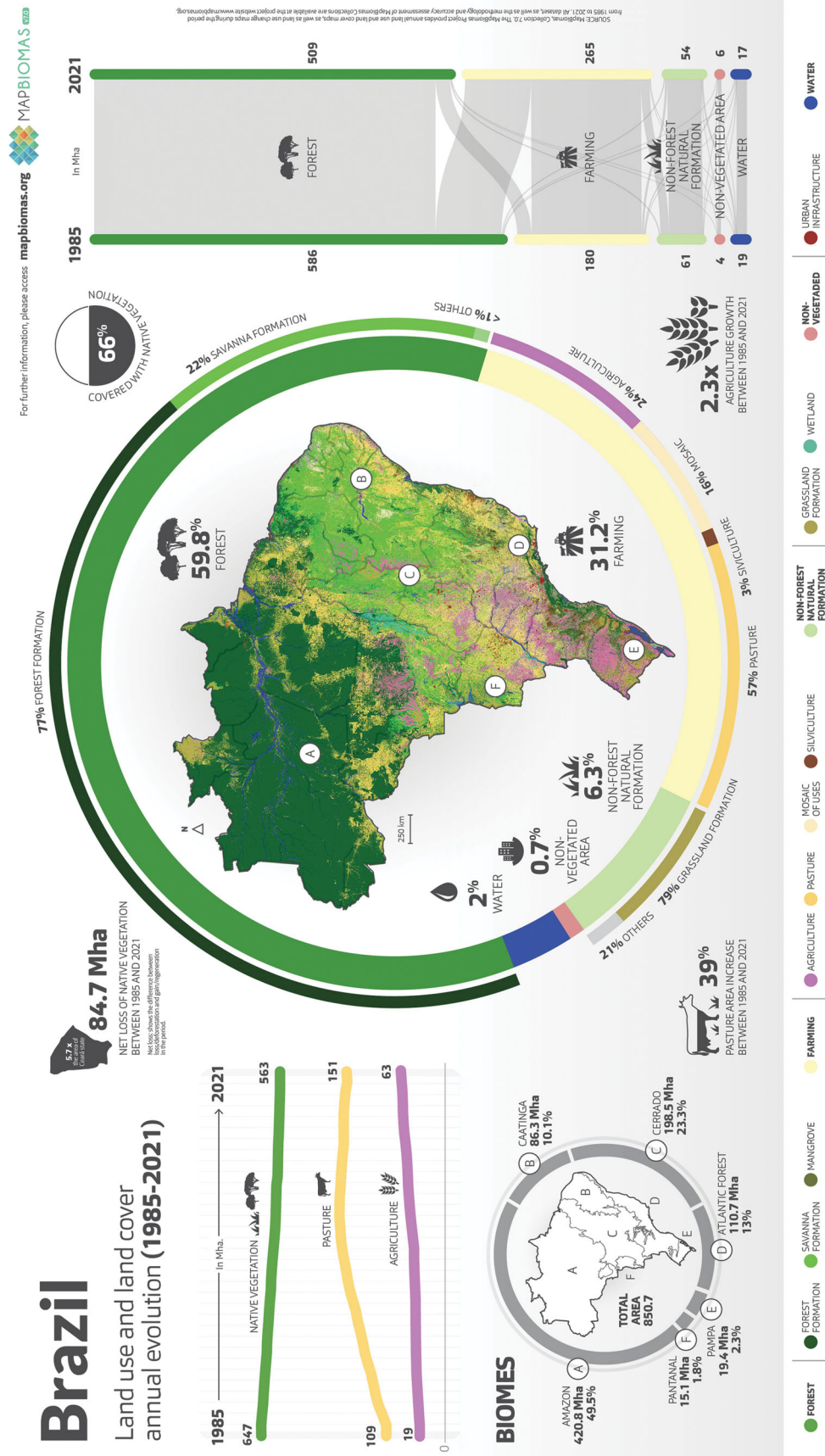


Figure 1. Annual evolution of land use, 1985–2019. Source: Mapbiomas Initiative (2022).



reached its zenith between 1997 and 2013 when a median of eighty-seven new PAs were created each year (Silva and Branchi 2021, using National Register of PA [CNUC] data). This section explores this ecological contradiction, echoing a global trend aligning neoliberal expansion with the enlargement of institutional and territorial conservation governance (Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008). We demonstrate how the contradiction, in the years leading to Bolsonaro's arrival, was constitutive of neoliberal governance, with PA growth used to justify the environmental degradations of extractive capitalist expansion.

The Pink Tide emerged in Brazil as an effort to subvert previous neoliberal policies that oversaw rapid growth without fundamentally affecting socioeconomic or political inequality. The Workers' Party (PT) arrived in power in 2003 on the back of rising popular support for extending meaningful citizenship to Brazil's working class, rural landless, and ethnically marginalized groups. Yet it also inherited and indeed sustained the existing globalized reality of manufacturing's concentration in cheaper production spaces, especially China, with (re)primaryization and deindustrialization across Latin America (Jenkins 2015; Brandão and Vogt 2021; Saad-Filho and Boffo 2021). President Lula's "letter to the people" infamously signaled his willingness to continue the macroeconomic policies of his predecessor, Cardoso, while his appointment of center-right figures in economics and finance reinforced the message that neoliberalization's elite benefits would not be affected (de Oliveira 2006). Pragmatic alliance building might explain these moves as much as ideological leaning—but the reality that elite economic power increased rapidly through the first two PT terms (2003–2011) is evidenced by growth in the share of national wealth by the top 5 percent income earners from 40 to 44 percent, and the number of Brazilian billionaires also jumped through the period (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada 2016).

The wealth originated largely in the commodity supercycle: threefold and tenfold increases in the respective prices of soy and iron ore, with a twentyfold growth in demand from China driving mass expansion of Brazilian (neo)extractivism (Jenkins 2015). Orthodox economists' interminable focus on the country's comparative advantages in land area and resource endowment brushed aside concerns over reprimaryization and neocolonialism. Yet, more saliently, this points us to the reductionism of modernization,

intent on the ideological eradication of ecology and culture from such nominally advantageous spaces. The Brazilian state, partnering with "national champion" corporations like Vale and Odebrecht, took an active role in appropriating greater quantities of nature for the progressive purpose of income redistribution (Saad-Filho and Boffo 2021), regardless of ensuing socioenvironmental conflicts within "primaryizing" regions and within leftist politics, which was increasingly divided vis-à-vis questions of social and environmental justice (Gudynas 2010). Although fissures were evident, the state's active role in reducing poverty and vulnerability through CCTs alongside economic development via major infrastructural projects lent neoextractivism clear societal legitimacy (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016; Acosta and Gudynas 2018). With commodity prices as high as social spending, and rising consumerism among the poor, the limitations of a strategy that allied the Left with agribusiness and mining was fundamentally obfuscated.

Soy farming had already expanded across swathes of former Atlantic forest in southern Brazil in the 1980s, but it was the extension of plantations to the Cerrado biome—the biodiverse savanna and low forest stretching across the country's center-north—from the mid-1990s and especially after 2003 that came to have a major effect on political economic processes. Some 50 percent of the Cerrado has now been lost in a mass land conversion that has also had a knock-on effect on neighboring Amazonia (Gibbs et al. 2015). Diverse woodland systems and livelihoods have been transformed into a "neo-nature" of monoculture genetically modified soy, eradicating up to 600 species per hectare and squeezing rural populations into migration to urban areas where they often draw on state cash transfers funded by soy exports (Rulli 2007; Oliveira and Hecht 2016).

As a "flex" crop, used locally and exported as whole beans, processed animal feed, and biofuels, soy's extension northward was led by Brazilian agglomerates Amaggi and Comigo, destabilizing the existing agribusiness monopoly by established U.S. and European "ABCD" giants: Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge, Cargill, and Dreyfus (Oliveira and Schneider 2016). Flexing soy encouraged foreign investment for bean crushing, transport, agricultural research, and secondary industries in pesticides, seeds, and food additives, and it also drove tariff reductions and banking reform. In twenty-first-century Brazil, soy's

expansion has underpinned a neoliberal legal-institutional rollout dedicated to rapid gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Neoliberalization was a distinctly political-ecological phenomenon: a vast land grab involving the expulsion of biodiversity, forest livelihoods, and possibilities for agro-ecological food futures.

Linkage between Cerrado conversion for soy and Amazonian conversion for pasture are at one level found in the vast cattle herds given soy-based meal when concentrated together prior to slaughter (Oliveira and Schneider 2016). At another level, competition for soy land grabs at the Amazon–Cerrado interface also displaced medium and smaller cattle ranchers, who consequently drove further into the rainforest (Barona et al. 2010). The decade after 1995 saw a (proportional) near halving of Brazil’s exports of processed soy, however, as neoliberalization propelled the removal of taxes on unprocessed beans and China ramped up its own crushing industry (Oliveira and Schneider 2016). Simultaneously, the lowering of tariffs led to a 50 percent increase in foreign ownership of the Brazilian crushing industry (Oliveira and Hecht 2016). In China, expansion of manufacturing to serve (especially) North American and European markets, as well as rocketing beef consumption and broader expansion of geopolitical power, certainly enlarged Brazilian state coffers. Yet, ultimately, the neoliberal reforms linked to Chinese market dominance created a situation in which sustaining a Brazilian crushing industry (with secondary industries in animal feeds and foodstuffs) demanded constant growth in livestock numbers. Under the PT, Brazil became the world’s largest beef producer, with JBS as its largest meatpacker. The coconstruction of the cattle–soy nexus with Brazil’s neoliberal rollout decimated large tracts of two critically important biomes to fulfill the profit surplus of the global corporate food regime.

This discussion tells us much about extractive commodity markets, but less about territorialization of the contradiction between neoextractivism and conservation detailed earlier. The safeguarding of natural, national, patrimony in Brazil accompanied the extension of extractivism since the late nineteenth century (Dean 1995; Diegues 2008). Fortress conservation spaces were made and unmade in quick succession under Brazil’s twentieth-century developmentalist regimes—a point that exemplifies the discursive role of conservation in hiding the widespread

removal of nature in the name of development. Emphasizing this further, Brazilian agribusiness frequently justifies agro-intensification by arguing that it spares land for conservation (Oliveira and Hecht 2016, 252). This is, of course, true if conserved spaces are only recognized as those legally bounded, a process that by extension enables the extractive destruction of (equally biodiverse) “unprotected” areas. Demarcating a small fraction of existent nature as saved has frequently represented the contradictory justification of its destruction elsewhere.

It is no coincidence that the expansion of the soy–beef nexus into the northern half of Brazil between 1980 and 2008 accompanied a simultaneous expansion in PAs and conservation infrastructure. Drummond (2014) detailed a complex matrix of PAs named as conservation units, legal reserves, permanent preservation areas, and sustainable use zones, alongside a marked increase in indigenous land titling, such that by 2020, 62 percent of remaining Amazonian forest lay within some form of PA designation (Mapbiomas Initiative 2020). Many initiatives certainly stemmed from struggles by indigenous, *quilombola* (maroon), and other traditional populations for social and environmental justice and the viability of forest-based livelihoods—a “heterodox spirit”, for J. A. Fraser et al. (2018)—feeding into wider national struggles for meaningful citizenship. Yet, although minority rights were central to the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, their 1990s alignment with the land demarcations of sustainable development as the purported solution to (neo)extractivist degradation exemplifies neoliberalism’s rollout, as it implicates the changing role of PAs vis-à-vis the extractive frontier within state territorialization (Brockington and Duffy 2010). Rendering territory and population legible for political control could be undertaken through legitimation for extractivist and conservation activities (Peluso and Lund 2011), a process of absorbing and aligning diverse areas and movements into a state driven largely by neoextractivist expansion, with constitutional rights now bringing “everyone” into a project of national growth.

Drawing parallels with progressive (rather than post) neoliberalism (N. Fraser 2020), neoliberal conservation offset and obfuscated socioenvironmental degradation alongside a discursive focus on rights, cultural equality, and environmental protection (Fletcher 2020). This is emphatically not to denigrate Constitution-era rights and community-based

participation—for the first time in Brazilian history they contemplated some marginalized populations—but moreover to analyze their cooptation into joint management agreements that advanced changing state and market roles in extractivist–conservation territorialization.

New demarcations emphasized PA corridors and networks, aiming to form integrated landscapes that reconciled conservation and extraction. Restrictive parks and biological reserves remained central to Brazilian environmental governance, but now accompanied a landscape ecology approach centered on connectivity. Rather than isolating forest fragments from their extractivist exterior, policy progressed toward PA “mosaics” with markets to enhance their protection (Sandroni and Carneiro 2016). From the late 1990s until around 2015, the approach formed a technocratic neoliberal consensus around “bioregional” conservation (Ferreira 2004). Just as the soy barons expanded northward, at the turn of the millennium major NGOs like Conservation International and WWF channeled funds into local NGOs and government agencies, bolstering policies like the National System of Conservation Units (Ayres et al. 2005; Drummond 2014).

The diversity of projects grew like never before, often designed to address the demands of populations in and around PAs, as well as so-called “leakage” due to neoextractivist encroachment. Schemes like REDD+, funded through the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, then the Amazon Fund after 2008, extended the economization of environmental protection by making it contingent on capital influxes from sovereign nations like Norway and Germany. In Amazonia, Proambiente and Bolsa Floresta rewarded or punished the behavior of local managers and landowners inside or outside forest reserves by offering CCTs or credit opportunities for those complying with environmental legislation (Gebara and Agrawal 2017). Such initiatives indeed often fed from local aspirations for environmental justice and at times manifested progressive outcomes. Yet the alignment of such movements with a PES frame of reference demonstrated a new form of technocratic state territorialization in which larger NGOs linked to corporate and governmental finance had the upper hand in decision-making and frequently concealed environmental conflict with the populations concerned (Büscher et al. 2012; Skutsch and Turnhout 2020). Likewise, 2008’s Sustainable Amazon Plan introduced

Ecological Economic Zoning to offset construction of soy extractive infrastructure like highways and ports, nominally protecting intact areas of Amazon forest yet simultaneously bringing them under the mantle of market value (Baletti 2012). Although the monocrop conversion of the Cerrado was largely ignored as the Amazon monopolized foreign attention, “sustainable soy” initiatives similarly greenwashed neoextractivist expansion by coopting NGOs into providing compensatory add-ons to agribusiness expansion (Baletti 2014). This effectively destabilized opposition by allowing conservation to function only within neoextractivist frames. Progressive neoliberalism as an obfuscatory discourse shifted environmentalism toward dependence on, rather than opposition to, neoextractivism.

The technocratic neoliberal consensus was at its core ambiguous: It acknowledged neoextractivism’s ecological contradiction by offsetting it through conservation territorialization. Amazonian deforestation fell to its lowest level for thirty years in 2008—although far from actually ceasing—and a relatively stable national politics implemented redistribution linked to the extractive imperative (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016). Apologists for the “marketplace transition” making conservation—and not just neoextractivism—profitable signaled the “end of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon” (Nepstad et al. 2009). Yet the fact incentivization schemes contradicted credits for soy biofuel, oil palm, or eucalyptus extraction from other government departments (A. Hall 2008) serves to illustrate the extraordinary economic minefield of the neoliberal rollout.

In reality, neoextractivism’s destruction of biodiversity was now compensated with nonsensical protection elsewhere: Logically, with funding derived from the same destructive enterprises, extraction must expand for conservation to simultaneously do so (Fletcher 2020). Neoliberal conservation’s denial of the ecological contradiction could be maintained as long as its technocratic consensus provided high commodity returns. The inevitable problem was that market growth imperatives led to calls for more infringement on conserved lands. Although pitting national progress and development against minority populations and environmental protection has long precedence in Brazil, authoritarian populism was now to employ a new discursive, posttruth mode of environmental governance.

## Authoritarian Neoliberalism, Deforestation Data, and Denial

Where there is indigenous land there is wealth beneath it. We have to change that.

—Jair Bolsonaro, April 2017 (Brasil Wire 2017)

Explanations for such a deeply abhorrent, racist character assuming Brazil's presidency in the 2018 elections typically focus on a squeezed middle class, the failures of PT industrial policy, social media manipulation (with support from U.S. Trump allies), a center-right anti-PT coup “gone wrong,” or on populist cries for “law and order” and “getting things done” (Saad-Filho and Boffo 2021; Singer 2020). Although all these paint colors combine on a complex canvas, they significantly underplay changing extractivist–conservation territorialization.

Declining soy and iron ore prices (Jenkins 2015; Brandão and Vogt 2021) significantly pressured the technocratic consensus. The contradiction between neoextractivism and conservation or protection, hidden within the progressive neoliberal compromise, fundamentally broke down in the years after 2010. Although South–South extractivist partnerships and infrastructural spending insulated growth and progressive spending from the immediate impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, Dilma Rousseff inherited a poisoned chalice of diminishing commodity returns that could not be thwarted indefinitely (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016; Saad-Filho and Boffo 2021). Struggling to fund cash transfers and other policies, Rousseff turned to alternative financial arrangements that opponents alleged were unconstitutional (Pahnke 2018). In crisis, belated 2014 austerity policies removed the PT's remaining credible advantage: that it could finance redistribution. Its awkward alliance with parties from the center and right including arch agribusiness figures like “chainsaw queen” Katia Abreu (Watts 2014) was revealed as functional only under conditions of commodity-generated prosperity. In 2016, using the pretexts of state-centered corruption and popular protest, Rousseff's erstwhile vice president, Michel Temer, forced her impeachment and instigated orthodox neoliberal reforms including privatizations, a twenty-year austerity package, labor market liberalization, antiprotest militarization, and environmental licensing downgrades as new enticements to *ruralistas* (Saad-Filho and Boffo 2021). In turn, these policies were deepened after 2019 under Bolsonaro.

The discursive basis for this new environmental governance regime was constructed long before Bolsonaro's rise, however. In 2008, senior scientists at EMBRAPA, Brazil's powerful state agricultural research institute, published a report arguing that the extension of indigenous PAs jeopardized Brazil's future by blocking agribusiness growth (Miranda et al. 2008). The Miranda report regurgitated the colonial trope that indigenous and other minority groups prevent national modernization by unproductively possessing land. Although echoing long-standing state and military designs on Amazonia (see Lemos and Roberts 2008; Salisbury et al. 2010), the reactionary trope was now reinstated in the policy domain as valid scientific truth. Miranda's group remained at the fringe of scientific opinion and the technocratic consensus on neoextractivism–conservation retained hegemony, orbiting around neoliberal PES schemes and satellite monitoring of deforestation (Carneiro and Sandroni 2018). Yet the “Miranda discourse” grew just as the technocratic consensus declined. The highly controversial 2012 Congressional amendment to the 1967 Forest Code, renaming illegally deforested areas as “consolidated agriculture,” cited Miranda et al. (2008) as legitimate scientific evidence to build policymakers' support (Drummond 2014). As neoliberalism's technocratic consensus had always enabled extractivism—precisely through the mirroring guise and controls of environmental protection—we can deduce that the aim of the scientists around Miranda was primarily political, to rid Brazil of a conservation consensus they viewed as anti-modern and antiunfettered extraction. Confirming the centrality of this change in environmental discourse toward populist posttruth politics, Bolsonaro named Miranda as his chief territorial number cruncher in 2019. The elevation of an overtly colonial, anti(bio)diverse and anti-indigenous position to key policy tenet suggests a break with the existing neoliberal consensus. Echoing Trump, Bolsonaro's populist authoritarianism targeted an illusory cosmopolitan leftist elite, crafting it as antinational and antirural. By mobilizing the extractive imperative for the good of the nation, he appealed to the right as well as to elements of the left (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016).

Bolsonaro's ascent signaled the rapid, violent dismantling of Brazil's existing environmental governance regime, with justice relegated to inconsequence under authoritarian neoliberal economic policy. Governmental discourse demonstrated “a narrative of destruction and repeated disregard for legal



frameworks” (ASCEMA 2020); environmental social movements, academics, and public servants were delegitimized and outright threatened; Federal Environment Ministry organs suffered 50 percent cuts, gutting PA monitoring and enforcement on illegal extraction and preventing land grabber prosecutions (Carvalho et al. 2019). The National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI), set up to support (land) rights, was placed under the anti-indigenous agribusiness figure Marcelo Xavier da Silva. State funding was withdrawn from environmental and minority protection NGOs, and further bills downgraded PAs for mining and commercial agriculture—acts attempting to legalize the illicit extraction already taking place. Influential market-based conservation initiatives like the Amazon Fund, leading REDD+ in Brazil, were terminated. The results were obvious: rapid increases in deforestation unseen in Brazil for thirty years, alongside frequent killings of indigenous and environmental leaders, illegal fire setting and land clearance, and an end to prosecutions for illegal timber and mineral extraction. Bolsonaro’s government represented nothing short of the authoritarian enforcement of biodiversity destruction, coded under blame on antiextractive others for a lack of national progress (McCarthy 2019).

If acting to change the existing extraction–conservation regime was key to the rise of posttruth politics, how did authoritarian populists evade fundamental challenges to the environmental costs in the context of global pressure? Authoritarian governance in Brazil, as elsewhere, generated new ways of denying the (neo)extractivist–conservation contradiction, to deal strategically with public opinion on the degradation of ecosystem and cultural diversity. Together, Bolsonaro, Vice President Mourão, Environment Minister Salles, and Miranda deployed a full-throttle assault on the centrality of “capital S” Science, a fundamentally political process of mystification and denial that we argue is constitutive of posttruth. For Rajão et al. (2022), their misuse of scientific credentials, discrediting of data, and creation of false controversies generated space for brazen lies and public confusion.

A key domain for such attacks was the production of controversies around deforestation data and forest fires, which reveal posttruth politics as a strategy to destabilize previous sources of social legitimacy around environmental decision-making. In 2019, the National Institute for Space Research (INPE), Brazil’s equivalent to NASA, which tracked deforestation rates since 1988, disseminated data on Amazonia from

the DETER<sup>4</sup> satellite system. The press duly broadcast an 88 percent growth in deforestation compared with 2018, rightly causing alarm. Bolsonaro responded publicly, “INPE’s data is a lie ... [the] people from INPE are psychotic” (Pitombo 2019). He further alleged that the influential scientist and INPE president Ricardo Galvão was persecuting his government “in the service of a big NGO” (Pitombo 2019). Galvão retorted in the *Estadão* newspaper that Bolsonaro had undertaken “cowardly and contemptuous actions” (Girardi 2019), comments that led to his summary dismissal. Deforestation occupied headlines in the following months, and global attention zoomed in on fires consuming significant tracts of forest in Pará and Acre states as ranchers took advantage of legal impunity and antienvironmentalist rhetoric (Biller and Douglas 2019). In September 2019 São Paulo’s sky turned gray, despite being 1,600 km from the nearest large fire, dragging urban elites into the debate. In response, Bolsonaro made the absurd claim that Leonardo Di Caprio and environmental NGOs were to blame for the fires as part of an international conspiracy against him (Deutsch 2021).

The 2019–2020 wet season saw deforestation drop (although remaining higher than previous wet seasons) and public concern shift toward COVID-19. The controversy returned however in June through August of 2020, with major new fires, including the loss of 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the Pantanal wetland, the most well-preserved biome in Brazil (INPE 2019). Although organized groups on WhatsApp (among other evidence) pointed to ranchers’ coordinated fire-setting in the Amazon, Pantanal, and Cerrado, Minister Salles responded by tweeting a picture of a *mico-leão-dourado*, a species endemic to the Atlantic rainforest, 2,000 km from the Amazon, to suggest that the latter biome was intact and public concern was unjustified. Addressing the Pantanal fires, Vice President Morão disseminated public doubt over their size: INPE’s data apparently required “adjusting” to become an “expression of truth,” because “heat spots” differ from fire (Gomes 2020). Morão then echoed Bolsonaro by claiming that INPE was working with NGOs and “other people” in a plot to undermine them—and Brazil itself—by damaging their place in international markets. Accusations of inflating deforestation also arose under earlier administrations, based around minor discrepancies over scientific method. Now, there was a wholesale discursive placement of environmental science within conspiracy.

If these behaviors amply indicate the interpretive and implicative twists of socially organized denial of scientific truth (Norgaard 2011; Lees et al. 2020), then they also echo a resource nationalism in which blame for the country's wider predicament is deflected onto internal and external (environmentalist) others (Koch and Perreault 2019). Morão stoked nationalist fears by claiming that leftist opposition within INPE was divulging negative data, and—illustrative of the institutionalization of posttruth politics—followed this by instructing legal allies and the Federal Police to investigate INPE on charges of “intellectual dishonesty” (Revista Forum 2020). The legal process compared INPE to “taxi drivers” protecting their livelihood against the “emergence of Uber,” a discourse designed to rile public opinion toward the individual market freedom that was then perceived to represent what Uber stood for, and thus guard against government regulation. Finalizing this show of sinister populism, Agriculture Minister Cristina declared in October 2020 that the solution for fires lay in scaling up livestock production (Calgaro and Resende 2020). In effect, neoliberalism's increasing state vigilance over economic production and growth was now rolled out through the imperative of extraction (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Fletcher 2020), but mediated through a new posttruth politics that publicly obfuscated and denied its extraordinary environmental fallout (Norgaard 2011; Neimark et al. 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021).

The end of 2021 produced more sobering evidence of Amazonian deforestation, with 13,000 km<sup>2</sup> cleared in twelve months, a 22 percent increase on the 2020 data and up some 60 percent since 2012 (INPE 2021). That this annual report, from the DETER system, was released shortly after COP 2021 demonstrated its purposeful delay by Bolsonaro, thus avoiding negative global headlines that would undermine economic growth built entirely around extractive exports (Prizibiszki 2021). At the COP itself, government representatives promised to uphold Brazil's Paris Agreement pledge to eliminate illegal deforestation by 2030 (Spigariol 2021), an absurd commitment when compared to reality. Comparative analysis between DETER and PRODES data by the *Instituto Socioambiental* in fact demonstrates that deforestation on indigenous Amazonian lands was substantially worse than the overall picture, with a 138 percent increase year on year (Instituto Socioambiental 2021).

Soberingly, the Xingu + network demonstrated a similar story with a 1,857 percent increase in deforestation from 2020–2021 on Ituna-Itatá land in Pará (ISA 2021), home to one of the last indigenous populations in voluntary isolation that depends on the forest to sustain their culture. Bolsonaro's administration actively dismantled juridical mechanisms safeguarding indigenous lands, and with usage protection decrees approaching expiration, miners and land grabbers, already present illegally, felt empowered to increase operations (Le Tourneau 2019). Even in the context of a new government from 2023, Brazil's Congress maintains a strong *ruralista* majority, making policy reversals difficult, and dependent on concessions elsewhere.

We view these controversies, played out in the rough and tumble of political and media debate, as indicative of a new wave of posttruth politics aimed at authoritarian neoliberal state territorialization, through a blurring or outright denial of capitalism's ecological contradiction (Peluso and Lund 2011; Arsel and Büscher 2012; McCarthy 2019; Fletcher 2020). This new typology of power and knowledge relations on conservation–extraction stretches the concept of truth to make environmental governance central to national interest and identity. Its actors undermine scientific institutions and the government departments informed by them to remove their public authority over the truth of environmental destruction. It is profoundly neoliberal because it advances state vigilance to force the reorganization of society in favor of capital growth (Bruff and Tansel 2019; Arsel, Adaman, and Saad-Filho 2021) and away from inclusive citizenship and public environmental commons (Marquand 2004; McCarthy 2019). This is what makes posttruth politics so insidious. Rather than a solely discursive, cultural-institutional issue, understanding posttruth as a spatial strategy reveals its reliance on actually existing territorial agricultural and mineral expansion and manipulating populist responses accordingly to neutralize opposition. Information and communication technologies transmit the public message that criticism is tantamount to national insurrection, disabling authoritarian populists' supposed moral challenge to a globalized liberal elitist system. The latter became a transcendent being in the social imaginary, a “powerful enemy” waiting to topple Bolsonaro—and one that will survive his absence, waiting for the opportunity to resume control.

Posttruth politics, built around upending the existent neoliberal consensus on conservation–extractivism, of course, stimulated reactions. Conservation

science focused on expressing outrage and jostled to reclaim the authority of its technocratic production of scientific facts. Academic initiatives alongside multiple NGOs improved public data sharing and fact checking, in an effort to “get back” their environmental facts (Marres 2018; Büscher 2021). Yet globally connected agribusiness and mining, and their underpinning institutions of financial capital, seized the opportunity presented by Bolsonaro. Extractivists never fully agreed with the environmental “limits” placed on them by neoliberal technocracy (de Freitas, Marston, and Bakker 2015) but accepted them based on ongoing growth from high commodity returns. Whereas some sectors became preoccupied with Brazil’s international image, especially over Bolsonaro’s response to the 2019 fires, the “rotten apples of Brazilian agribusiness” (Rajão et al. 2020) enjoyed the opportunity of a lifetime for an expansionist neoliberal agenda without limits. The sector was unscathed by the 2020 pandemic-related fall in GDP and benefited from a comparative advantage in agricultural exports generated by currency devaluation, recording 2 percent growth, with zero public discontent (IBGE 2020). As revenues flowed alongside a neoextractive imperative of lies and deceit—including at international fora like COP 2021—Brazil’s extractivist associations were content to accept environmental costs and have conservation policy more broadly consigned to the prevalent doubt of posttruth politics.

In short, deforestation data controversies reveal posttruth politics as a fundamentally spatial phenomenon that enables the market to assert greater control over (neo)extractivism, revolving around confusion, denial, outright lies, and violence against environmental defenders of all types. The permanent damage to natural, cultural—and Brazilian—landscapes can (in large part) not be reversed, even under present political shifts largely open to (previously silenced) environmental justice movements and new, related forms of opposition.

## Conclusion

The realities of a fundamental shift in neoliberal governance, driving neoextractivist expansion at the expense of conservation and indigenous peoples, represent “protected truths.” These truths are obfuscated, denied, and banished from public debate precisely because accepting them as reality is to accept that extractive capitalism is itself so

threatening as to be redundant. The technocratic consensus that sustained neoliberal conservation and development shifted to an authoritarian populist, posttruth politics that aggressively employs uncertainty to generate public support for (neo)extractivism, regardless of massive destruction across the agricultural and mining frontier. Rather than representing neoliberalism’s “unchecked social and environmental externalities” (Peck and Theodore 2019, 257), the environmental destruction was fundamentally internal, the material theater of neoliberalism’s “disavowed truth” (Swyngedouw 2019, 269). Posttruth politics, beyond a discursive program, remains an actual spatial-governmental strategy, critical to understanding the hard right turn in multiple locations, yet recurrently overshadowed in the literature.

The management of changing modes of extraction and conservation was central to neoliberalism’s rollout, as legal instrumentality over environmental exploitation, pollution, and conservation was critical to state reregulation, thus demonstrating neoliberalism’s constitutive “limits” (de Freitas, Marston, and Bakker 2015). Mitigating its worst effects through environmental compensation could sustain it as a viable development strategy. Although environmental justice movements called for deeper democratic, shared lived environments for all life, the technocratic consensus responded by rationally dividing territory for accumulation through both extractivism and protection. As the status quo of progressive neoliberalism flailed on the back of declining neoextractive returns, the ecological contradiction at its heart became untenable (Fletcher 2020). The upshot of Brazil’s crisis in extractivist dependency was a fundamental break with the existent conservation consensus (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016; Büscher and Fletcher 2020). State management of the distinction between extractivism and protection—one of its central roles—was no longer tenable under neoliberal growth imperatives. Obfuscation of the distinction ensued, through blood and soil, anti-indigenous claims to the nation, and systematic attacks on environmental scientific truth (McCarthy 2019).

Action to take back conserved land for narrowly defined national benefit—under Bolsonaro’s government as for his elite supporters today—is precisely this, the concealment of the increasingly obvious fact that continued developmentalism requires

nothing short of the state-authorized eradication of biocultural diversity. Further neoliberalization required a new mask to cover its disastrous consequences. The contradiction at neoliberal capitalism's heart—that endless extractive growth can proceed without concern for the environmental fallout—must be mystified or outright denied, with alternative voices ridiculed and repressed. A progressive administration, although certainly welcome after socioenvironmental turmoil, cannot wash over either reprimarization or hard-right, posttruth myth making, even as it attempts to revert to the neoliberal technocratic consensus.

An in-depth understanding of these connections is critical for recognizing alternatives. The U.S. experience shows that posttruth politics remains alive and well amidst a return to progressive neoliberalism, even if authoritarianism loses its institutional prerogative. Fake environmental controversy and uncertainty does not cease, and even less existing damage is reversed. A renewed progressivism must then recognize the socioenvironmental fractures of reprimarization and commodification. Addressing the contradiction between neoextractivism and conservation entails understanding—and attacking—the local–global drivers in supply chains and finance capital that profit from nature's destruction and supposed efforts to conserve it. “Slowing” socioenvironmental destruction after the Bolsonaro catastrophe remains depressingly inadequate. A convivial approach to conservation must dismantle the legitimacy of the technocratic consensus and reassert those historically marginalized as active protagonists with rights to restitution and reparation, in contrast to the tired rehashing of neoprotectionist and market-based approaches to nature's future (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). Policy programs offering viability for biodiverse life require “transformation beyond conservation” (Massarella et al. 2021) to chip away at the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism.

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## Notes

1. Usage of the term in Portuguese commonly means the sustainable small-scale extraction of nontimber forest products by traditional forest-dependent populations such as the Amazonian *seringueiros*, as part of wider struggles for environmental justice in Brazil. Here, we instead focus on the processes and degradations associated with extensive capitalist agricultural and mineral resource extraction.
2. The authors collaborated on the project “Towards Convivial Conservation: Governing Human-Wildlife Interactions in the Anthropocene,” supported by Norface, Belmont Forum, and FAPESP. Among other objectives, it examined how austerity politics affect conservation governance.
3. Named “Chicago Boys” by Milton Friedman, these were Latin American economics students financed by the U.S. government to study neoliberal doctrine in Chicago. Many Chilean students went on to work under General Pinochet.
4. DETER was designed to red-flag rapid governmental response on deforestation; the separate PRODES system measures deforestation over time.

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