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# Questioning common conceptualizations of the “Amazonian frontier”

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**Abstract** —The hypothesis supported by this paper is, in regional studies, that the common characterization of Amazonia as a frontier should be deeply revised. This territory has been part of the capitalist world system form more than five centuries and may be better be conceived and interpreted as a composition of enclave environments, economies and ecologies, whose relationships to external political and socio-economic powers is deep-rooted and far less fragile than the frontier usage implies. Methodologically, the analysis focuses on socio-territorial literature about Amazonia and about Amazonian territorial constructions highlighting those many factors that seem to contribute to the continued plausibility of the frontier notion. Principal results are related to the construction of a critique to the sense and fertility of the concept of ‘frontier’ in territorial planning and administration practices in contemporary Amazonian territories — *frontier; Amazonia; coexistence; socio-spatial processes; coloniality*.

**Resumen**—L’ipotesi sostenuta in questo articolo è che negli studi urbani e sociali l’immagine comune dell’Amazzonia come ‘frontiera’ dovrebbe essere radicalmente messa in discussione. Questa regione fa parte del sistema di scambi capitalistico da oltre cinque secoli e può essere meglio interpretata come una composizione di più ambienti, economie ed ecologie, le cui relazioni con poteri politici e socio-economici esterni sono molto meno fragili di quanto l’uso del concetto di frontiera implica. Metodologicamente, il discorso è costruito a partire da una rilettura critica degli studi socio-territoriali amazzonici ragionando su quei particolari elementi che insistono sull’utilizzo del concetto di frontiera. I risultati principali sono legati alla costruzione di una critica al senso alla fertilità del concetto frontiera nelle pratiche di governo e pianificazione territoriale nei territori amazzonici contemporanei — *frontiera; Amazzonia; coesistenza; processi socio-spaziali; colonialità*.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE FRONTIER CONCEPT

This text is an attempt to question common conceptualizations of the “Amazonian frontier” in regional studies. The Amazonian discourse is marked by many tensions, conflicts and rhetorics. In this complex field some pivotal ideas emerge that are specifically created and designed to shape socio-spatial as well as spatial policies. In many Amazonian studies the notion of *frontier* seems to be the organizing theme of environmental history, while the ecological-political approach is usually applied to the analysis of territorial disputes (Turner 1921; Ribeiro 1971; Anderson and O’Dowd 1999; Brunet-Jailly 2005; Pullan 2011).

Frontiers are generally defined as sparsely populated pe-

ripheral geographic areas compared to the political-economic centers in which demographic or accelerated technological processes are manifested. From a socio-economic point of view, a frontier is an area of abundant natural resources and land relative to labour and capital, but such abundance relies on distinct place constructions, political economies or development ideologies (Tsing 2005). Schmink and Wood (1992: 14) define frontiers as a power field characterized by resistance and resource contestation. Frontiers have been characterized as “pioneer fringe” (Bowman 1931) and the first wave of modernity that penetrate the coast of unexplored land. Amazonia, in any case, does not fall within this definition. Modernity has reached its shores for centuries, and Amazonians have reacted in so many ways that Amazonian space and society is a fragmented skirt of time frames. The definitions of frontiers in the Amazon have been linked to colonial, imperial forces and capitalist economies. All have caused the arrival and formation of several social groups that, as a whole,

have defined the long-term globalization process.

The Amazonian frontier first presented before expansionary European societies in the 16th century looks similar to what Wallerstein (1974) has referred to as an external arena, or perhaps more accurately a low-value external arena. Amazonia represented a frontier, but one whose integration into the dynamics of expropriation was marginal. It was not a frontier that particularly mattered. It was the World system, but did not present itself that way. It had little role to play either in terms of labour or in terms of highly desirable extractive resources, but it has periodically been inserted / re-inserted into the global trade since its Conquest (Hecht 2013; 2014). As other sources of key extractive / primary resources have disappeared (such as timber from previously cheaper sources in Southeast Asia and central Africa, or bauxite and iron ore located close to fluvial transport), Amazonia has been re-introduced as an alternative supplier (Browder and Godfrey 1997). Earlier, in the same way, the Amazonian rubber industry, abandoned in the face of Southeast Asian plantation competition, was revived (somehow) during World War II when Allied access to Asian supplies was restricted. The demographic collapse haphazard development of the Portuguese colony produced a fragmented social landscape. A condition easy to be interpreted as an institutional purpose by an outsider. But in view of the fact that the cardinal frontier was more a product of Conquest than an original condition, the unknown qualities of the region and its peoples – those elements that in part justify the frontier characterization – are too highly variable to sustain the adequacy of the term (Nugent 1990; Schmink and Charles Wood 1992).

In Amazonia there was not a single frontier similar to that of the USA but a plethora of ‘crystal frontiers’ (Fuentes 1995), developed through centuries linked to the extraction of different types of raw materials. Each ‘wave’ was based on new desires, knowledge, systems, technologies, forms of social organization and incorporation of new actors that interacted with groups that were already there (Pullan 2011; Little 2001). Each group had its own space and ecological production strategies. Flows and flows back are common phenomena in Amazonia. It is a sea more than a land. In these movements some social groups have disappeared, others have affirmed, fallen, fled. In Amazonia frontiers were not only open and closed, but they were constantly reopened and closed again. This is a perennial phenomenon marked by the arrival of new actors in search of new resources and with the consequent re-territorialization. A secular phenomenon which is more intense than ever nowadays (Schmink and Wood 1984; Little 2001).

### **THE FREQUENT NOTION OF AMAZONIA AS A PRISTINE SPACE AND THE EXPANSION OF THE “FRONTIER”**

In regional studies, the common characterization of the whole hydrographic basin of the Amazon river as a frontier should be deeply questioned. This territory has been part of the capitalist world system for more than five centuries and may be

better interpreted as an assemblage or composition of different socio-spatial enclave environments, whose relationships to external political powers are more deep-rooted than the frontier usage implies. The history of the Amazon is full of examples of moving subjects: nomadism, group migration, long-distance trade, explorations, forced displacement, colonization and labor migration (Hecht 2013, 2014; Nugent 2004).

In Amazonia several spatial production competing processes are superimposed and many social groups are involved in a constitution / reconstitution process, as well as in negotiations in a poorly-known biophysical context. The constant flow of subjects and resources inside and outside the border generates unstable dynamics, making the field of powers unpredictable and even chaotic. In regional studies, the equation of *frontier* and Amazonia has some of the obsessive qualities of a fixed idea (Schmink and Wood 1984, 1992; Little 2001; Pullan 2011). Its repeated invocation, at different scales, in many branches of academic inquiry on this territory reflects as much as an attitude towards a long marginalized territory (and its inhabitants) as a carefully thought-out model of regional disparity and uneven development. Amazonia and its inhabitants (especially *indígenas*) carry a particular symbolic weight that is paradoxically both central to on-going nation-building projects and, at the same time, suggestive of a remote exoticism. There is an expanded frontier metaphor that, while having real content, also contributes to a counterproductive mythologizing that ignores socio-spatial changes in colonial and post-colonial Amazonia. It is possible to affirm that this term works as a familiar device for distancing Amazonia from particular ‘development processes’ characterizing this region. In regional studies, dominated by developmentalist or ecological protection issues, where attention is typically focused on highly circumscribed object of analysis (a river or forest with high ecological values or a set of dispersed urban settlements or mining areas), the notion of frontier continues to maintain significant utility because of the seemingly sharp demarcation of discrete socio-spatial worlds and the consequent absence of unifying or different conceptual framework for Amazonian territories and societies (Jackson 1975; Overing 1981; Viveiros de Castro 1996). From this perspective as well, the continuous accommodation of what is regularly portrayed as an inexorable and sparsely provisioned natural realm is a constant reminder of the presence of an implacable frontier. From a socio-spatial perspective, frontiers have come and gone, and the degree to which the frontier concept is perspective-dependent in an ontological sense is overtaken by a more prosaic *cui bono* / material interest-group sense.

In terms of the extraction of primary resources, for instance, Amazonian frontiers have appeared, disappeared and reinvented over hundreds of years in response to shifts in global availability of prosaic resources. These kind of frontiers are less a matter of local cultures construction, although they no doubt impinge on many different cultural perspectives, than stipulations of global economic interests for which Amazonia provides certain strategic possibilities. Yet the widespread usage of the frontier metaphor in regional stud-

ies tends to enforce a generic notion of the term. One consequence of that usage is that the same term in reference to diverse phenomena obscures what has actually taken place in Amazonia in favor of fragmented perspectivism. Nevertheless many Amazonian existing indigenous populations may reflect diverse socio-cultural realities and, therefore, live within their own histories. There has been a transformative colonial history that has shaped, in still poorly understood ways, their contemporary conditions of existence. Yet the persistent frontier notion grants priority to spatial arrangements and dispositions as though these provided adequate mapping (Bryan 2012; Pinedo 2019).

A clear illustration of how the frontier/spatial perspective occludes the temporal one is provided in the growing literature on anthropogenic in Amazonian pre-history (Balée 1994). The continued force/plausibility of the frontier metaphor, however, is undeniable. Even in the recent past, since the inception of the Manta-Manaus corridor, for example, and with the extensively documented radical transformation of social and biological landscapes in the region, there has hardly been a lessening of the overall characterization of the “frontier green hell” (Martínez-Pinzón and Uriarte 2019; Slater 2002).<sup>1</sup>

This misalignment of a politically key notion of frontier (which underscores the importance of a spatial frontier to the viability of indigenous societies), and a methodological frontier (that is one that signifies the particular features of the dominant spatial mode of discourse), is reflected in the marginal position that non-indigenous, rural Amazonians (*campesinos*, *mestizos*, kinds of typological status rather than ‘cultures’) maintain (Gruzinski 2007; Stolcke 2008). They are not seen as being *on the frontier*, but as literally *constituting the frontier*, i.e., eroding the barriers between ‘intact’, atomized forest societies and a set of encroaching urban actors, forces and imageries (Larsen 2005). An analysis of the literature concerning Amazonian territorial constructions highlights many factors that seem to contribute to the continued plausibility of the frontier notion, although the major one is the insistent portrayal of Amazonia as a passive natural space acted upon, brought to life by non-Amazonians: *conquistadores*, missionaries, the state, foreign capital, NGOs. This active/passive contrast is concordant with modernization impetuses according to which Amazonia was to be ‘integrated’.

The naturalistic associations of Amazonia, widely familiar since the Victorian era, when, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Lost World* (1912) defined the image of the neotropical frontier, for popular consumptions, have long offered self-serving opportunities for bringing culture and civilization to the benighted. Within Ecuador and Peru in particular, the ambition for political hegemony in the Amazonian region has exploited the threat of other nations’ assault in ‘the frontier’.

**Finally, the ideological maintenance of a permanent Amazonian frontier has been useful for the point of view of a predatory state’s offers of free land and resources to interests willing to ‘colonize’ on behalf of the nation** (Foweraker 1981; Velho 1972; De Souza Martins 2002)(Brown et al. 1994). Bunker’s (1985) analysis of extractive activities describes the seeming functionality of the frontier concept as the expression of a dysfunctional state, and the more recent book by Balick and Posey (2006) illustrates that the ubiquity of the frontier concept offers little in terms of illustrating the trajectories within the intensified research climate of the past thirty years from the vantage point of a number of disciplines. These various frontier associations are well represented in literature, many seen as expressions of an overarching geophysical rationale in a region in which even the territorial referent is complicated by the uncertain relationships between water and land. An example is the contrast between *varzea*, a seasonal floodplain forest inundated by whitewater rivers, and *terra firme* or ‘firm earth’, i.e., a kind of rainforest that is not inundated by flooded rivers. These notions or connotations of frontier seem to take priority over more precise historical contextualization, but at the same time they harbor the implication of impeding, final defeat or breaching of the frontier boundaries. The arena in which that apocalyptic take is most realistic is with respect to indigenous people. Yet adherence to a deferred notion of the final breaching of the insulating frontier obscures the extent to which that frontier has already been breached. It is in this respect that the notion of *enclave* maintains the explanatory force of frontier, but also draws attention to the sequence of selective incorporations of the region. This is most marked in relation to some specific activities associated with particular Amazonian products, mainly extractive, but also agricultural and pastoral. A case in point would be the ‘gold rush’ in the 1980s (Cleary 1990), widely depicted as highly reminiscent of the frontier of California a century earlier, but with very specific localized efforts.

The conceptual, cultural frontiers that have been seen in Ecuador or Brazil from both the green hell (*inferno verde*) and *piranhalandia* of Amazonia have been repeatedly cloned. The late twentieth century has also seen such cloned frontiers in the successive appearance of the foodstuff frontier (Velho 1972), the cattle frontier (Foweraker 1981; Hecht and Cockburn 1989), and the soya frontier not to mention timber, iron, bauxite, gold, etc. These are ‘commodity frontiers’ that have arisen not because they represent newly discovered frontier-resources, but because they have achieved prominence because of the decline or exhaustion of analogous resources elsewhere in the tropical or semi-tropical world (e.g. declining timber resources in Central Africa and Southeast Asia).

The frontier discourse misrepresents the vulnerability of Amazonia by portraying these resources as intrinsic to discovery in the region as opposed to their availability as a function of comparative advantage and weak-non-existent regulation. If any frontier term is correct it is ‘frontier of legal non-enforcement’.

<sup>1</sup> *Green Hell* and *Eldorado* have constructed Amazonia as the place of the exceptional. The term *Green Hell* has been popularized by the the Brazilian writer Alberto Rangel, who described to the Amazon as a hostile jungle in a 1908 collection of stories entitled *Inferno Verde*. This image reappeared in a book on conservation by Goodland and Irwin titled *Amazon Jungle: Green Hell to Red Desert* published in 1975.

## CRITIQUE OF ROMANTICIST / NATURALISTIC USE

There is a strong association between the Amazonian frontier orthodoxy and arguments expressed in Meggers' *Amazonia: Man and Culture in a Counterfeit Paradise* (1971). In the first instance there is a similarity in regional characterization. Secondly, there is the implication of permanence of the frontier state of affairs. Thirdly, there is the implication that the characterization, whether frontier or false paradise, is an original condition. These three elements have been substantially modified since the publication of that book, but there is an implausibility in the position strongly expressed in replies to various revisionist suggestions. From within the cultural ecological strand within which Meggers herself is strongly positioned, there is much greater insight into the diversity of Amazonia subregions. In general, a strong case for greater heterogeneity and differentiation within the 'humid neo-tropical forest' designation 1993 can be made.

The permanence of the rigidities of 'counterfeit paradise' and its long tenure have both been queried by diverse kinds of work (demography, historiography, archaeology) on the region (e.g. Denevan 1972; Lathrap 1970; Heckenberger 2005; Porro 1996; Roosevelt 1989). One major topic to which attention is drawn in this work is the fact that many of the frontier aspects of the region are not natural givens, but are social products. Not least among these is the demographic collapse that took place in the very early phases of the construction of colonial society, such that the frontier aspects long assumed to be manifestations of an original condition in Amazonia may better reflect the thoroughness of the social and biological assault on the region and its peoples. In keeping with the frontier motif that dominates Amazonian historiography, the rubber industry is typically depicted as 'boom', an episodic event, yet while toward the end of the 19th century there was an intensification of the rubber trade (monumentalized in the Opera House in Manaus). The rubber industry actually lasted for about one hundred years. It brought the development of extensive commercial and transport links within the region with its significant urbanization and integration into advanced technological sectors of global economy, all this enabling the dispersion of many immigrants from other regions of Brazil (Becker 2013; Risério 2012).

What these and other examples illustrate is the frailty of an attempted pan-regional, adequate frontier characterization. Instead, they draw attention to the long-standing existence of a non-uniform social topography in which various kinds of societies are dominated in number and type by disenfranchised peasantries, much more identifiable with post-frontier societies although unrecognized as such in terms of innovation. Amazonia was already articulated as a frontier regardless of how it was perceived on the ground by 'frontier Amazonians'. In, particular, in the social studies literature focused on the analysis of non-indigenous Amazonians there has been an undeniable frontier aspect. This is well illustrated in the early work of Moran 1981, for example, and is also found in a literature derived from a sort of 'peasant strategies' approach

(Lisansky 1990). But the frontier in all such work co-exists with another kind of peasant society that shares little of that frontier characterization or orientation (see Harris 2000; Nugent 1993) where instead a historical rather than spatial dynamic seems to prevail.

## CONCLUSION

Among the consequences of an overly generous metaphorical reading of the frontier notion in Amazonia there is a systematic detracting of Amazonian societies (Nugent 2009; Hecht and Cockburn 1989). Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as *hidden* by the frontier, when maybe, it is possible to say they are *hiding from the frontier* in the sense that adjacency to white society strongly correlates with conflicts (Hess and Da Matta 1995). The frontier metaphor has aided in denying the historical depth of non-indigenous peoples and the integrity of the various *mestizo* societies of the area. Whereas indigenous are typically represented as, in principle, in harmony with the great Amazonian biosphere, peasants are typically regarded as invaders. Another untoward consequence of the overwhelming frontier characterization is the seemingly affinity Amazonia is projected as having for extractivist activities. Some examples are the advance of the soya industry as the most recent, and by many reckonings lethal, addition to extensive agro-pastoral, timber-felling, fishing and mining activities (Schmink et al. 2019; Espinosa 2013). The widely recorded and acknowledged illegality of much Amazonian industry is seen as a typical and hard to mitigate consequence of the region's frontier status. The active space of deregulation and weak legal enforcement is not intrinsic to Amazonia, but that impression is certainly reinforced by the regular invocation of frontier.

The dominance of frontier metaphors in part represents the success of some selective naturalistic readings of tropical socio-spatial realities. The contingencies of many aspects of social existence may become self-reproducing pathologies when territorial planning policies are premised on the notion that the role of the state is to 'tame' the frontier. Conditions – as in the case of the Manta-Manaus corridor program – that create frontiers often emerge when none existed beforehand. What has happened since has been the creation of many new forms of frontier, but these are far less the spatial interface of a marginal regional and encroaching state than specific enclave developments which, in their aftermath, produce residual frontiers, degraded bio-social spaces. A tradition of representing Amazonian peoples as frontier-occupiers or definers has the effect of defining them as contingent and largely subject to the backdrop against which they are cast. While there can be little disputing over the effects of various kinds of externalities in shaping the lives of modern Amazonians, the contingency of the frontier characterization is contradicted by the systematicity of the forces that have acted upon them since the colonial era. The relationship between colonizer and colonized has not been just a spatial one, and to summarize it as such – on the frontier – distorts what is actually known from the historical and ethnographic record.

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