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# Dispossessions in Bolsonaro's Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In 2020–2021 Brazil simultaneously experienced the far-right presidency of Jair Bolsonaro and the world's largest health crisis in a century. The Covid-19 pandemic struck the country deeply, killing about 690 thousand people by late 2022. They were also years of increased pressure by capital on peasants and indigenous people, targets of the violence with which capital, ever since its dawn, has wielded to advance over spaces that serve the subsistence of immediate producers. In this period, the Brazilian state continued to comply with decades-old demands from neoliberal ideology for privatizations and the dismantling of protections for workers and the poor in general. These phenomena, when articulated by theory inspired by the Marxian concept of primitive accumulation, suggest that the Bolsonaro administration and its class allies used the pandemic as a political opportunity for dispossessing policies. The article discusses this based on concepts that distinguish dispossessions that serve capital expansion from those that do not. The first group includes processes that lead to proletarianization of immediate producers in addition to the capitalization or commodification of hitherto means of subsistence. Among dispossessions that do not expand capital are those that involve the simple redistribution of surpluses or means of production. The paper contributes to the literature on dispossession by analyzing concrete manifestations of it, drawing on a conceptual framework that distinguishes dispossession types that have been conflated in much current research.

## 1. Introduction

Expropriations, evictions, and enclosures throughout the world have come to the forefront of academic and public debates. Events resembling those that occurred in Europe at the dawn of capitalism keep reproducing at both the center and periphery of the world-system. Examples can be traced from India, where peasants have been displaced to make room for industrial, infrastructural, or real estate projects (Levien, 2011, 2013; Roy, 2001), to Egypt or Senegal, where fisherfolk have been displaced by industrial fishing (Chen-Zion, 2022; Malm & Esmailian, 2012). In Brazil, Britain, Korea, and South Africa, urban residents were evicted to make room for construction projects related to events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games (Bin, 2017; Davis, 2011; Newton, 2009; Raco & Tunney, 2010). In Bolivia and Lao PDR, peasants facing loss of land and water due to mining and land-based investment have been forced to leave their communities in search of work (Nanhthavong et al., 2022; Perreault, 2013).

In this context, scholars have claimed that capital's inaugural processes are not restricted to a distant past such as "the pre-history of capital" delimited by Karl Marx (1890/1990, p. 875) or to an outer locus such as the "non-capitalist civilization" distinguished by Rosa Luxemburg (1913/2003, p. 434). Some analysts maintain that the system has reached a phase of new forms of primitive accumulation, while others believe primitive accumulation continually reappears or has never ceased to exist given that it is necessary to, and thus coexisting with, late capitalism (Harvey, 2014; Perelman, 1984; Sassen, 2010). The enclosure of ideas and knowledge and their transformation into commodities is paradigmatic of such a movement (Boyle, 2003, 2008; Welsh, 2020, 2021). In this vein, primitive accumulation and enclosure could be used, Massimo De Angelis (2007, p. 271) claims, "as interchangeable theoretical terms." For him, rights and entitlements universally provided by the welfare state, for example, are defined as a sort of "new commons," which are thus subject to "new types and modes of enclosure" (De Angelis, 2007, pp. 145–146).

Yet equating enclosures with primitive accumulation creates a major problem for theory. It ignores that primitive accumulation took place in a global context in which capitalism did not yet exist (Nichols, 2015). Furthermore, enclosures are transhistorical phenomena—they can be

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found at the transition from feudalism to capitalism and in the internal functioning of capitalism itself—while primitive accumulation is an historical concept that pertains only to the dawn of capitalism (Zarembka, 2002). Another flaw in current discussion is the insufficient attention given to whether dispossession contributes or not to capital accumulation. Even when it may have contributed, most analyses do not clearly demonstrate how this occurred. For some, the simple existence of dispossession seems to be enough to associate it with accumulation. Studying a historically and spatially delimited case can contribute to filling in these theoretical gaps. To do so, I examine Bolsonaro's Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic.

By late 2022, the pandemic had caused about 690 thousand deaths, one of the world's highest amounts relative to population size (Rodrigues, 2022). Médecins Sans Frontières affirmed in April 2021 that authorities' "lack of political will to adequately respond to the pandemic" was "driv[ing] Brazil to humanitarian catastrophe" (MSF, 2021). Upon analyzing official measures since the outbreak, in May 2021 the Center for Studies and Research in Sanitary Law of the University of São Paulo identified specific "federal government action to support the broad dissemination of the virus in national territory" (Cepedisa, 2021, p. 19). In October 2021, a Brazilian Senate commission of inquiry requested the indictment of nearly 80 people—high-ranking government officials, congresspersons, businessmen, doctors, and military officers—for crimes related to the pandemic. Among them was President Bolsonaro, accused of causing an epidemic resulting in death, violations of preventive sanitary measures, and crimes against humanity. Seven ministers or former ministers of his cabinet, including the then incumbent minister of health and his predecessor, were also accused of some of these crimes (Rezende et al., 2021).

During the pandemic the Bolsonaro administration implemented measures that had objectives similar to primitive accumulation. Some of them sought to convert means of subsistence into commodities or into means of production, and to convert immediate producers—peasants, for example—into proletarians, movements that allow capital to expand. Other dispossessions were only redistributive of means of production or surpluses, which do not lead to the expansion of capital. In various degrees and formats, both types of dispossessions—redistributive and capital-expanding—were advanced during the pandemic. Even if one focuses on the government's omissions towards Covid-19, it is a fact that "while neglect might not be the process of change itself, it paves the way for dispossession" (Bastos Lima & Kmoch, 2021, p. 12). The simultaneity of the events mentioned suggest a purposefulness that indicates that exclusionary regimes like Bolsonaro's were not merely dysfunctional when responding to the pandemic (cf. Evans, 2020a; cf. Saad-Filho, 2020).

The objective of this study is to develop the argument that the Bolsonaro administration and its class allies used the Covid-19 pandemic as a political opportunity and the state as an authoritarian apparatus for advancing dispossessions. I begin the study by distinguishing dispossessions that serve the expansion of capital from those that do not. This is the goal of the next section, where I synthesize the conceptual framework used to guide the analyses of concrete dispossessions. Considering both the case of Brazil under the far-right Bolsonaro presidency and the pandemic context, the third section examines some exemplary redistributive dispossessions. In the same section I analyze capitalizing, commodifying, and proletarianizing dispossessions, which all lead to the expansion of capital. The paper's main findings and conceptual contributions are discussed in the fourth section, which precedes the conclusion. The study contributes to the literature on dispossession by analyzing concrete manifestations of it, drawing on a conceptual framework that distinguishes dispossession types that have been conflated in much current research.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives on dispossession[1]

As mentioned, the existence of expropriations, evictions, or enclosures seems to suffice for some analyses to associate current dispossessions with capitalist accumulation. This is the case of David Harvey's (2003, p. 153) well-known "accumulation by dispossession," which in his words has "become the dominant form of accumulation relative to expanded reproduction." Yet this is a logical impossibility, since no value can be distributed without first being produced (Fine, 2001; Mandel, 1990). Harvey's imprecisions are also noticeable in the four main elements he uses to illustrate his concept: privatization, financialization, management and manipulation of crises, and state redistributions (Harvey, 2006). Harvey does not say why one should distinguish between dispossessions brought about by financialization and those by the handling of crises, which are today frequently interrelated with each other. Furthermore, financialization or the management of crises can involve state redistributions, and the latter can be brought about by privatization.

The fact that primitive accumulation-like dispossessions are still ongoing does not indicate a retrogression in capitalism. Contemporary capitalism depends on expropriations and production of new capitalist spaces to surmount barriers to accumulation and enlarge the social basis of the mode of production (Fontes, 2010; Gonçalves & Costa, 2020). Thus, dispossessions quite similar to those of the dawn of capitalism continue to occur, as when peasants are evicted from their land to make room for expansion of capitalist production (Bin, 2021). Fontes (2010, pp. 44, 55) refers to this as "primary expropriation," which goes along with "secondary expropriations" that have targeted, inter alia, public services, social entitlements, and labor rights. These "secondary expropriations" bring about new forms of expanding the availability of labor-power and new sectors for extraction of surplus-value (Fontes, 2010, p. 54).

Both the acceleration of primary expropriation and the inauguration of secondary forms are signs of neoliberalism. In this context, contemporary dispossessions have served to counteract falling rates of profit by pushing down labor costs—the Marxian variable capital ($v$)—which includes the so-called social wage. Because the latter is granted through public policies, the welfare state has been the main target of neoliberals, whose origins go back to the accumulation crises of the 1970s. Neoliberalism and the dispossessions it promotes have also served to check falling profit rates by pushing down the costs of constant capital ($c$), that is, of means of production. Such dispossessions, however, can also simply redistribute surpluses, and this is why dispossession cannot be equated to accumulation of capital. It may simply indicate its centralization, that is, a "fusion of different capitals under a single common command" (Mandel, 1978, p. 592).

A second theoretical distinction to be made in the functioning of historical capitalism is between dispossession and exploitation. The latter is the social relation through which capital accumulates, while dispossession is a means—although not the only or the main one—for the expansion of the scale of accumulation. This distinction is present in Marx's own study of primitive accumulation, which "takes as its guiding thread precisely the elements which were distinguished by the analysis of the capitalist structure" (Balibar, 1970/2009, p. 313). These elements are those brought about by the "separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour" (Marx, 1890/1990, p. 874). This means that producers at the time could no longer work for themselves and therefore must work for others, which in capitalism implies labor exploitation.

Primitive accumulation was thus the social process through which the capitalist mode of production had its earliest and foundational rounds of both proletarianization and capitalization. They respectively

[1] This section is a shortened version of a discussion I developed elsewhere (Bin, 2018).

turned immediate producers into wage-dependent producers and means of production that were hitherto used for subsistence into capital. Examining the Marxian rate of profit ($s \div [c + v]$), one notices that primitive accumulation was the social relation that created both constant capital ($c$) and variable capital ($v$), making them available to capitalists for the extraction of surplus-value ($s$). The distinction between dispossession and exploitation is also apparent in this formula. While exploitation impacts the numerator ($s$), dispossessions can impact the formula's denominator, namely the costs of either constant capital ($c$) or variable capital ($v$)—although some dispossessions can have no impact on capital whatsoever, as we shall see.

Drawing on these distinctions, in another study (Bin, 2018) I developed some theoretical categories of dispossession that consider the different forms in which they relate, contribute, or even do not contribute to capital accumulation. The first concept is redistributive dispossession, which refers to dispossessions that do not create any condition for the expansion of the production of surplus-value. It involves nothing but the redistribution of surpluses or means of production, without turning any of them into capital. In short, redistributive dispossession is "an appropriation of surpluses that has no impact on capitalization, proletarianization or commodification. Translated into the Marxist formula for the profit rate, [it] increases neither constant capital ($c$) nor variable capital ($v$)" (Bin, 2018, p. 82). Logically, redistributive dispossession may entail an increase of individual capitalists' profits and stock of capital, but this is not reproduced at the macroeconomic level. For expansion of capital to occur, the subsumption of labor to capital must be established on an expanded scale.

A clear example of redistributive dispossession is privatization, which David Harvey (2003, p. 157) considers "the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession." One of Harvey's inaccuracies here is to treat state-owned assets as if they were in themselves a commons. However, there are countless situations in which assets and services of the state are deployed in the general process of capital accumulation, or even operated under the capitalistic logic itself. More importantly, a simple transfer of ownership by no means leads to the expansion of capital. In sum, "accumulation of capital is [the] increase of proletarian labor with its associated constant capital" (Zarembka, 2000, p. 223). Yet neither is brought about by privatization per se. For accumulation to expand, both labor-power and means of production must also expand. Capital can expand through either proletarianization and capitalization combined or proletarianization and commodification combined.

This leads to the two other concepts I have developed to address contemporary dispossessions and their potential impacts on accumulation. One is capitalizing dispossession, which in addition to proletarianization involves capitalization, that is, the transformation of means of non-capitalist production into capital. The other concept is commodifying dispossession, through which means of subsistence are commodified. It is true that a commodity is capital, nevertheless, commodification is distinguished from capitalization in the sense that the latter is the process through which means of subsistence are turned into means of production of commodities. Another distinction is that while capitalizing dispossession involves eviction, commodifying dispossession does not. Nonetheless, both commodifying and capitalizing dispossessions involve proletarianization, which is a condition for capital to expand.

Proletarianization is the conversion of immediate producers into wage-dependent producers. In the case of capitalizing dispossession, it occurs, for example, when immediate producers are evicted from the location where they had been producing for themselves. They are then compelled to join the workforce, either as employees or as part of the reserve army of labor-power. In commodifying dispossession, proletarianization is brought about by denying immediate producers free access to means of subsistence—instead of by evicting them as in capitalization. One example is the transformation of public into private services, which is increasingly occurring in sectors like healthcare, water supply, or social security. Thus, in addition to the goal of reducing labor costs—considering also the so-called social wage in these costs—there is a mercantile motivation in this type of dispossession. For instance, the less the state funds healthcare or social security, the greater the potential growth in private health insurance or pension funds.

## 3. Dispossessions during the pandemic: The Brazilian case

This study seeks to articulate the abstract and concrete dimensions of dispossession by means of an initially simple method. Relying on Marxian theory of the internal logic of capital, the paper casts light on contemporary dispossessions to explain how they relate to accumulation. By so doing, I return to the fundamental theoretical notion that capital accumulates via labor exploitation; I also turn to the not always elementary notion that capitalist labor exploitation may or may not expand with dispossession. Thus, the study's first methodological resource is to develop a conceptual line between dispossession and accumulation, which are distinct phenomena, although historically connected. The paper then analyses concrete examples to discuss and develop theory, which means that data is not intended to generalizations of a supposed dominance of dispossession. Nonetheless, dispossessions continue to occur and are sufficiently variegated to deserve more accurate concepts. The method thus draws on an exchange between data and existing theory to reconstruct this theory (Burawoy, 1991, 2009).

The distinctions made in section 2 are normally more easily perceptible through conceptual abstractions than in immediate historical manifestations. Redistribution, capitalization, commodification, or proletarianization do not necessarily occur in isolation and are not always empirically distinguishable from each other. They can all simultaneously be part of the same historical phenomenon that must nevertheless be analyzed in its specificities through concepts that indicate the implication that each kind of dispossession has for capital reproduction. In sum, "conceptual apparatuses are historically specific" (Emigh, 2004, p. 189). This is what one will notice in the following four subsections, where the historical data is disentangled by theory. Thus, this paper seeks to develop theoretical generalizations by analyzing a concrete case. This exercise can profit from a case like the intensification of Bolsonaro's exclusionary politics, which far from singular is part of a global pattern of political change (Evans, 2020b).

The relevant evidence was collected from official statistics and documents, legislation, press reports, and other documents issued by organizations that study agrarian, indigenous, environmental, health, and labor issues. The historical focus of the investigation is the 2020–2021 period, when the most severe phase of the Covid-19 pandemic hit Brazil and the country was under Bolsonaro's rule. The pandemic is not the object of analytical concern, but is considered as the social context that I propose was functional for the deepening of pro-dispossession political measures. This may raise a concern about whether the pandemic was used as a political opportunity or just coincided in time with the advance of an agenda that could have been pursued independent of the pandemic. Yet the evidence I rely on to illustrate the case was particularly striking in the two years following the outbreak as we shall see.

### 3.1. Redistributive dispossessions

As mentioned, privatization is a straightforward example of redistributive dispossession. Despite the Bolsonaro administration's commitment to neoliberal credo, it was a bit difficult to locate privatizations during the pandemic or even during Bolsonaro's term (2019–2022). To the deception of the ruling classes that backed his election, the examples were not as numerous as they had hoped for.

Bolsonaro was not as much an enthusiast of privatization as had been Presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) or Michel Temer (2016–2018).[2] Bolsonaro's minister of the economy—a Chicago-trained economist and former banker—was charged with efforts to sell state assets, but he issued more bravado than concrete measures. At the beginning of the Bolsonaro administration the minister said that he planned to sell all the federal state-owned companies to collect some US $310 billion, but a year and a half later only 18 of the 614 companies were included in the National Destatization Plan (Wiziack, 2020), the first legal measure needed to sell them.[3]

Under Bolsonaro, the main privatization was that of Eletrobras, the country's largest electricity generation company. It was carried out through a share offering set to dilute the government's stake instead of through a public auction used in most previous privatizations. In an auction there is normally a premium over the minimum bid price, which indicates a possible magnitude of redistribution of surpluses. Yet the case of Eletrobras had contradictory signs: on one hand, the offering price per share was quite similar to the closing price on the eve of the deal; on the other hand, the demand for shares in the company, US$12.2 billion, was far higher than the US$6.9 billion raised in proceeds (Filgueiras & Tecchio, 2022). The first is a sign that there was no significant dispossession, while the excess demand indicates—just as an auction premium normally does—how much the government may have depreciated the offering price in relation to the company's profit potential. Yet any dispossession that may have occurred was only redistributive because no new capital was created and no new labor-power was added to the economy.

Among the few other privatizations that Bolsonaro was able to undertake, some reveal more clear evidence of redistribution through price mechanisms. On April 2021, the government auctioned the rights to operate 22 airports for which it took in US$590 million vis-à-vis the US $33 million that it established as the minimum bid price (Hirata, 2021). This premium of about 1,680 % indicates how much of a redistribution there may have been to the benefit of the purchasers. It indicates how much the government may have depreciated sales prices in relation to the potential profits from the operations of these airports. This was one of the evaluations issued at the time by specialists from the sector and even by the government. For the latter, in the words of the incumbent minister of infrastructure, "the investments forecasted [were] more important than the auction premium" (Martínez-Vargas, 2021, p. 19). This declaration appears to reveal a concern for capital expansion vis-à-vis redistribution, but this is a question for future evaluation. It differs from the concreteness of the auction premium, whose occurrence suggests an already materialized redistribution.

Redistributive dispossession through pricing mechanisms also occurred in the sale of Brazil's second largest oil refinery, then held by the state-owned petroleum company Petrobras. Since the ouster of the Rousseff government, Petrobras had been alienating assets alleging objectives such as debt reduction and the search for investments with greater financial return. In early 2021, when the second large wave of Covid-19 began in Brazil, Petrobras announced the sale of the Refinaria Landulpho Alves to the Mubadala Investment Company, a sovereign investor of the Abu Dhabi government. The price of the deal was US$1.6 billion, while evaluations of the refinery ranged from US$2.5 billion, made by the BTG Pactual Bank, to US$3 billion, by the Institute of Strategic Studies of Oil, Natural Gas, and Biofuels, a think tank associated to the Single Federation of Petroleum Workers union. In mid-2020 Petrobras itself estimated the fair value of the refinery at about US$3 billion (Nunes, 2021).

Redistribution of surpluses appeared with particular clarity through what Marx called interest-bearing capital. At the Covid-19 outbreak the government announced its intention to create emergency aid composed of three monthly installments equivalent to some US$40 each aimed at an estimated 15 to 20 million self-employed workers who were expected to lose income due to the pandemic (Ribeiro et al., 2020). Shortly afterwards, the Congress initially approved three monthly installments of about US$120—equivalent to 57 % of the national minimum wage—for low-income workers with no formal employment ties (Brasil, 2020d). Between April and August 2020 nearly 68 million people received the benefit, which was extended until December and paid at half of the original value to 57 million beneficiaries. The amounts declined in 2021 and after an interruption of three months nearly 39 million people received an average of US$45 between April and October, when the program was terminated (Brasil, 2022). But the same assistance that helped workers face the pandemic, also served to dispossess them afterwards.

In Brazil, as elsewhere, people used portions of the cash transfers to pay off loans in default and take larger and longer-term new ones (Gonçalves & Lavinas, 2022; Lavinas et al., 2022). Between March 2020 and December 2021, household debt rose from 41.7 % to 49.7 % of annual income, and interest payments rose from 7.8 % to 8.2 % of available income, while real average labor income fell about 9.6 % (Fig. 1). In Brazil, the pandemic appears to have deepened the worldwide pattern of financialization through which modern rentiers have been able to expropriate surpluses due to the combination of stagnant wages and workers' increasing dependence on borrowing to meet material needs (Lapavitsas, 2011, 2013; Santos, 2013). This dispossession was simply redistributive because interest is "nothing but a part of the … surplus-value" (Marx, 1894/1991, p. 493). It does not arise from the separation between labor-power and means of production, but from the circumstance in which not only functioning capitalists but also loan capitalists have command over money (Hilferding, 1910/2006).

### 3.2. *Capitalizing dispossessions*

In his inaugural addresses upon being sworn in as president, Bolsonaro stated that "no society develops without respect for [the] precepts" of the motto on the Brazilian flag, "order and progress," and vowed that "our concern will be for the safety of good people and the guarantee of the right to property and legitimate defense" (Folha de S.Paulo, 2019, pp. A8, A9). Effects of his bellicosity did not take long to arrive. Possessory invasions, illegal exploration of resources, and damage to indigenous lands, which totaled 109 cases in 2018, soared to 256 in 2019—the first year of Bolsonaro's term—263 in 2020, and 305 in 2021 (Cimi, 2021, 2022). Violence against indigenous people, which totaled 110 incidents in 2018, jumped to 277 in 2019, 304 in 2020, and 355 in 2021, including 471 murders in 2019–2021 (Cimi, 2020, 2021, 2022). In August 2021, Brazilian indigenous groups filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court in The Hague accusing the Bolsonaro administration of violating human rights by inciting land development and mining on their lands (Tollefson, 2021).

The trend towards the capitalization of lands hitherto used in production for subsistence became more clear in the first year of the pandemic. Data from the Pastoral Land Commission of the Catholic Church indicate that 2020 was the year it recorded the most agrarian conflicts between 1985 and 2022 (CPT, 2023). The violence against peasant communities, which had been chronic for decades and increased just after the ouster of the Rousseff government, skyrocketed under Bolsonaro. The number of incidents, which averaged around 820 per year during the Rousseff administration (2011–2015) and about a thousand during Temer's (2016–2018), jumped to 1.6 thousand in the first year of the pandemic (Fig. 2). In addition, these numbers had a significant correlation with the amount of land involved in conflicts—their correlation coefficient is 0.93 for the 2011–2022 period.

[2] Michel Temer replaced Dilma Rousseff as Brazil's president in May 2016, nevertheless in the yearly statistics shown in this paper, 2016 is entirely considered under the Temer administration.

[3] Figures originally reported in Brazilian currency, the real, were converted into US dollars according to the exchange rate on the day in which they were reported.

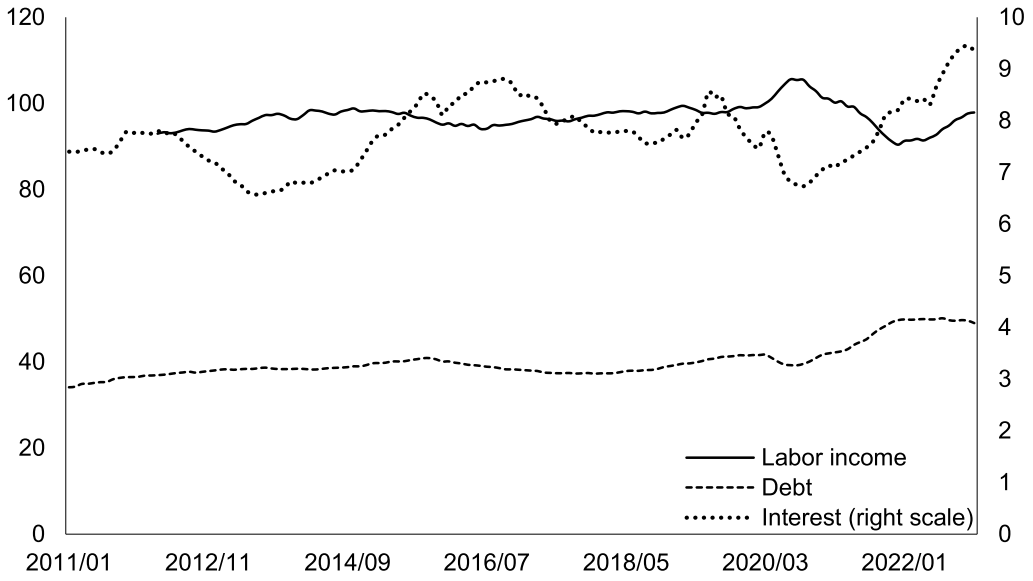



**Fig. 1.** Household debt, interest, and labor income, Brazil, January 2011–December 2022. Source: prepared by the author based on data from the Banco Central do Brasil and the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada. Notes: i) labor income is the habitual real average earnings of employed people, in index number (March 2020 = 100); ii) household debt held by financial institutions as a percentage of the available income accumulated over the past twelve months; iii) quarterly moving average of the expected household debt interest payments as a percentage of the available income.

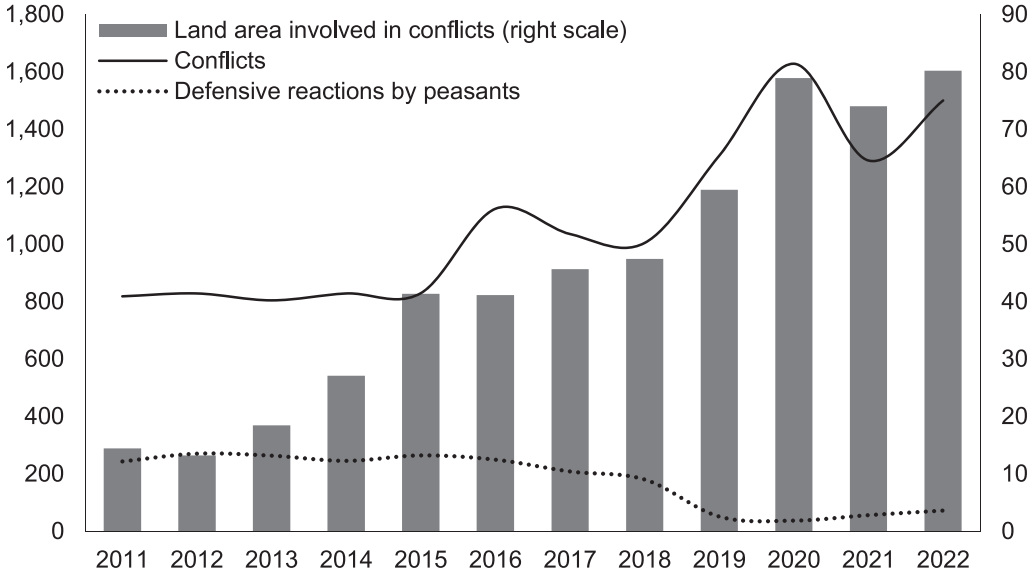



**Fig. 2.** Land conflicts, Brazil, 2011–2022. Source: prepared by the author based on data from the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT, 2021, 2022, 2023). Notes: i) land area in millions of hectares; ii) conflicts refer to violent incidents against peasant communities, such as evictions, threats of eviction, destructions of homes, belongings, and crops, hired killings, land grabbing, and land invasions.

This was evidence of a trend towards capitalizing dispossession insofar as more land and labor-power became available for capital.

The land area involved in conflicts, which had averaged 23 million hectares per year during the Rousseff administration and rose to an average of 45 million during Temer's, peaked at 79 million hectares in 2020 (Fig. 2). The increase in conflicts and the area involved in them during the last period is evidence that the Bolsonaro administration and its class allies took advantage of the pandemic to push for dispossessing policies. By reducing the circulation of people, the health and social contexts led to a decrease in defensive reactions by peasants. Resistance through land occupations, which remained relatively stable at an annual average of some 240 cases in 2011–2018, plunged to 37 reactions in 2020 (Fig. 2).[4] Meanwhile, the land area planted with grains, which had averaged 54 million hectares in the 2011–2015 period, rose to 61 million in 2016–2019 and reached 70 million in 2020–2022 (Fig. 3). In mid-2020, Bolsonaro's minister of agriculture lamented that "in the United States all of the tillable land has been occupied. Here [in Brazil] no" (Uribe & Wiziack, 2020, p. A12).

[4] Something similar happened in Mexico, where just after the Covid-19 outbreak the government designated some infrastructural mega-projects a national priority, taking advantage of the pandemic as health concerns made it easier to impede both injunctions against the projects and consultations with people who would be impacted (Hofmann, 2020).

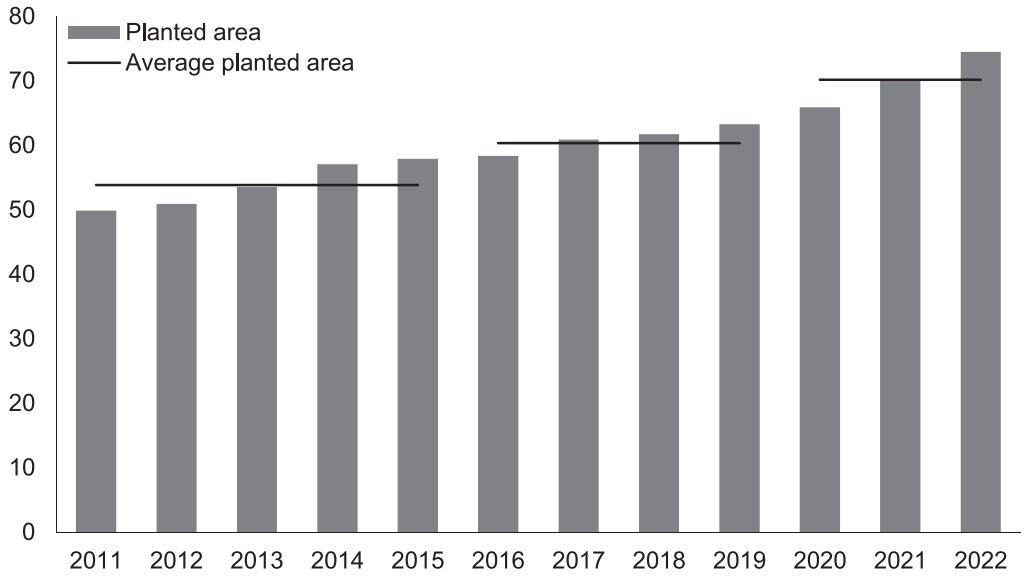



**Fig. 3.** Area planted with grain crops, Brazil, 2011–2022. Source: prepared by the author based on data from the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada. Note: area in millions of hectares.

In the 2018 electoral campaign Bolsonaro promised that during his presidency "not a centimeter will be demarcated for indigenous reservations" (Borges, 2018, p. B4), and processes then involving about 120 thousand people were frozen (Cimi, 2023). When an indigenous reservation is demarcated, it comes to be state property for the exclusive use of the indigenous people, which reinforces its character as a commons. Non-demarcation, on the other hand, makes it easier to turn the land into capital. In April 2020 the National Indian Foundation (Funai) revoked a rule that since 2012 had restricted possession by private parties of lands identified as potentially pertaining to indigenous peoples (Brasil, 2012, 2020f).[5] As a result, certifications of regularity of possession of indigenous lands, which had been granted to 42 private non-indigenous farms between 2019 and the eve of the revocation, rose to 72 in less than a month and totaled 248 farms on 124 thousand hectares in 2020 (Fonseca et al., 2022; Fonseca & Oliveira, 2020). In comparison, between 2014 and 2018 there were 14 certifications of this type.

Another potential dispossession of indigenous lands during the pandemic was linked to mining. Without a known source for the affirmation, in April 2019 Bolsonaro said that "in Roraima [state] there are billions of dollars underground. … The Indian can't be poor on rich land" (Gonçalves, 2019, p. A5). In early 2020, he sent to Congress a bill to permit the exploration of mineral resources and the use of rivers to generate electrical energy in indigenous areas. The bill proposed to legally recognize that these activities "entail, through the commercial operation of the projects, payments, through revenue sharing, to the indigenous communities affected" (Brasil, 2020c, art. 18). The bill was not voted on under Bolsonaro, but it can be supposed that it contributed as a political incentive to the entire process of converting means of subsistence, such as lands or rivers, into capital. Its specter lasted until early 2023 when President Lula da Silva, who had just replaced Bolsonaro in office, withdrew the proposal and the legislature shelved it.

That type of capitalizing dispossession had actually accelerated after Bolsonaro came to office. Deforestation due to mining in the Brazilian Amazonia totaled about 28 thousand hectares between 2019 and mid-2021, a 37 % increase over 2015–2018 (Salomon, 2021). From January 2019 to April 2021, of the 1.3 million hectares of indigenous lands and surrounding areas for which the government had received requests for authorization for mining or research—gold was the most sought mineral—at least 900 thousand hectares were linked to requests made in 2020 and the first four months of 2021 (Salomon, 2021). The accumulated area degraded by gold mining on the Yanomami Indigenous Land alone rose from 1.7 thousand hectares in January 2020 to 3.3 thousand hectares by December 2021 (HAY, 2021; HAY, 2022). In early 2023 it was reported that during Bolsonaro's term 570 Yanomami children under five had died of malnutrition or curable diseases caused by mining (Machado et al., 2023).

Expansion of mining on indigenous lands combined with increases in global gold demand and prices to accelerate dispossessions. Gold was considered a safe harbor amid fears of the pandemic's impact on the global economy. Its price rose above US$2 thousand a troy ounce for the first time in August 2020 (Wigglesworth, 2020). In 2020, the average price soared about 27 % above that of the year before the pandemic outbreak and remained at that level in 2021–2022 (Fig. 4). Annual gold exports, which in 2011–2019 averaged US$2.7 billion, rose to near US$5 billion in 2020 and remained at this level during the 2020–2022 period. These increases at the end of the series are largely explained by the rise in the price of the metal, as shown in Fig. 4. Even so, the ratio of the dollar-value of exports to the nominal price suggests that extracted physical volumes—which are especially relevant when analyzing dispossession—grew from a yearly average of about 63 metric tons in 2011–2019 to 87 tons in 2020–2022.

As seen, capitalizing dispossession is a destructive process, through which capital builds upon the ruin of the commons, one type of which is the natural environment. Prominent loci of this have been Amazonia and the Cerrado, the country's largest biomes and with the highest rates of deforestation, the latter substantially linked to agribusiness (see Rajão et al., 2020). The area cleared in both biomes combined, which had been nearly stable at an annual average of some 1.6 million hectares in 2011–2019, shot to an average of about 2.1 million hectares in 2020–2022 (Fig. 5). Meanwhile, the number of fines for infractions against flora was reduced from an annual average of 5.2 thousand to 3.7 thousand between these periods (Fig. 5). This fulfilled a promise Bolsonaro made as president-elect when he declared "I won't let Ibama go

[5] Funai is the federal agency responsible for coordinating and executing indigenous policy in Brazil. In early 2023 it was renamed the National Indigenous Peoples Foundation.

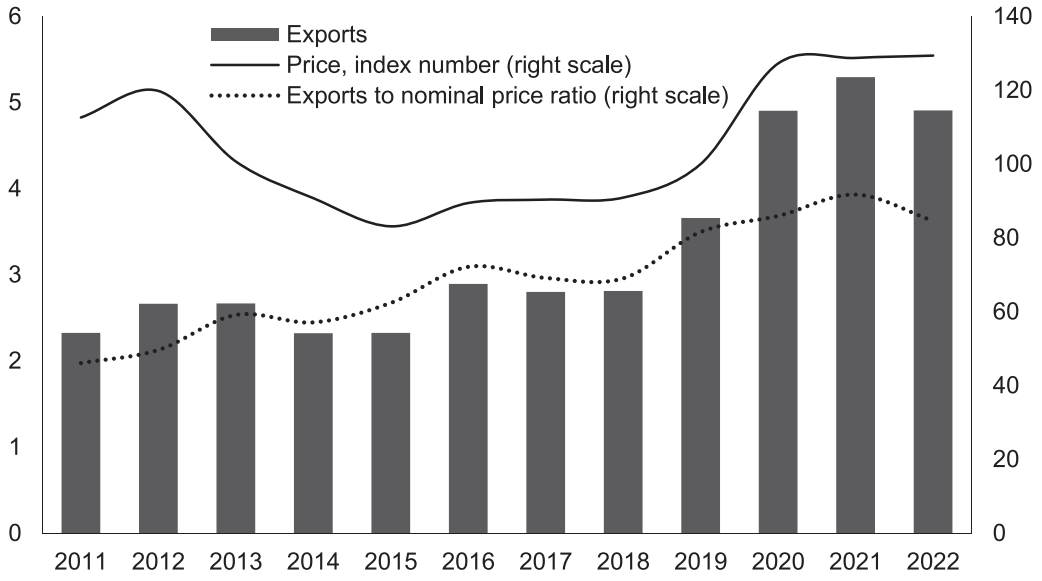



**Fig. 4.** Gold exports and gold prices, Brazil, 2011–2022. Source: prepared by the author based on data from the Banco Central do Brasil and Yahoo!Finance. Notes: i) gold exports in billions of nominal US dollars; ii) gold prices in index number (2019 = 100); iii) exports to nominal price ratio in metric tons.

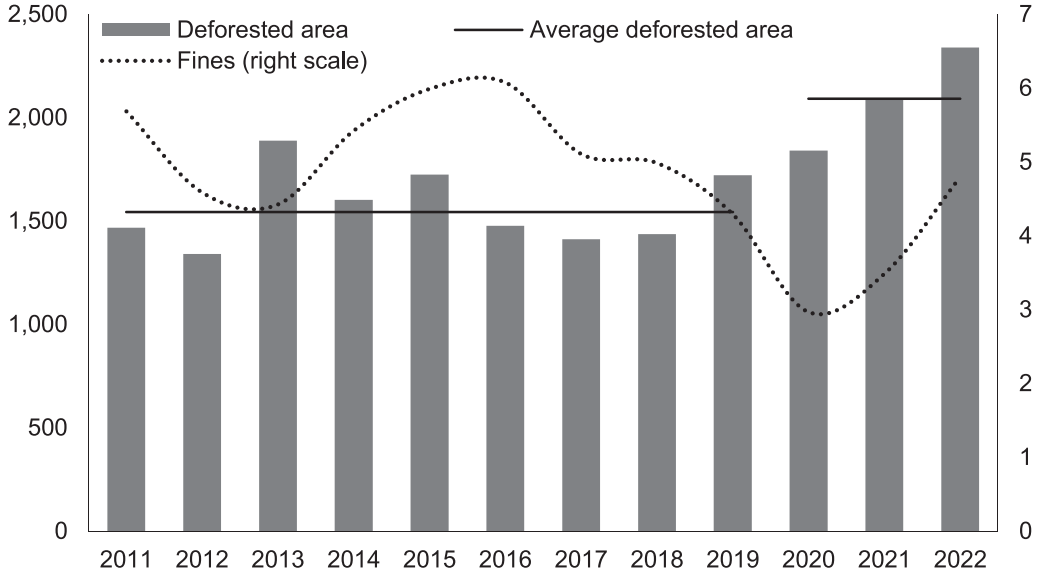



**Fig. 5.** Deforestation and fines related to flora, Brazilian Amazonia and the Cerrado, 2011–2022. Source: prepared by the author based on data from Ibama and the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais. Notes: i) area in thousands of hectares; ii) fines in thousands.

out giving fines left and right …. The party's over" (Guetta, 2021, p. 4).[6] Combined, these events give a straightforward example of Bolsonaro's "environmental … malgovernance, where transgressions are intentional" (Bastos Lima & Costa, 2022, p. 509).

In concluding this section it is worth recalling a fundamental conceptual distinction this study draws on. As seen, commodifying dispossessions turn means of subsistence into commodities, and since the latter are capital, commodifying and capitalizing dispossessions could be seen at first sight as interchangeable concepts. Nonetheless, we also saw that commodification differs from capitalization in the sense that the latter transforms means of subsistence into means of production of commodities. This implies that goods or services that already exist as a commons—public healthcare, for example—can be turned into commodities that differ from means of production sensu stricto, like agricultural land. Another distinction is that while capitalizing dispossession encloses means of subsistence through eviction, commodifying dispossession blocks free access to such means. I will now analyze some manifestations of this second type of capital-expanding dispossession.

### 3.3. *Commodifying dispossessions*

As seen in section 3.1, some of the privatizations carried out by the Bolsonaro administration transferred the ownership of already capitalist businesses hitherto operated by the state. I now focus on the other variation of dispossession that, beyond a simple redistribution, involves the potential for capital expansion, in this case via commodification. In 2020–2021 Bolsonaro included within the Investment Partnership

[6] Ibama is the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, a federal agency responsible for enforcement of environmental law.

Program 12 national parks and a national forest as areas subject to concession for private commercial exploration (Brasil, 2020g, 2020j, 2021).[7] Among them were the Aparados da Serra and the Serra Geral national parks on the border between Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul states. In January 2021 they became the first public parks effectively transferred to private operation, for which the government took in US $3.7 million in proceeds vis-à-vis the US$130 thousand it had stipulated as the minimum bid price (Amaral, 2021).

Parks that had been a sort of commons thus became means for capital accumulation, for which elements of nature were commodified through entrance and parking fees. Due to its limited spatial scope, this is not as significant quantitatively as it is a significant theoretical example of commodification. Also, its social dimension is not as encompassing as other commodifying dispossessions that have been taking place under neoliberalism, such as education, social security, or healthcare. One of these socially far-reaching dispossessions is related to the privatization of water supply and sewerage systems that had been under discussion for years in Brazil and gained its more relevant push during the Bolsonaro administration. Almost all of these services were then provided by state companies in Brazil. In 2018, nearly 47 % of the population did not have sewage collection, and some 16 % did not have treated water supply (Brasil, 2019a).

In July 2020 Bolsonaro signed into law a bill that determined that by 2033 99 % of the country's population must have access to potable water and 90 % to sewage collection (Brasil, 2020h). The law also prohibited states and municipalities to continue to directly hire state-owned companies to provide these services. This had for long been a demand of business leaders, as made explicit by the National Confederation of Industry when it complained that "the maintenance of unsuitable contracts and with infinite extensions restricts the entrance of new agents to the sector" (CNI, 2019, p. 22). With the new law, when current contracts with state companies terminate the services must be conceded through public bids in which both state and private companies can participate. The legislature even sought to delay the mandatory auctions by including in the bill the possibility that then existent contracts with public companies be extended for 30 years. Bolsonaro vetoed the measure because it would, in his words, "limit free initiative and free competition" (Brasil, 2020i, p. 10).

Combined, these actions sought precisely to increase private participation in water supply and sewerage services through the expected investments needed to attain the goals for sanitation coverage. At the same time that the law now determines the expansion of the relevant services, space is opened to private operation if the state companies do not expand operations. The point is that in these neoliberal times, any state investment in marketable services is regarded as a heresy. In 2019 the National Confederation of Industry said that "the current fiscal context reinforces the need to increase private participation" and "the lack of resources makes it impossible for the public companies, with no investment capacity, to expand water and sewerage services" (CNI, 2019, p. 2). Unlike privatization of a company that already operates under capitalist logic, here one sees potential capital expansion. This is brought about not by new investment, which can take place either with or without privatization, but rather by the conversion of a commons, such as public-supplied water, into a commodity.

It is certain that for some time now water is not a commons as it was once upon a time. Today, especially in urban areas, even when supplied by the state, it is a sort of commodity. If a state company constructs a system for capture and storage, that is, invests in constant capital ($c$), and pays wages to those who work in this system, that is, acquires variable capital ($v$), and from the productive combination of both extracts surpluses ($s$), this implies a capitalist production of the commodity-like water. However, this is a somewhat orthodox definition of commodity, based on a more abstract and less historical concept of capitalism itself. According to Immanuel Wallerstein, "for a historical system to be considered a capitalist system, the dominant or deciding characteristic must be the persistent search for the *endless* accumulation of capital" (Wallerstein, 2013, p. 10; emphasis in original). Yet accumulation is not the dominant or deciding objective of the state operation in a service like basic sanitation.

Water produced by the state has exchange-value as a *means* and not as an end, because its primary objective is the supply of the use-value of water itself. Meanwhile, water produced by a for-profit company has exchange-value as the *end*, with use-value as a means. Translating these Marxist terms to the language of finance, I cite an investment fund manager who, upon analyzing the new law for basic sanitation predicted that, "considering that the administration is equidistant and technical, the assets that exist today become more valuable. The [state-owned] sanitation companies had been sold below [their value considering that of] their [private] peers …. This difference of value tends to decrease" (Oliveira, 2020). This brings to the fore the phenomenon that I call relative commodification, which takes place when a good's exchange-value gains *even more* significance for the social relations that develop around this good. This occurs for example when a public service that already competes with a privately-provided service of the same nature cedes even more room to providers totally driven by capital accumulation.

In addition to basic sanitation, Bolsonaro made an effort to advance the commodification of public healthcare services. In October 2020 he decreed the government's interest in "partnerships with the private sector for the construction, modernization, and operation of primary healthcare units" throughout the country (Brasil, 2020l, p. 3). After two days with many critical reactions, particularly from sectors of society linked to public health, Bolsonaro revoked the decree (Brasil, 2020m; Della Coletta et al., 2020). In early 2021, his administration also sought to revoke constitutional earmarks that require the federal and subnational governments to allocate minimum percentages of their tax revenues to healthcare and education, but the proposal was not backed by the legislature (Machado & Resende, 2021). If approved, these measures could expand the supply of these services under the commodity form. This is because the less the state finances public health, the more people turn to private providers, including those of health insurance.

These and other attempts, setbacks, and defeats after protests show that the dispossessions or attempts by Bolsonaro did not take place without resistance by discontents. But they also reveal that the Covid-19 pandemic was used by the government and its class allies to facilitate policies of this nature. For example, the attempt to do away with constitutionally mandated state spending for public healthcare and education took place precisely when the government pretended to offer a social compensation. The latter involved the extension of the cash transfer to workers who were expected to lose income due to the pandemic (see section 3.1). The government was not able to undertake the first measure—the defunding of healthcare and education—but revealed its instrumental logic by proposing this in the same deliberations in which the Congress discussed the second—extended cash transfers. In addition to the explicit and immediate movements of commodification mentioned, measures of deregulation implemented by Bolsonaro pointed in the same direction, like those aimed at the enclosure of natural sites.

In a cabinet meeting in April 2020 the environment minister urged his peers to make "an effort while we are in this quiet moment in terms of press coverage, because the only talk is of Covid, and let the cattle stampede, change all the regulations and simplify norms" (Brasil, 2020b, p. 20). He was referring to regulations that could be modified by the executive branch without depending on the legislature to eventually eliminate rules that limit capital expansion by prescribing measures to protect the environment. For some analysts, those intentions, combined

[7] Created by Michel Temer just after he seized the presidency of Brazil, the Investment Partnership Program is responsible for promoting the interaction between the state and the private sector in public infrastructure projects (Brasil, 2016).

with neglect of the spreading disease and support for commodification of common goods, allowed Covid-19 to enter indigenous communities (Menton et al., 2021). Yet the disease may have been more than a consequence. In mid-2020, the federal prosecutor's office petitioned the court to remove the environment minister from office due to a "premeditated sequence of actions ... [to] dismantle Brazil's national environmental policy … opportunely during the pandemic" (Brasil, 2020a, p. 7).

When analyzing government measures taken since March 2020, a group of Brazilian ecologists concluded that the Bolsonaro "administration [was] taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to intensify a pattern of weakening environmental protection" (Vale et al., 2021, p. 1). For example, in October 2020 the National Environment Council revoked resolutions that had declared areas to be reserved for permanent environmental protection (Brasil, 2020k), many of which were sought for real estate or tourist development. Since 2002, those resolutions had restricted deforestation and the occupation of coastal lands with native vegetation, such as mangroves and sandy coastal plain vegetation, as well as areas around artificial water reservoirs (Brasil, 2002). With the revocations, the government opened the path for economic activities such as hotels, shrimp farming, and housing in hitherto protected areas. In October 2020 the Federal Supreme Court suspended the revocations and in December 2021 declared them unconstitutional, restoring the original protective norms (Ventura, 2021).

Those Federal Supreme Court decisions, by pointing to illegalities of the Bolsonaro administration, showed the extent of its efforts to commodify nature. The government could also count on explicit support from capital. As soon as the environment minister's appeal to "let the cattle stampede, change all the regulations" became public and stirred popular repudiation, business leaders quickly defended him. In a major national newspaper, nearly 90 entities declared that "the actions of the environment ministry … have our total support" (Folha de S.Paulo, 2020, p. A5). Among the signatories were the country's major employer's unions in agriculture, commerce, and industry. For the chairman of a construction industry union, "it makes no sense to require an environmental license to place asphalt on a cobblestone road" (Narcizo, 2020, p. A18). This repeated the axiom that development justifies itself and that its ecological and social impacts are acceptable side effects of progress (Russo Lopes et al., 2021).

### 3.4. *Proletarianizing dispossessions*

As seen, primitive accumulation was the historical development through which capitalism had its earliest and foundational rounds of both proletarianization *and* capitalization. The birth of the mode of production thus involved the simultaneity of these two social processes. For this reason, when defining capitalizing dispossession and commodifying dispossession, I did so by considering in both a similar simultaneity of processes: capitalization and proletarianization for the first type of capital-expanding dispossession, and commodification and proletarianization for the second. Note that proletarianization is present in both, and this is fundamental for this study's theoretical perspective. Yet to the degree that we observe concrete manifestations of that which we assume to be exemplary of these concepts, their specificities present themselves in a way that is normally less pronounced.

We saw earlier that the number of agrarian conflicts had a significant correlation to the land area involved in these conflicts, which is evidence of the capitalization of lands that had previously been used for subsistence. This is one of the examples in which it was possible to identify capitalization with greater clarity than proletarianization. Yet this does not discard the likelihood that the latter occurred. We have suitable conceptual tools to project the occurrence of proletarianization, which even if not immediately perceptible is a likely logical consequence. Those who are evicted from their lands, even if they do not come to work for a wage, are converted into proletarians, in this case, forming the reserve army of labor. There is proletarianization because this army is "a surplus population of *workers*" that fulfills "a *condition* for the existence of the capitalist mode of production" insofar as it either "weighs down the active army of workers" and "puts a curb on their pretensions" (Marx, 1890/1990, pp. 784, 792; emphases added).

The fact that proletarianization may be empirically less perceptible at first sight indicates that in some instances it must be studied in a particularized manner. I affirmed earlier that in the case of capitalizing dispossession proletarianization occurs, for example, when immediate producers are evicted from locations where they produce for themselves. In commodifying dispossession proletarianization is brought about by denying immediate producers access to means of subsistence. However, this study suggests that even without the occurrence of capitalization or commodification proletarianization can take place and thus contribute to capital expansion. In this case, the object of dispossession is not that which will be converted into a commodity or into means of production of commodities. It involves something that I associate to a contemporary and broader understanding of a commons, which can include public provisions arising from welfare policy, for example.

Let's recall that when the pandemic began the Bolsonaro administration first proposed a derisory cash transfer to help workers with no formal employment ties affected by lockdowns. It was the legislature that raised the sum and increased both the numbers of monthly installments and people benefited. The benefit began in April 2020 at 57 % of the national minimum monthly wage paid to 68 million people and declined to 25 % paid to 39 million people in November 2021, when the program was terminated. The evolution of this situation shows the importance the government placed on not extending the aid. It had been declared that the greater concern was with the fiscal situation, but this was also associated to a classic concern of capital that refers precisely to proletarianization. When in early 2021 the government was under pressure to offer the assistance once again, after suspending it in late 2020, Bolsonaro retorted that "some want to make it permanent. … At first it was US$120. Let's pay everyone US$1 thousand per month, *no one works anymore*, they stay home" (Weterman & Souza, 2021, p. B3; emphasis added).

At that moment, Bolsonaro was echoing an old concern of propertied classes. English industrial capitalism was only able to develop after the abolition of social protections that were impeding the formation of a competitive labor market (Polanyi, 1944/2001). The austerity invented in the 1920s in Italy and Britain to reimpose the capital order by reversing labor gains—including welfare—made a worldwide comeback in the 1970s with the same objective (Mattei, 2022). The point is that the welfare state diminishes the need of the propertyless to sell their labor-power (Therborn, 1984). This shows that to grasp contemporary proletarianization it is necessary to examine, in addition to the transformations of non-proletarians into proletarians, the mechanisms that expand the latter's need to sell labor-power. This can occur when there is a reduction of public provision of subsistence—which is a contemporary commons—like the cash transfer by the government during the pandemic. There are also other indirect forms of proletarianization that do not necessarily involve expansion of one's immediate need to sell labor-power, which can nevertheless take place later on.

In the Marxian theory of primitive accumulation, the transformation of non-proletarians into proletarians meant the transformation of labor-power into a commodity. While immediate producers previously deployed their own labor-power in subsistence activities, under capitalism labor-power is exchanged in the market. There, capitalists and workers enter into contracts that, in principle, are regulated by terms that they define themselves, without interference by third parties. In this sense, any state regulation aimed at protecting workers in their uneven relations with capital to some degree distances labor-power from functioning as a commodity and approximates it to the realm of the commons. The reduction of labor protections provided by the state does just the opposite. That is, it entails proletarianization to some extent. This is what the Temer administration did by approving changes to labor laws that in late 2017 transferred a significant portion of state labor

regulations to direct bargaining between capitalists and workers (Bin, 2022).

Bolsonaro also pushed for proletarianization through reduction of labor protections during the pandemic. In August 2021 he gained approval from the lower house for a bill that sought to establish new more flexible modalities of labor relations. One of them would permit people aged 18 to 29 who had been unemployed for more than two years, or who were beneficiaries of federal cash transfer programs, to be hired without the full protections and benefits of those with full-time employment, no social security, and at a pay of half a minimum wage for 22 hours per week (Resende & Brant, 2021). The bill was rejected by the Senate (Lima & Truffi, 2021), which must nevertheless be seen not as a definite defeat of capital, but as a step forward in paving a way for proletarianization. Brazil has had several examples of commodifying and proletarianizing policies that took time to materialize. A paradigmatic example is the state-run pension scheme, which since the late 1990s has suffered regressive changes that were proposed, then rejected or postponed, to be eventually approved (Bin, 2020, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, if Bolsonaro's attempts followed by defeats signify resistance to dispossessions, they also reveal that the government saw the pandemic as an opportunity to execute them. For example, the search to create new modalities of labor contracts to reduce protections for workers revived proposals that the same administration had made in 2019 but were revoked due to a lack of parliamentary support (Brasil, 2019b, 2020e). Bolsonaro also acted to weaken state activities to inspect health and safety at work, combat slave-like labor, and verify employer compliance with labor law. The average annual budget for these activities, which in 2013–2016 was US$10 million, fell to US$5 million in 2020–2021, as proposed by the Rousseff and Bolsonaro administrations respectively (Resende & Brant, 2020).

Before discussing our findings, let me show them in schematic form in Table 1.

**Table 1**
Definitions and historical manifestations of dispossessions in Bolsonaro's Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic.

| Type | Definition | Historical manifestations or evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Redistributive dispossession | Appropriation of surpluses or means of production that has no impact on proletarianization, capitalization, or commodification and thus increases neither variable capital nor constant capital. | Privatization of Eletrobras.<br>Concession of state-owned airports to private operation.<br>Privatization of Brazil's second largest oil refinery.<br>Increasing interest payments on household debt. |
| Capitalizing dispossession | Transformation of immediate producers into proletarians through the conversion of their means of subsistence into means of capitalist production. | Increases of agrarian conflicts, land area involved in conflicts, and planted land area.<br>Decrease in land occupations and reoccupations by peasants.<br>No demarcation for indigenous reservations.<br>Deforestation and soil degradation due to mining in indigenous areas.<br>Decrease in fines for infractions against flora and increase of deforestation of Amazonia and the Cerrado. |
| Commodifying dispossession | Transformation of immediate producers into proletarians through the conversion of their means of subsistence into commodities. | Concessions of national parks to operation by for-profit private companies.<br>Opening of public water supply and sewerage services to operation by for-profit private companies.<br>Attempt to partner with private sector for the operation of public healthcare facilities.<br>Attempt to revoke constitutional tax earmarks for spending on healthcare and education.<br>Revocations of federal protection for environmental reserves. |
| Proletarianizing dispossession | Transformation of immediate producers into proletarians through the reduction of their means of subsistence. | Reduction and eventual extinction of the emergency cash aid paid during the pandemic to people with no formal employment ties.<br>Attempt to reduce state-provided labor protections through the creation of precarious modalities of labor relations.<br>Budget cuts for federal labor inspection activities. |

Note: proletarianization is a necessarily constitutive process of both capitalizing dispossession and commodifying dispossession, but in some instances it must be studied in a particularized manner and, for this reason, proletarianizing dispossession appears separately here and in section 3.4 as well.

## 4. Discussion

This study develops the argument that the Bolsonaro administration and its class allies used the pandemic as a political opportunity and the state as an authoritarian apparatus to carry out dispossessions on which capital relies, either to expand or to solve its accumulation crises. Nevertheless, not all dispossessions lead to expansion, as seen in the case of privatizations. As seen in section 2, the privatization of a good may not go beyond redistributive dispossession, which does not lead to capital expansion. Firstly, it does not necessarily engender the conversion of the means of production into capital. A state-owned company, for example, may already be operating under the capitalist logic before being sold. Privatization also does not lead to proletarianization when the workers involved are already exploited under the capitalist logic. In sum, privatization is a legal relationship of a transfer of ownership, having little substantive meaning as an economic relation.

For this reason, differently than David Harvey's (2003, p. 157) claim that privatization is "the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession," this study argues that it can be considered at most the cutting edge of redistributive dispossession. I say at most because privatization may not even involve dispossession, but be restricted to redistribution, as in a case in which ownership is alienated for the price equivalent to value. Thus, for there to be redistributive dispossession, privatization must occur for a price different than the value of the asset in question. This seems to be the case of the airports the Bolsonaro administration transferred to private operation, earning a 1,670 % premium at auction, or of Brazil's second largest oil refinery that may have been privatized at a price as low as half its value. Also, the government's stake in Eletrobras may have been underpriced when alienated, as indicated by the fact that demand for the deal was twice as much as the government raised in privatization. In none of those cases were new capital or labor-power added to the system.

Some of our findings show the continuity of dispossessions similar to primitive accumulation that reached the periphery of the world-system in the colonial era. While the violent expansion of capital over the lands of indigenous people has been continual since then (Terena et al., 2021), it became an explicit state policy during the 1964–1985 dictatorship (Bin, 2021). Under Bolsonaro, authoritarian methods were once again explicitly employed in state actions for the capitalization of spaces still not completely submitted to capital. This confirms other analyses that his rise to power did mean a return of conservative and authoritarian

positions in favor of long-established leading industries (Hatzikidi & Dullo, 2021; Mendes Motta & Hauber, 2023). Yet this was not restricted to cultural, political, or ideological positions, as if the latter were not conditioned by material determinants. In fact, Bolsonaro's authoritarian regime was an expression of current dynamics of capital accumulation dependent on increases in dispossession, as in agriculture or mining (Veltmeyer, 2023).

As this study shows, dispossession was facilitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which by attracting public attention to the disease and diminishing circulation of people reduced reactions to defend peasants and indigenous peoples from dispossessions. Like economic crises, health and other social crises also impose losses on the majority and opportunities for a minority. Along with the spread of the virus, agrarian conflict rose as did the area planted with grains. Gold mining on indigenous lands also grew to supply increasing global demand for the metal, whose price skyrocketed in the first year of the pandemic. This entire process was supported by violence and destruction; violence against those who produce for themselves, and destruction of the means used for that purpose. The archetypical sign of this is deforestation, which has for long been disproving Garrett Hardin's (1968, p. 1245) claim that so-called "tragedy of the commons … is averted by private property." Actually, commons have experienced a type of Schumpeter's (1950/2008, p. 83) "creative destruction" but reversed to a destructive creation, in which capitalizing dispossession expands capital by destroying one's means of living.

This apparent turn of capitalism towards primitive methods shows the persistence of its dependence on dispossession. In addition to capitalizing dispossession, commodifying dispossession is the other type of capital-expanding dispossession. When the state reduces its role in supplying public services, this creates room for the expansion of their privately provided homologs. Our findings have shown this in cases of the transfer of national parks to private operation, in which visits to natural sites and related services are now sold as commodities. Changes in legislation opened public water supply and sewerage to be operated under the same logic. Attempts to open public healthcare even more to private provision, through either the transfer of operations or the shrinking of public financing, were also among commodifying measures during the pandemic. As one can see, commodification can have as its subject anything with use-value that people "want … or need to acquire" (Jameson, 2011, p. 37). Here it is important to emphasize this "need to acquire" vis-à-vis the universal access to means of subsistence existing before commodifying dispossession.

Proletarianization occurs when people are evicted from where they had been producing for subsistence or when they have to pay for what had been public. Capitalization or commodification do so by reducing means of material support for those who either produce for themselves or count on contemporary versions of commons to survive. Examples include social protection policies, which even conservatives admitted were necessary during the pandemic. This was not the case of the far-right Bolsonaro administration, which since the Covid-19 outbreak resisted expanding these mechanisms. The legislature had to establish a cash transfer to help workers to remain and survive in isolation. Even so, the payments were irregular and declined in value, otherwise a risk could be created that, in Bolsonaro's words, "no one would work anymore." Brazil's incumbent president was then singing the tune of the ruling classes who for decades have been pushing for regressions in social policy virtually everywhere. And since working for others is the social relation upon which capital accumulates, these very words summarize the dispossessing intentions and actions carried out throughout the pandemic to expand capital.

Signs of dispossessions were salient in 2020–2021, an indication that the Bolsonaro administration and its class allies took advantage of the pandemic. Many analysts have identified Bolsonaro's authoritarian measures as a radicalization of the neoliberal policy of dismantling social and environmental protections, which they somehow connected to the pandemic (Hatzikidi & Dullo, 2021; Menezes & Barbosa, 2021; Milhorance, 2022). Other commentators have straightforwardly affirmed that "far from happenstance, this policy fits into a form of necropolitics … catalysed by the pandemic" (Russo Lopes & Bastos Lima, 2020, p. 92). The combination of rising deforestation, suppression of environmental protections, support to land grabbing, illegal logging, and wildcat mining, as well as the admitted diversionary use of Covid-19 led to the inference that "the Bolsonaro administration offers perhaps the most striking contemporary example of what may be understood as … malgovernance, where transgressions are intentional" (Bastos Lima & Costa, 2022, pp. 519, 509). Like many others, these analyses do not point out capital-related goals of such policy dismantling, and this paper tried to help to fill in this gap.

## 5. Conclusion

When the events studied in this paper took place, Brazil had already entered the latest authoritarian phase of neoliberalism and began to follow the worldwide right-wing trend to replace consent with coercion (Saad-Filho & Boffo, 2021). Authoritarianism and violence were mechanisms fundamental to the phenomenon that inaugurated the capitalist mode of production. Marx named this phenomenon primitive accumulation, a term to be reserved for those initial events, which does not mean that expropriations, evictions, and enclosures by capital have ended. To the contrary, dispossessions still occur, whether in the classic form or in others adapted to current times. Capitalism is a system traversed by contradictions, and one of them is that it can only sustain itself by turning to mechanisms that do not seem to be capitalist in a pure, abstract sense of the concept. Another of its contradictions is that crises, which appear to threaten accumulation, can also be opportunities to expand labor exploitation.

One of the means that capital has to expand is to use dispossessions to create new spaces for exploitation while also adding new workers to the economy. The Bolsonaro administration sought to undertake this during the pandemic, first by using aggressive rhetoric that stimulated and sanctioned violent practices. Indigenous peoples and peasants experienced increased violence to their bodies and an accelerated encroachment over the spaces that they occupy to produce their biological and social existences. People were attacked and forests cut down at even greater intensity than in prior decades. Along with these conflicts, there was an expansion of the land areas used by capitalist agriculture and mining. All of this had government incentives, particularly through weakening of mechanisms for environmental monitoring. Ruling classes also benefited from direct measures that sought to transform spaces of preservation and subsistence into spaces for production of commodities.

The increase in the number of conflicts over land and of the extent of areas related to them were accompanied by a significant drop in defensive reactions by peasants. This is another indication that the pandemic, by reducing the circulation of people, served the economic proposals of the government and its class allies. Among these objectives was to give continuity to the privatizing logic reintroduced by the Temer administration upon seizing power in the coup d'état of 2016. Some of the privatizations Bolsonaro promoted had a redistributive character, that is, they involved the transfer of ownership of already capitalist businesses operated by the state itself. But there were also privatizations or incentives to them with potential for capital expansion via commodification of public services or sites, even natural environments, which are archetypical of the commons.

What we have seen in this study is evidence that the Bolsonaro administration and the ruling classes saw the pandemic as a context favorable to the dispossessions on which capital depends to expand. It was a context equally favorable to dispossessions of a redistributive type, which also serve to increase the assets of individual capitalists. Redistribution, plundering, or dispossession in general are means to which the ruling classes can turn without having to expose their money—at least initially—to what Marx (1890/1990, p. 919) described as "the troubles and risks inseparable from its employment in industry."

Thus, considering what was presented here, it is not difficult to understand why Brazilian propertied classes had been so enthusiastic about a president who seemed to enjoy displaying barely civilized manners. In fact, Bolsonaro was quite "civilized" for a "civilization" in which capital advances through violent means. Brazilian ruling classes may never have been so well represented in the country's presidential office.

## Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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