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STARLINK, PLANETARY CAPITALISM AND CONTEMPORARY IMAGINARIES OF THE AMAZON

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Introduction

In November 2021, Fábio Faria, now former Minister of Communications of Jair Bolsonaro's government announced on his Twitter account that the Brazilian government had invited Elon Musk and his company SpaceX/Starlink to operate in the country. Fast forward to 2024: not only has Starlink effectively acquired a license to operate in Brazil; it has become one of the major satellite-based Internet providers in one of the country's largest and most vulnerable regions: the Amazon.

Faria's invitation, as well as support for the expansion of Starlink's service have been advertised as advancing connectivity and bringing development and protection to one of the country's most disconnected region. In a movement that echoes the history of occupation, exploration, and expropriation of the bodies, territories, identities and interdependent modes of existence present in the region, both Bolsonaro's government and Starlink have reiterated a longstanding hegemonic project that promises to 'integrate' its 'isolated' populations to modern capitalism.

Our work analyzes public documents, social media publications, media reports and interviews on the operation of Starlink in the Amazon to investigate the role of contemporary digital infrastructures in advancing projects of capitalist occupation and exploitation of the Brazilian Amazon. We identify hegemonic discourses surrounding the role of digital technologies in the economic and social development of the region and look at how these discourses resonate with 19th and 20th centuries projects of occupation for the region via 'civilization' and technological progress. At the same time, we demonstrate that these infrastructures circulate through heterogeneous local interpretations, including both enthusiastic endorsements and tactical, non-celebratory uses, revealing a more complex terrain of sociotechnical negotiation.

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Expanding the infrastructural frontiers of capitalism

Mr. Faria's invitation to Starlink mentions the provision of broadband Internet infrastructure for rural and remote regions in Brazil and the 'noble' mission of preserving the Amazon rainforest. In-between its lines is a proposal to expand the sociotechnical frontiers of capitalism and occupy a 'void' that has been long occupied. This proposal becomes more explicit when we place the invitation alongside a series of other 'X-tweets' that Faria made throughout 2022, when Starlink received authorization to operate in the country.

Throughout its history, the Amazon has been recurrently imagined as a void. This symbolic emptying of territory and peoples has justified repeated colonial and developmental interventions. These imaginaries—of an Eldorado, a paradise, or a "green hell"—rest on the assumption that the region lacks civilization and therefore must be occupied, improved, or redeemed (Castro & Campos, 2015; Gondim, 2019).

Politically, portrayals of the region as a human and cultural void have justified violent processes of occupation and state intervention. Government advertising from the 1970s framed "overcoming backwardness" through infrastructure—roads, waterways, ports, hydropower plants—and natural resource exploitation (Loureiro, 2014). These development policies are anchored in an ideal of progress based on extraction, rendering the lives and rights of local populations largely secondary.

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Starlink: a civilizational project?

The perception that the Amazon 'lags behind' and the techno-solutionist imperative of expanding digital infrastructures borrow support from sociodemographic data on internet access, connection stability and the cost of staying connected. As internet access becomes a precondition not only for the possibility of "contact with the outside world", but fundamentally for access to a variety of rights, the nonexistence of commercial infrastructures for mass connectivity becomes synonymous with underdevelopment. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Starlink's promise of connecting even the most inaccessible places on the planet at reduced costs appears to be very attractive to local public managers and governments.

Public policies for building connectivity have existed for decades, alongside commercial satellite Internet providers such as Hughes and Viasat (Alves, 2022; Abranet, 2024), but our research shows that the model of development and occupation proposed by Bolsonaro-Starlink has its own ideology. The Brazilian far-right has demonstrated ideological affinity with a model of appropriation and development of the territory that is based on its occupation and provision of services by private multinational corporations –

especially those ahead of the libertarian and technologically determinist ideals of Silicon Valley (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). Support for Starlink's operations, in this regard, reflects the imperative of an occupation led mainly by the market and, substantially, by the so-called "big tech".

If it is true that digitalization can bring many benefits to local populations, including increased access to fundamental rights (education, health, access to information) and services, our research shows that Starlink's expansion in the Amazon occurs in a 'move fast, break things' style: to the detriment of policies of the digital inclusion and literacy of local communities, and has been increasingly exploited to benefit individual interests and produce disinformation and to commit crimes, such as the operation of illegal mining operations (Lobato, 2023; Valente, 2024).

Simultaneously, some local actors re-purpose satellite connectivity for community protection and territorial autonomy—pointing to a more ambivalent landscape than the binary of benefit versus harm suggests.

Our findings indicate that today, Starlink's satellites play a fundamental role in guaranteeing communication between land grabbers, miners, and drug traffickers inside and outside Indigenous lands, enabling evasion of inspections and criminal investigations—perhaps more so than in guaranteeing access to rural schools (O Globo, 2024). The privatized access at any cost that it provides benefits those who have the resources to dominate it, reinforcing a development model anchored in a civilizational imaginary of technological expansion. This ideal of civilization, based on the economic interests of a conglomerate of billionaires, their supporters, and beneficiaries, leaves little space for autonomous paths of development.

These dynamics become particularly evident when examining how different actors interpret and mobilize Starlink's presence in the Amazon. On the one hand, regional elites, business associations, and organizations such as the Associação PanAmazônia publicly celebrate Starlink as a transformative force. In 2024, the company received the Grandes Amazônidás prize for its perceived social impact on education, health, autonomy, and emergency communication. Local leaders frame connectivity as dignity and progress, citing examples such as telemedicine, online classes, strengthened economic networks, and reduced isolation (Revista Amazônia, 2024).

On the other hand, community-led initiatives such as Conexão Povos da Floresta mobilize satellite connectivity in a more cautious and tactical way. Their public documents avoid citing Starlink directly, referring only to "satellite technology" and "equipment installation." Nevertheless, independent reporting shows that Starlink antennas were purchased and installed in several Indigenous communities, including Yanomami territories, to support territorial monitoring, environmental protection, emergency communication, and political coordination. Project leaders explicitly state that there is no partnership with Starlink, underscoring their desire not to align their political identity with Musk's techno-imperial imaginary (Adachi, 2023; Conexão Povos da Floresta, 2024).

Taken together, these contrasting interpretations reveal that Starlink circulates across diverse political and sociotechnical projects—celebrated by elites as a civilizational breakthrough, but tactically appropriated by forest peoples as a tool for autonomy and self-defense.

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