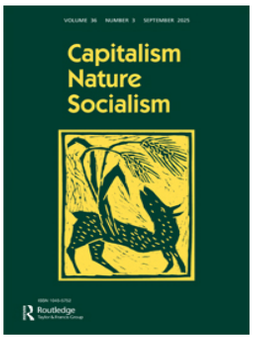

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# Inverted Sacrifice Zones

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper interrogates the reproduction of capitalist society through the lens of environmental governance, asking: How is traditional sacrifice inverted and institutionalized to sustain a capitalist system nearing its ecological limits? It argues that environmental conservation as a form of state-sanctioned sacrifice—performed in service of global capitalist accumulation—remains underexamined. To address this, the paper develops the concept of the Inverted Sacrifice Zone (ISZ): a spatial formation reconciling ecological preservation with mechanisms of exclusion and labor discipline. Engaging literatures on green grabbing, accumulation by conservation, and capitalist state sovereignty, the ISZ reframes state-led conservation not as a rupture from capital but as a non-extractive deepening of its spatial and ideological logics. Focusing on the Brazilian state of Acre, the paper analyzes how the SISA initiative transforms forested landscapes into carbon assets and rural communities into stewards of commodified nature. The Acre illustrates, how ISZs allow states to acknowledge ecological limits while managing them to sustain accumulation. These zones mark neither a retreat of the capitalist state nor its ecological redemption, but its consolidation through the ethical and material infrastructures of preservation. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial to cultivating ecologies and politics that confront, rather than reproduce, state-led capitalism.

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**KEYWORDS** Capitalist reproduction; Brazilian Amazon; REDD+; sacrifice zones; environmental governance

## Introduction

In the far west of the Brazilian Amazon, the state of Acre is easy to overlook. Remote, sparsely populated, and often treated as peripheral. Even within Brazil, it is a place many assume has been left behind by development. And yet, as Ailton Krenak suggests, it may also be "a place that might generate ideas to postpone the end of the world" (Greenleaf 2024, 17). In Acre, the forest is not cleared – it is preserved by the state. The people are not displaced. They are enlisted. Unlike traditional sacrifice zones, where populations are

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abandoned to environmental devastation, Acre exemplifies an inversion: a zone where preservation replaces extraction, but sacrifice remains.

The puzzle this paper engages with is both urgent and foundational: How is capitalist society reproduced? Reframed within the specific context of this study, the question becomes: How is traditional sacrifice inverted and reproduced for the maintenance of a capitalist system nearing its ecological limits? Building on (Büscher and Fletcher 2015), this paper argues that a comprehensive assessment that situates environmental conservation within a framework of state-sanctioned sacrifice – performed in service of global capitalist accumulation has yet to be fully articulated.

Capitalism, understood as both an ideological project and an economic structure, depends on the continual expansion of production, market frontiers, and mechanisms of value extraction. Yet, the Earth offers a limited number of hectares, energy reserves, and ecological systems – constraints that capitalism can delay, but not ultimately escape (O'Connor 1988; 1994). Even if the system were to achieve near-total efficiency, producing only a fraction of the waste and degradation it currently does, the arithmetic of infinity ensures that this fraction, multiplied indefinitely, becomes unsustainable. The contradiction is therefore not merely theoretical; it is material and spatial. It calls into question the survival of both ecosystems and the political states that manage them. In response to capitalism's deepening ecological contradictions, a new spatial fix is emerging: the inverted sacrifice zone (ISZ) – sanctuaries of preservation that nevertheless operate through mechanisms of exclusion and labor discipline. ISZs represent a form of green grabbing, which (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012, 237) defines as "not only physical land grabs but also … the green sanction for otherwise declining forms of capital accumulation and the disabling of institutions that could pose threats to expanded accumulation." Similarly, Corson and MacDonald describe green grabbing as "emergent conservation enclosures." (2012, 264)

Inverted sacrifice zones (ISZs) also build on the concept of accumulation by conservation, that should be viewed as the ultimate denial of the environmental destructiveness inherent to the capitalist mode of production (Buscher and Fletcher 2015). ISZs align with Buscher in recognizing capitalism's ever looming ecological crisis, while also departing from any imminent-collapse thesis. As such, ISZs rather than signaling capitalism's decline, instead point to the intensifying ecological contradictions that are being reframed and institutionalized by the state as new moral, ethical, and material imperatives. Yet, even within a broader paradigm of "ultimate denial" regarding the ecological destructiveness of capitalism, inverted sacrifice zones, by virtue of their inverted structure, represent the state's conditional admittance of capitalism's environmental consequences. Such zones acknowledge the present-day instability of capitalist production, which increasingly threatens the state's own present day viability.

ISZs are spaces of intense ecological preservation that nonetheless function to stabilize capitalism not through extraction per se, but by rendering ecological conservation itself productive for the state as revenue (taxes, carbon credits, NGO contributions). Within these zones, forests, biodiversity, and even traditional knowledge are curated, managed, and commodified, transforming preservation into a mechanism that supports rather than disrupts capitalist growth. This technocratic form of ecological management reflects a broader historical recognition of natural resource management as central to capital accumulation (Arrighi 2010; Li 2008; Luke 1997; Moore 2010). This natural resource management finds concrete expression in the Brazilian state of Acre, where, at Rio + 20, state and capital interests converged on an unprecedented scale within Brazilian environmentalism by designating the entire state of Acre as an inverted sacrifice zone – a space set aside as an exception to facilitate the technocratic diversification and preservation of an ever-appreciating forest asset. As with past crises in capitalist history, the state once again intervenes not to undo capitalism's destructiveness, but to rescue it from its own structural failures. The state acts to shield capitalist production from exhausting its labor and resource bases, effectively "saving the state from capitalism and capitalism from itself." In doing so, it enables capital to resume its path of infinite growth.

In this context, ISZs emerge as spatial responses to a global capitalism that has demonstrated its incapacity to manage ecological limits autonomously. These zones signal the state's effort to impose a technocratic form of ecological management precisely because unregulated capitalism has proven unable to ensure global sustainability. Yet this should not be interpreted as evidence that the state can perform ecological alchemy. As Büscher notes, some continue to believe that capitalism can be reformed, arguing that ecological unsustainability is not a necessary outcome of its fundamental laws of motion. According to this view, ecological efficiency can be enhanced without abandoning the pursuit of profit and accumulation. However, following Li (2008), this paper sides with those who see such optimism as "completely wishful thinking." Even in a context like China (with its immense centralized state capacity) Li argues that it is implausible to expect that the ecological contradictions of capitalism can be successfully internalized into a new, stable mode of accumulation (Gulick 2011).

As such, ISZs do not resolve the fundamental crisis of ecological sustainability under capitalism. Rather, they prolong it (and maybe that is the best we can do for now). They represent a paradoxical formation where both perspectives: capitalism's reformability and its structural ecological limits can appear true, depending on scale and temporality. In the long term, ISZs mark a tacit admission by capitalist-dependent states that ecological unsustainability is indeed an inevitable consequence of capitalism's systemic imperatives. Yet in the short term, they function as zones where ecological

efficiency can be performed, where sustainability appears manageable within a profit-driven framework. Ultimately, ISZs exemplify the power and flexibility of state-led exclusion, allowing capitalism to sustain the illusion of an infinite planet. One that can be perpetually restructured and optimized to serve the imperatives of infinite accumulation.

To illustrate how these dynamics materialize in practice, this paper turns to the case of Acre, a state in the western Amazon often overlooked in political and economic analyses. Through the SISA (System of Incentives for Environmental Services) initiative, Acre has been transformed into a model of inverted sacrifice governance. The state's preserved forests are no longer obstacles to development but assets in the global carbon economy and rural communities are not displaced but integrated into the apparatus of environmental value production, assigned roles as forest stewards and laborers within a newly imagined forest economy. This process exemplifies what Büscher et al. describe as a distinctive mode of commodification specific to conservation: unlike traditional efforts to extract and transform natural resources into mobile commodities, conservation seeks to commodify nature in place and valorizing them through ostensibly non-consumptive use (Büscher et al. 2012). These dynamics reveal the political and economic logics of inverted sacrifice zones: spaces preserved not in opposition to capitalism, but in service of its reproduction under evolving ecological constraints. This interpretation aligns with a growing body of scholarship that frames conservation more generally not as resistance to capitalist expansion, but as a critical mechanism within it (Brockington and Duffy 2010; Castree 2010; Corson, MacDonald, and Neimark 2013; Igoe, Neves, and Brockington 2010; Roth and Dressler 2012).

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows. First, a theoretical foundation of the state is laid by examining key thinkers on state power, sovereignty, and sacrifice – drawing from Schmitt, Agamben, Lenin, and Althusser to demonstrate how capitalist states wield both ideological and coercive apparatuses to manage sovereign exclusion. The paper then connects sovereign exclusion to the traditional concept of sacrifice zones, followed by the elaboration of their inversion. The case of Acre is presented as a concrete instantiation of this inversion, showing how state-led ecological preservation can be embedded in and co-opted by capitalist reproduction. Finally, the conclusion situates the concept of the inverted sacrifice zone within broader debates about climate politics, economic expansion, and future research directions.

## The Capitalist State, The Environment, and Sacrifice zones

The question of what constitutes the state has been taken up by a wide range of thinkers across political theory, sociology, and critical geography. Scholars

such as Allen (2024), Allinson et al. (2021), Bond (2022), Dunlap (2024), Fanon, Farrington, and Fanon (2002), Parson (2025), Scott (1998), Seymour (2024), Smith (2011), Truscello (2020), and Vettese and Pendergrass (2022) have all contributed important and varied perspectives to this long-standing debate. This literature reveals that the state is not a static institution but a dynamic and contested field, shaped by and shaping the social, material, and ecological conditions in which it operates.

But, for the purposes of understanding state sanctioned exception (sacrifice), none capture the basis of state power better than Schmitt and, later, Agamben. Carl Schmitt's argument on sovereignty is simple and unifying, a definition that exposes the inner workings of both liberal democracy and fascist dictatorship. He famously argues that: "Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception" (Agamben 2017, 17). Although very different authors living during different times, Schmitt and Agamben share a central concern with the origin of state power – sovereignty. They make clear in their writings that: sovereignty is the decision of whether to exclude or include bare life, that is, life without rights or protections. Sovereignty gives bare life "the particular privilege of being what whose exclusion founded the city of man" (Agamben 2017, 10).

This sovereignty, which founded the city of man, necessarily exists both outside the legal order and within it. It creates the laws that constitute it, while simultaneously holding the power to be the exception to those laws. After all, it is the sovereign who decides whether the law is to be suspended. Thus, the sovereign, whether an individual or a group (i.e a political party) lives off the exception alone. It is nothing other than what it captures inside itself through this inclusive exclusion: "it nourishes itself on this exception and is a dead letter without it" (Agamben 2017, 26). Ultimately, both authors make clear that sovereignty inhabits a space between the judiciary and bare life – the state of exception.

Sovereignty, or the state of exception, then, is not an anomaly but a structural feature of political life under any modern state system: liberal, communist, protectionist, extractivist, preservationist, corporatist, federal, parliamentary, autocratic, meritocratic, democratic, etc. We find the link between the state and sovereignty clearly expressed in Lenin's writing, decades before either Schmitt or Agamben. This is because past and present conceptions of sovereignty and the state have almost always treated them as synonymous – implicitly bound by their shared function of managing exclusion. Lenin's earlier and seemingly disconnected analysis of the state in "State and Revolution" argues that "The state is the product and the manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises when, where and to the extent that class antagonisms objectively cannot be reconciled" (Lenin 1917, 9). Lenin is, in effect, acknowledging sovereignty, though he conflates it with the state itself. The state arises during periods of irreconcilable class

conflict precisely because it can suspend itself from the law while simultaneously constituting it – fulfilling the function of managing exclusion to preserve societal cohesion for the benefit of one class over the other. Lenin attributes sovereignty to the state, but it is exclusion that defines the state, not the state that defines exclusion. As such, it is theoretically possible to have a non-exclusionary state, but there can be no sovereignty without exclusion. Putting Agamben, Schmitt, and Lenin into conversation allows for a pointed recovery of the state's foundations in exclusion. What remains relevant for the rest of this paper is how the modern state wields its power to exclude, to manage definitions of "the environment," establish sacrifice zones, and enact inverted sacrifices often without scrutiny.

From this understanding of the state; the modern state emerges as the sovereign organ of exclusion for the benefit of infinite capital growth which it relies on for revenue and performance legitimacy. What should be clear is that the modern sovereign state is an oppressive not reconciliatory organization. Within capitalism's global paradigm of infinite growth, the sovereign state functions as an exclusionary force delineating land and labor for the production of surplus value in capital markets. These markets underpin all modern systems that sustain life: food, water, energy, and transportation – placing humanity in a form of capitalist blackmail where we depend on capitalism for the conditions of modern life, even as it perpetuates the very crises of economic and environmental instability.

And so, modern states wield sovereignty to preserve the future of capitalism and in doing so themselves. They do this through their two arms (repressive and ideological).

Althusser's insights into ideological state apparatus' reveals how the state sustains capitalist reproduction not only through overt repression but also through the ideological institutions that shape what society deems normal, necessary, and desirable. These dual arms, repressive and ideological, work in tandem to uphold the social order required for capitalism to function (Althusser et al. 2014). Nowhere is this coordination more visible than in traditional sacrifice zones: geographies where the state exercises its sovereign exception to designate certain spaces – and the people within them – as expendable. These are not naturally occurring wastelands but actively produced zones of abandonment, legitimized through ideology and enforced through repression. The sacrifice zone is a spatial manifestation of the capitalist state's ability to suspend legal protections, isolate undesirable populations, and justify this abandonment as necessary for national or economic progress.

These zones are strategically designated, not incidental, as sites for exploitation in the name of progress, profit, and technological advancement (De Bruyn 2023). As such, they become loci of both physical devastation and socio-ecological displacement, reducing entire populations to a status of disposability (Lerner 2010). These sites often bear a disproportionate burden of

environmental harms, including pollution, contamination, toxic waste, and heavy industry. Sacrifice zones are part of the math in the chain of capitalist commodification, an input, if you will. They are areas of exclusion that reveal the sovereign core of the state and its contemporary entanglement with infinite capitalist growth; a relationship predicated on the state's role in making labor and land available for capitalist production.

This traditional sacrificial dynamic is illustrated by uranium mining during the Cold War, where the state's facilitation of resource extraction at the expense of marginalized populations exemplifies its role in sacrificing both land and labor for capitalist and geopolitical imperatives (Zografos and Robbins 2020). Traci Voyles takes a deep dive into the history and subject of these uranium sacrifice zones in her book "Wastelanding". She describes wastelands as engineered by "a State that has structurally excluded populations of color, the queer, immigrants, and others … because it is constituted on and through their exclusion." (Voyles 2015, 26).

Whether traditional or inverted, sacrifice zones rely on a state-defined understanding of "the environment." Importantly, this category is not timeless. For much of modern history, "the environment" as we now know it simply did not exist. In the early twentieth century, there was little incentive or conceptual framework to track pollution, measure hectares of deforestation, or quantify atmospheric $CO_2$, because industrial state capitalism had not yet generated the planetary-scale impacts that demanded such accounting. But, as capitalism grew alongside the state during the twentieth century it started to directly influence humanities definition of the environment, how to manage it, and why. As early as 1907 the Roosevelt administration was already aware that the natural endowments upon which "the welfare of this nation rests are becoming depleted, and in not a few cases, are already exhausted." (Luke 1997, 79) As a result, the emphasis on the environment by the 1980s transforms and is molded from "we have no right to kill nature" to "we may need nature someday" (Luke 1997, 67–68). Within this trajectory, the Amazon forest's symbolic status has also undergone a profound shift from an icon of tropical biodiversity to the Earth's most important carbon sink (Caple and Swanson 2025, 43). From this perspective, the environment (and the amazon) becomes less a moral concern and more a technical problem – resulting in environmental governance that revolves around the logic of thresholds and scientifically defined limits aimed at ensuring nature can continue functioning under the daily strain of capitalist pollution. The inverted sacrifice zone uses the exact same high modernist state logic[1] that undergirdles traditional sacrifice zones, but they look like pristine nature not wastelands.

[1]A high-modernist ideology: is best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing

## Inverted Sacrifice Zones

Inverted sacrifice zones, as found in Acre are constructed through sovereign logics. The difference lies in appearance, not in structure. In ISZs, state exclusion does not occur through "wastelanding", but through the conservation of old growth forests (pristine landing).

The political economy of inverted sacrifice zones lies in their productive inversion of traditional extractive logics. Whereas classic sacrifice zones are defined by extraction, displacement, and visible ruination – inverted sacrifice zones are defined by conservation, assemblages, and regeneration. Their productivity is not based on raw resource extraction but on preservation-as-commodity (or accumulation by conservation). In these zones, such as those in the Brazilian Amazon state of Acre, carbon offsets become the bridge to monetary value for the state. This requires centralized state control over forested territory, not for direct extraction, but for technocratic management of non-extraction. Inverted sacrifice zones create the illusion that capitalism can manage its own ecological contradictions, that environmental degradation can be offset by the rational, science-led actions of states and green markets. Just as traditional sacrifice zones hide, neutralize, and spatially concentrate the making of extraction, inverted sacrifice zones hide and concentrate the making of preservation.

At a local level the political economy of inverted sacrifice zone replaces dispossession with entitlements, and the deepening instability of capitalism with the aesthetic of governmental management. This shift is hardly surprising given that the deepening environmental crisis demands new strategies of state intervention.

As capitalism collides with the material and ecological limits of the planet, we should expect the state to reimagine strategies of exclusion in ways that reposition state-led capitalism as the protector of freedom, land, and life, even as it continues to fuel the ecological crisis it argues to be resolving. As new forms of sacrifice are deployed to sustain capitalist expansion under ecological constraint, it becomes clear that these inverted sacrifice zones are not spontaneous responses, but calculated constructs of the sovereign state designed to protect capital through selective preservation and exclusion.

Inverted sacrifice zones are preservation areas that do not explicitly serve to greenwash extraction but rather to explicitly bring territories and people under the control of the state during a time of unfolding ecological crisis in order to conserve natural resources and a stable climate for the indefinite reproduction of the capitalist state. The inverted sacrifice zone represents

satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws. It originated, of course, in the West, as a by-product of unprecedented progress in science and industry (Scott 4).

an inverted "slow violence" or a delayed destruction of the planet by prolonging the lifetime of global capitalism through novel applications of sovereignty and exclusion that preserve diverse natural areas – resurrecting zombies of historically murdered indigenous identities, for the maintenance of capitalist pollution. They reduce nature into a system "that can be dismantled, redesigned, and assembled anew to produce its many "resources" efficiently and in adequate amounts when and where needed in the modern marketplace" (Luke 1997, 79). The difference is that instead of uranium the inverted sacrifice zone produces oxygen and ecological diversity.

The concept of inverted sacrifice exists alongside the "treadmill of production," a system where the extraction of raw materials and the disposal of waste grow in tandem with expanding markets. While traditional sacrifice zones are the visible dumping grounds of this treadmill (spaces of extraction and contamination) inverted sacrifice zones are the less noticeable counterparts, made up of preserved, pristine landscapes that capitalism exponentially depends on. These zones are just as essential: they act as ecological buffers, spaces that offset, absorb, or legitimize the environmental damage being done elsewhere. By preserving certain landscapes as pristine, they help mask the ecological limits of the system itself. Thus, Inverted sacrifice zones are the state imposed structural supports for a global economic system that denies its own limits. By using state sovereignty to reserve living space for capitalism indefinitely, inverted sacrifice zones create the illusion of a planet larger than it truly is, even as they shrink it in practice by allowing capitalist pollution to exceed the moral and ethical boundaries once tied to land, freedom, and life. Ultimately, this process dehumanizes both people and the planet, reducing them to mere inputs and outputs for economic productivity (Table 1).

The decline of the environment is most alarming not only because it threatens the revenue flows but also because it could provoke widespread discontent and class consciousness in the working class that rally around a common cause of responding to a system which is leaving a smaller and smaller world while asking for more and more concessions from its citizens. Under capitalism we must work to survive, while work leaves us an environment that is harder and harder to survive in. A sign of this concern are the numerous state sponsored competitions and international events for designs for more efficient preservation areas. They are intentionally designed around efficiency, chosen, and nurtured for their biodiversity.

Within this framework, the preservation of forests takes on a familiar but strange character not as a challenge to capitalism, but as a means of prolonging its viability. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise and the global population grows, the careful conservation of remaining forests becomes increasingly vital with many of the world's major forest stands having already been destroyed by centuries of colonial and capitalist development.

**Table 1.** Comparison of sacrifice zones and inverted sacrifice zones.

| | Sacrifice Zones | Inverted Sacrifice Zones |
|---|---|---|
| The State | • Made an exception by the state<br>• Technocratic Management | • Made an exception by the state<br>• Technocratic Management |
| Capitalist value | • Extraction/Pollution/ Resources | • Environmental Offsets/Conservation/ Regeneration |
| Labor and knowledge | • Locally erased, displaced, and extracted from alongside the landscape<br>• Slave and precarious labor, extractive activities (Logging, mining, fishing etc) | • Locally resurrected, preserved, and curated alongside the landscape<br>• Government entitlements, regenerative activities (organic fertilization and maintaining old growth etc) |
| The "Environment" | • Used to justify the control of an ever increasing number of hectares to sustain the pollution and extraction needed for the reproduction of markets.<br>• Traditional resource managerialism in extraction | • Used to justify the control of an ever increasing number of hectares to sustain the pollution and extraction needed for the reproduction of markets.<br>• Emerging resource managerialism in preservation |
| Location | • Anywhere the state exerts control (i.e four corners region, USA) | • "Mega-diverse" regions in the global south where the state exerts control (i.e Acre, Brazil) |

Meanwhile, the technological solutions once promised in the late 1990s and early 2000s have failed to deliver meaningful progress in addressing ecological collapse.

The imperatives of maximizing forest diversity in this case requires demechanizing the maintenance of the forest. Needing instead flexible, specialized, cheap human labor that works best in the diverse jungle environment of the amazon rainforest. Through this process the people and "the forest as a habitat disappears and is replaced by the forest as an economic resource to be managed efficiently and profitably" (Scott 1998, 13).

Today, the old-growth forest, once considered too chaotic for controlled study, has replaced the managed monocrop as the ideal ecological asset. These spaces are, in many ways, the opposite of traditional laboratories. Yet paradoxically, as science shifts from controlled labs into these "natural" environments, it begins to remake the field itself into a new kind of laboratory. In doing so, science reasserts its authority by adapting to complexity, reinforcing its own legitimacy while reshaping the forest in its image. This marks a shift where traditional and Indigenous knowledge is gradually neutralized and absorbed into scientific frameworks, retooled for the purposes of the

capitalist state. It is precisely the complexity of the forest and its entangled relationship with the climate that now becomes the foundation for developing new, state-sanctioned regimes of forest management. And although the movement away from the "laboratory" is intended to reimagine the forest and its relationship to capitalism and the state, it quickly becomes a natural laboratory.

In the short run I have no doubt that the high modernist state's radical diversification of the amazon rainforest is/will be a resounding success; both for the capitalist class and state power. At the same time preservation areas confined within the capitalist state paradigm will fail to deliver on the utopian dream of scientific forestry, but in falling short will never-theless imprint the Amazon rainforest with its long term design: poverty, child labor, state control, and the reproduction of colonial roles and identities. The great environmental "revolution" of the Amazon rainforest into a diverse standing forest commodity machine is precisely the first step in the creation of a future "forestry science" that solidifies over time into a rigorous technical discipline at the disposal of the sovereign capitalist state.

Additionally, given that global environmental imaginaries are overwhelmingly shaped by the ideological apparatuses of the global North, it is unsurprising that inverted sacrifice zones are/will be first located in the mega diverse regions of the global South since they do not interfere with the territorial integrity of the core (industrialized global North) and simultaneously offer lower-cost sites of ecological labor and conservation enforcement. These "megadiverse" countries in the global South are home to approximately 58% of the world's biodiversity (Purton 2024) and offer the conditions under which inverted sacrifice zones are most plausible. In this arrangement, "financial resources from the global 'core' are funneled into states conserving natural resources in the 'periphery'". In a Wallerstienian world systems sense, this system preserves lucrative development prospects in core countries by outsourcing environmental mitigation to peripheral zones, where the ecological costs of capital can be offset more cheaply (Büscher and Fletcher 2015). These arrangements exploit global wage disparities: as Sodikoff (2009) describes, low-wage conservationists enable a dramatic reduction in the cost of protected area management. While managing protected areas in the U.S. can cost upwards of $$2,500/km$^2$, the same task in Tanzania and Kenya may cost as little as $$182 and $$94/km$^2$, respectively. Given this constellation of ecological value, labor cost, and political possibility, the Brazilian state of Acre situated in the Amazon rainforest emerges as an ideal type of the inverted sacrifice zone.

## The Acre

Marion Greenleaf recalls that Acrean friends and acquain-tances alike frequently griped that nothing was produced in the Acre. Everything they

bought, it seemed, had to be trucked in from Brazilian states to the south or imported. For some Acreans, this was a failing that seemed linked to the forest that covered over 85 percent of the state. "There is no economy here, There is only forest … it's not known whether [Acre] is the beginning or the end of the world" (Greenleaf 2024, 15–16).

Its remoteness has made it a hard territory for the Acrean state to control and extract revenue from. For a short period of time it served as a vital source of global rubber that formed the tires of bicycles and cars in the city centers. During this time the Acre was "one of the most commercially desirable stretches of territory on earth." (Greenleaf 2024, 17). But, as rubber production moved to southeast Asia the state's economy was once again abandoned.

This void in the economy and in capitalist productivity spurred the Acrean government to get creative. The Acrean state started to reimagine the standing forest in front of them not as the German forestry scientists saw timber in the early 1900s: valuable in the largest quantity of extractable timber, but instead valuable in the largest quantity of preserved diverse forest ecosystems. From 1999 to 2010 the Acre became an innovator in carbon markets and other market-based mitigation schemes and practices which polluters seek to "offset" their own emissions or otherwise monetarily compensate tropical forest regions for forgoing deforestation.

The many once tangential REDD + preservation projects were formalized and brought together under a new system with the creation of SISA in 2010. SISA, and specifically ISA-Carbono, is a state policy designed to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, while promoting conservation and sustainable forest management. This REDD + approach is based on three overall strategies: (i) command-and-control – promotion of environmental compliance, including application of CAR required by the Brazilian Forest Code; (ii) monitoring – improved monitoring of small-scale deforestation and forest degradation through technological advancements; and (iii) sustainable production – promotion of sustainable activities in both the agriculture and forestry sectors (Sills 2014).

But, SISA included a forest carbon program that went beyond small scale green capitalism, green washing and/or green extraction. So while government officials had initially considered creating a delineated REDD + project in a few priority areas within the state as was commonly done, it instead decided to expand the scope to include the state's entire territory. They started with a project and ended with a state system. In this system, the Acrean government measured deforestation across the state's entire territory rather than focusing on a specific region within it. The government could then sell the difference as carbon offsets or otherwise receive monetary compensation for it (Greenleaf 2024, 19). In other words at RIO + 20 Acrean state and capital interests came together on a larger scale than had ever been

seen in Brazilian environmentalism to designate the entire state of Acre as an inverted sacrifice zone by using its sovereignty within the greater Brazilian state to set aside its entire territory as an ecological exclusion in order to facilitate the technocratic diversification and preservation of an ever appreciating forest asset. Acre indeed had stepped away from environmental projects and moved on to create a high modernist state sponsored system. A system of inverted sacrifice, one that could be honed and replicated like the bike tires once made from Acrean rubber.

But, now that the true value of the forest was revealed, the thoughts of soy farms, mining operations, and logging drifted further and further away from the Acrean state's imaginary of productivity. Why would they, when the forest carbon's value could be more valuable than El Dorado. As the CEO of BlackRock (the world's largest investment firm) stated in his 2021 letter to fellow executives, "The climate transition presents a historic investment opportunity" (Greenleaf 2024, 8). This shift in value was not just rhetorical, it was backed by real money. Through the REDD + Early Movers (REM) Program, launched at Rio + 20, the Acrean government received €25 million from the German development bank KfW as compensation for avoiding carbon emissions between 2011 and 2015. These payments, priced at $$5 per ton of emissions reduced, marked Acre as the first recipient of REM funding. "The payments monetized emissions reductions and signaled the quality of Acrean forest carbon, and the socio environmental relations keeping it sequestered, for potential carbon credit buyers to come" (Greenleaf 2024, 7). This framing is not unique. It reflects a broader recognition among capitalists that tropical deforestation represents one of the most immediate and cost-effective levers for climate mitigation. Those who move early in these emerging markets understand they are securing access to nature at historically low prices, turning forests into undervalued assets poised for appreciation as environmental scarcity becomes more acute. Corporate leaders themselves have begun to articulate this shift in stark terms, acknowledging that "we are past the point where our land and oceans can meet the food, energy and commodity demands of our planet's seven billion inhabitants" (Büscher and Flecther 2015, 7). Even Bolsonaro, a right wing president keen on profiting from the deforestation of the Amazon, sought to profit from the emerging carbon markets, asking for a billion dollars in exchange for reducing deforestation in the Amazon and calling for "fair payment for ecosystem services." His administration framed Brazil as a carbon offset exporter, pledged to end illegal deforestation by 2028, and introduced legislation to compensate rural populations for their role in environmental stewardship (Greenleaf 2024, 8). Profiting from the protection of the Amazon rainforest is not a partisan issue in Brazil.

What made Acre's forest carbon stand out wasn't its standardization, but its uniqueness, tied to the specific ecological and social conditions of the

region (Greenleaf 2024, 3). Instead of displacing poor rural communities to make room for large landowners or corporations, these programs brought them into the fold of capitalism, integrating their labor and land into the state's environmental agenda (Greenleaf 2024, 22). Inverted sacrifice zones do not push the rural poor out; they incorporate them as part of the forest's value. Just as captured Aztec slaves were washed, well fed, and pampered the week leading up to their deaths. The earth and its labor is turned into an "environment" in order to be organized by the capitalist state up until its final moment. Whether it is given death on the battlefield as a traditional sacrifice zone or captured as tribute for the maintenance of the system (ISZ), everyone and everything is held within the capitalist state of exception.[2]

For example, during an embedded ethnographic encounter, Greenleaf describes visiting a rural family with state agricultural extension technicians. She observes a young boy, perhaps no older than twelve, working under the searing Amazonian sun, repeatedly smashing dried *mucuna* pods with a heavy stick. His eyes remain fixed on the seeds, toxic and inedible, that will later be processed by his mother while his father engages in conversation with the technician (Greenleaf 2024, 20–21). *Mucuna pruriens*, promoted by the state for its nitrogen-fixing properties, serves as a material and symbolic cornerstone of Acre's green developmentalism. In this vision, environmental sustainability is achieved not by dismantling extractive structures, but by retooling peasant labor through agroecological methods that are legible to state planners and international carbon markets. The boy's rhythmic movement and the family's diligent seed processing become acts of environmental stewardship, but they also reflect a deeper contradiction: this is labor made visible only to be appropriated into capitalist state survival. While framed as a shift away from slash-and-burn farming, the adoption of *mucuna* is not the result of spontaneous ecological consciousness but of the reproduction of the conditions necessary for capitalism to function both locally and internationally.

The agricultural technician, eager to justify the state's methods, praises the family's *mucuna*-fertilized fields as orderly and efficient, in contrast to the "mess" (*bagunça*) of neighboring plots (Greenleaf 2024, 22). This language is not innocent. It echoes a long history of colonial spatial imaginaries wherein indigenous and peasant lands are cast as disordered spaces awaiting

[2]Keep in mind that the number of preservation and inverted sacrifice zones remain relatively small compared to the capitalist surplus value that it enables. If the premium for these carbon capture forests was to the level necessary to be a 1–1 then there would be no profit margin for the capitalist system. Just like the worker, nature here is reproduced to the level that allows for the extraction of the maximum amount of surplus value. Whether the value of the forest is seen to capitalism as an extractive resource or not, as a resource valued by capitalism it will always be made into a form of "cheap nature" … forest-dependent – rather than deforestation-dependent, doesn't really matter because they are both capitalist dependant definitions of nature and value which privilege capitalist/state accumulation in the long term.

rational management. By marking certain zones as chaotic and others as disciplined, the state performs a familiar civilizing gesture this time, under the banner of inverted sacrifice. In this reordering the rainforest becomes a site of productive preservation, a landscape where non-extractive labor is domesticated, monitored, and monetized. But the lives of those performing this labor remain structurally precarious. These families remain materially impoverished, excluded from basic services such as running water, healthcare, and education (Greenleaf 2024, 25). They are economically subordinated, culturally stigmatized by ranchers and urban elites, and politically circumscribed. The contradiction is glaring: inclusion, in this context, refers to the incorporation of marginalized populations into a regime of visibility and value extraction that leaves the foundational structures of dispossession intact. The state disperses targeted cash payments and development programs, not to empower recipients, but to incorporate them into a system of managed marginality. This inclusion operates as a performance of care and modernity, masking a deeper logic of exclusion. The Acre shows us that poverty does not arise solely from the private seizure of commons through extractive development, but also from public, non-extractive community oriented appropriation when orchestrated by a capitalist state. ISZs make visible the unsettling fact that even collective or state-held conservation spaces can perpetuate poverty when they operate within exclusion on behalf of the capitalist state. In these zones, old-growth forests are protected using local indigenous labor, compensated through government entitlements. But this arrangement does not challenge the deeper question: who benefits? In Acre, whether capitalists or environmentalists draw the lines of governance, the result is the same, local populations remain structurally impoverished.

## Conclusion

This paper has outlined the theoretical and empirical contours of inverted sacrifice zones as emergent spatial formations that fuse environmental preservation with the enduring logics of capitalist sovereignty. Drawing on a rich genealogy of state theory from Schmitt's and Agamben's formulations of sovereignty as exceptions, this analysis has argued that the modern capitalist state is structured not around reconciliation, but around systemic exclusion. The sovereign's power lies in its capacity to decide on the exception: who and what is made legible, governable, and ultimately, expendable. This logic reveals the capitalist state as a form of rule that perpetuates itself through both physical coercion and ideological apparatuses, embedding the reproduction of labor power and obedience within everyday life.

Within this framework, sacrifice zones whether traditional or inverted are not accidents but constitutive features of the capitalist state's spatial ordering. Where conventional sacrifice zones are designated sites of toxic exposure and

extraction, inverted sacrifice zones emerge as sanctuaries of preservation that nonetheless operate through exclusion and labor discipline. They are not oppositional to capitalist development; rather, they are its ecological insurance policy, designed to stabilize capital accumulation under planetary duress.

In the Brazilian state of Acre, the green developmentalist project under the PT (workers party) illustrates this logic with exceptional clarity. Through the SISA system, the Acrean state has redefined the standing forest as a public carbon asset, enrolling marginalized populations into environmental labor schemes while maintaining their social and economic subordination. Inclusion here is not emancipation, it is technocratic sacrifice, where traditional knowledge, peasant labor, and indigenous identities are preserved not as ends in themselves but as instruments of state-led environmental management. These people, like the forests they tend, are folded into the state's system of value through a carefully curated logic of visibility and governance. Thus, the inverted sacrifice zone becomes a spatial expression of capitalist sovereignty in the age of ecological crisis: a site where nature and labor are conserved not against capital, but for it.

This leaves the capitalist state in a position of extreme power when it is solely responsible for the protection and extraction of the environment.[3] This dynamic places the natural world in a position similar to homo sacer "whose body exists in its capacity to be killed but not sacrificed, a living pledge to its subjection to the power of death" (Agamben 2017, 76). It is as if the Amazon rainforest has to pay for its preservation with an unconditional subjection to a power of death (the sovereign state), as if its life were only able to enter the "city of men" under the double exception of being capable of being killed and yet not sacrificed. This further expansion of sovereignty past the idea of man is a dangerous development which threatens to bring the entire world under the domain of the sovereign capitalist state. Shrinking the living space in the world as it expands meaningless profits for a capitalist class.

The concept of the inverted sacrifice zone opens several promising avenues for future research. First, the Amazon cannot be conceived of as a single frontier, but rather as a mosaic shaped by various waves of occupation, each reflecting the region's ecological, political, and cultural diversity (Rivero and Seisdedos 2010, 69). Some areas have become classic sacrifice zones – sites of accumulation through dispossession – while others, like Acre, are more aligned with the logic of the ISZ. Why has Acre emerged as an ISZ, while other Amazonian states remain entrenched in extractivist or green capitalist paradigms? One answer may lie not only in ecological or economic factors but in how cultural and identity politics are mobilized and managed in particular spaces.

[3]To the misfortune of society and scholars the state was the first to substantially advance a definition of the environment.

Another promising direction is the investigation of the identities and cultural practices being resurrected, managed, or preserved within these zones. Understanding how state-led environmental governance selectively revives and instrumentalizes marginalized identities could offer deeper insight into the ideological functions of inverted sacrifice. Finally, future research might theorize different modalities of inversion by examining how these zones emerge not only through metabolic and ecological logics but also through historical and geographic dimensions. This broader theorization could illuminate the diverse mechanisms through which states convert preservation into sacrificial governance.

Most importantly, the inverted sacrifice zone and this paper are not meant to diminish the efforts of environmentalists all around the planet who work tirelessly to find solutions to an impossible problem. The emergence of inverted sacrifice zones should prompt us to ask which aspects of the preservation system are no longer serving their intended purpose and may, in fact, be reinforcing the very structures they were meant to oppose. This paper has aimed, much like critical science itself, to identify the false assumptions that obscure our understanding – moving us closer to a relative truth through the process of exclusion. The goal is not to abandon all environmental efforts simply because they exist within a capitalist framework, but rather to act with full awareness of that framework's constraints and logics. Recognizing the existence of the capitalist state does not paralyze us; it clarifies the stakes. It allows us to imagine environmental projects that confront capitalist inversions of preservation, rather than unconsciously reproducing them. What we need are not new mechanisms to sustain the capitalist state but new political and ecological imaginaries. Identifying inverted sacrifice zones for what they are removes the rose-colored glasses of state led preservation and the illusory neutrality of its "science". It is not enough to develop new tools to solve the next capitalist crisis, but to fundamentally reorient our thinking away from sacrifice for the sovereign capitalist state and toward, at the very least, sacrifice for the sovereign individual.

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