

Understanding ‘post-truth’ development: conservation, biodiversity decline, and denial in Bolsonaro’s Brazil

This presentation focuses on unfolding questions surrounding authoritarian governance, economic expansion, and the denial of environmental degradation, in Brazil and beyond. While 14 years of centre-left government made strong gains in social and environmental protections, in Brazil it also saw a deepening dependence on agri-industrial and mineral exports that was vulnerable to the post-2008 slowdown. Bolsonaro’s rise to power was based on a superficial condemnation of ‘elite politics’ and ‘globalism’, which in urban areas tapped into working-class discontent with crime, and slow progress in addressing privileges in areas like pensions and tax. I argue that this discourse in fact masks the deepening of extractivist neoliberalism alongside the militarisation of everyday life, helped along by (social) media manipulation with scant regard for the truth. Discourses of the environment as ‘there for the taking’ remain central to Bolsonaro’s nationalist-territorial appeal, and his administration has granted numerous concessions to livestock, soya and mining interests intent on removing environmental and minority protections.

But ‘post-truth’ goes beyond this, increasingly manifesting in techniques of bureaucratic obfuscation and confusion. Using the examples of the recent *Fundo Amazonia* debacle surrounding oversight from Germany and Norway over forest conservation, as well as the recent widespread forest fires, I argue that this is a fast-paced process entangling opposition forces—in government administration, media, and environmental agencies—in bureaucratic process and debate, which ultimately allows private (and often nominally illegal) forces to operate with few constraints. While the denial of environmental crisis remains central to the underpinning of the new authoritarianism, resulting tensions over development and conservation paths, in Brazil and globally, are leading to new intensifications in resistance, debate, and instability.

Dr. Robert Coates is Lecturer in the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. His research focuses on urban hazards and disasters, conservation at the urban-rural interface, and development and environment debates, especially in Brazil.

