

Book Review

- *The Brazilian Amazonia in Change I: Opening Up and Colonisation in the 1970s*, by Jan M. G. Kleinpenning, Transcript Publishing, 2025
- *The Brazilian Amazonia in Change II: Five Decades of Exploitation, Deforestation and Attempts at Sustainable Development*, by Gerd Kohlhepp, Transcript Publishing, 2025

Few regions have fascinated intellectuals as powerfully as the Amazon. From the missionaries, state authorities, and naturalists who travelled through the region centuries ago to the more recent ecologists, anthropologists, geographers, and other social scientists, the Amazon has occupied a central place in the global intellectual imagination. It is therefore not surprising that the Amazon has been imagined in many ways. In certain narratives, it appears as an exuberant sanctuary of nature, the “lungs” of the earth, a planetary water pump, a regulator of the global climate, or a living repository of biodiversity that should be protected. In others, it is portrayed as a mosaic of peoples, languages, and cultures that can deepen our understanding of humankind. For many scholars, it is also a region where alternative livelihoods challenge conventional economic thinking and offer insights into how societies might live more harmoniously with our planet. Taken together, these multiple dimensions have made the Amazon part of the world’s shared heritage, continuously attracting scholars seeking solutions to some of the most fundamental challenges of our time.

It is within this long-standing intellectual engagement with the region that the joint publication by Kleinpenning and Kohlhepp, *The Brazilian Amazonia in Change*, volumes I and II, should be situated. The books offer a welcome revisitation of the authors’ long engagement with the region, as part of the Dutch and German traditions of human geography. Reading them provides an opportunity for those unfamiliar with the region to gain a comprehensive introduction to it, while for more experienced readers, it invites revisiting established ideas or reviving references and points of view. Both authors were pioneers in a long tradition of on-the-ground research on the Amazon frontier that documents and theorises socio-environmental dynamics, migration, land-use change, and conflict along the frontier of settlement and land-use change. This research tradition dates back to the 1960s and 1970s and emerged largely in response to the

military government's initiatives to open new roads, establish colonization schemes, attract private investors, and promote mining, timber extraction, and agricultural expansion in the region. These policies were aimed at "occupying" and "modernising" the Amazon, which was portrayed as "empty" and "backwards". This tradition, which likely finds one of its most important references in the earlier work of Orlando Valverde, includes influential scholars such as Otávio Velho, José de Souza Martins, Charles Wood, Marianne Schmink, and Emílio Moran, among many others. Their works remain key references in our courses and discussions on Amazonia and its agrarian dynamics today.

The work of Jan Kleinpenning, published in the first volume *The Brazilian Amazonia in Change I: Opening Up and Colonisation in the 1970s*, takes the reader back to the debates of that decade. The book offers a valuable snapshot of how scholars at the time interpreted the early stages of Amazonian frontier expansion. Drawing on adapted versions of his original texts, Kleinpenning discusses the federal development strategies for the Amazon promoted by Brazil's military government in the 1970s. He reviews key policy initiatives such as the Manaus Free Trade Zone and the broader industrialisation strategy, before turning to the colonisation projects. A detailed case study of the Altamira I colonisation project examines the spatial organisation of settlements, including the size and distribution of plots, the structure of *agrovilas*, and the establishment of forest reserves. He also presents a case study of Altamira in which he assesses the impacts of the road and settlement process by comparing data from 1970 and 1980. Particularly striking is the methodological context of the time: research was conducted without many of the tools that are now standard, such as remote sensing, and with limited statistical information available from institutions like IBGE, SUDAM, and IPEA.

Reading these texts today is interesting because many of the transformations that would later reshape the region, such as the expansion of cocoa and mining, and the impacts of projects like Belo Monte, were not yet underway. The book is also rich in references and initiatives from that period that were lost, such as Eliseu Rezende's article "O papel da rodovia no desenvolvimento da Amazônia", and the mention of pioneering research initiatives such as the Rondon Project, which sent university students to poorer regions of Brazil, and the Programa Trópico Húmido, financed through the National Integration Program (PIN). Kleinpenning's analysis pioneered the highlighting of the limited outcomes of early colonisation efforts and opened the discussion on the transition to a second phase of frontier expansion, which increasingly favoured medium-sized properties allocated to private individuals and corporations. This sets the stage for the second volume, *The Brazilian Amazonia in Change II: Five Decades of Exploitation, Deforestation and Attempts at Sustainable Development*.

Gerd Kohlhepp's book is organised into three main parts and covers a wide range of important topics that cannot be explored in detail here. In brief, the first part presents the "top-down" military strategies implemented in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Grande Carajás Program, the Polonoroeste Program, and

foreign investments such as the well-known Volkswagen project in Santana do Araguaia. It also revisits earlier initiatives, such as the first large-scale mining investment in the Amazon in the mid-1950s in Serra do Navio (Amapá), as well as the Jari Project. In the second part, Kohlhepp examines the emergence of the socio-environmental agenda, particularly strengthened through the PPG7 (Pilot Program to Conserve the Brazilian Rain Forest), alongside the rise of social movements, the professionalisation of NGOs, and the expansion of academic institutions.¹ Yet, this period was not without contradictions, as it also witnessed the continued expansion of agribusiness into the frontier and the persistence of large infrastructure projects such as the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam. The third part addresses the more recent period under Bolsonaro's government, discussing issues such as the EU–Mercosur agreement, the Amazon Fund, the dismantling of the environmental system, and the intensification of socio-environmental conflicts, particularly involving Indigenous groups. It also examines deforestation trends and brings the discussion forward to contemporary debates on climate change and tipping points in the Amazon system. In the epilogue, Kohlhepp addresses recent developments under Lula da Silva.

Kohlhepp's analysis provides a comprehensive and richly detailed account of more than fifty years of socioenvironmental transformations in the Amazon. From the early state-led colonisation schemes and frontier expansion policies to the contemporary debates surrounding international trade or climate finance, he presents a narrative shaped by hope, apprehension, and contradiction. One of the strengths of Kohlhepp's work lies precisely in his ability to capture the complexity of these transformations without reducing the Amazon to simplistic narratives of either destruction or salvation. The Amazon emerges instead as a dynamic and disputed territory, shaped by multiple actors, competing development projects, and shifting political and economic agendas across time. In this sense, his work remains remarkably relevant today.

At a moment when the Amazon once again occupies a central place in global discussions on climate change, biodiversity, and bioeconomy, Kleinpenning and Kohlhepp remind us that contemporary debates cannot be understood without acknowledging the historical trajectories that produced the region's current social and territorial configurations.

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Notes

- 1 A particularly important contribution of his career was also his role in major German–Brazilian research programs, notably SHIFT (Studies on Human Impact on Forests and Floodplains in the Brazilian Tropics), conducted between 1993 and 1998.