

SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA

469

FROM PIN TO PAC

BRAZILIAN INDIANS AS HOSTAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

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Universidade de Brasília

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Daniel Schroeter Simião

FROM PIN TO PAC
BRAZILIAN INDIANS AS HOSTAGES OF DEVELOPMENT¹

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If we look at Brazilian history from the vantage point of developmental ventures, we can see that in the past 150 years a number of projects that promised either wealth or national security turned out to be a waste of money and human lives. In the wake of government whims, hundreds of indigenous peoples suffered the loss of large portions of their traditional lands, not to speak of severe depopulation. This is a recurring pattern of the type of development pursued in Brazil, especially from the Republican turn (1889) to the present. As demonstration, I shall focus on four events in the Republican era that directly affected indigenous peoples in the Amazon. One is the opening up of the telegraph lines at the turn of the twentieth century. Second is the building of the Madeira-Mamoré railway in the early 1900s. Third is the construction of the Transamazon complex in the 1970s. Forth is the hydroelectric projects of the Lula administration.

¹ Paper presented at the Symposium *Globalization in the Amazon: Exploiting natural resources and the sustainability of the human factor*, The University of Haifa, Israel, May 26-28, 2010

1. **The telegraph lines.** As a delayed reaction to the aftermath of the Paraguayan War (1865-1870), the Brazilian government, realizing how fragile the western border was to invasions, as late as 1892, began the construction of a series of telegraph lines as an attempt to take control over the vast hinterland that had laid virtually outside the State's dominion. In charge of the works from 1900 to 1915 was a young Army officer who was to become a major figure in Brazilian indigenism: Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon (Lima 1995). He opened up hundreds of kilometers, mapped the terrain, and contacted dozens of indigenous peoples for the first time. As he gathered strategic information on that vast region, he inaugurated the method of "pacification" of indigenous groups who had been kept to themselves in the western forests. Rondon was famous for his motto "die if need be, but never kill" (Ramos 1998). Nevertheless, his expeditions, comprising hundreds of men not always in good health conditions, were responsible for the exposure of the recently contacted Indians to lethal contagious diseases. Furthermore, the lavish distribution of trade goods at each episode of pacification resulted in the inevitable dependence of the Indians on material objects that all of a sudden became indispensable needs.

The so-called *Comissão Rondon* that built the telegraph line from Cuiabá to Santo Antonio do Madeira (later Porto Velho) from 1907 to 1915 coincided with the construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railway. That joint effort accelerated the process of contact and dependence of yet more indigenous peoples. Rondon's Positivist doctrine of Comtean persuasion convinced him that the Indians should be protected until they came to the stage of spontaneously choosing civilization. He was aware of being responsible for flinging open vast areas still unknown and exposing the lives of those peoples to the hazards of contact. But he was also convinced that his method of bringing the Indians into civilization was far more humane than the persecution and destruction

promoted “not only by pioneers of extractive industries, but also by scientific explorers of railroad companies with the pretext that the Indians are irreducible to civilization” (Gagliardi 1989: 166).

Despite Rondon’s humanistic inclinations, his military operations in the Wild West of Brazil, directly or indirectly, caused much damage to the multitude of indigenous peoples who lived along the country’s western border. At the end of his long life, Rondon recognized the fallacy of his Positivist premises. “He became convinced that we should no longer nationalize the Indians, for, he affirmed, it ‘creates serious problems and maladjustments’” (Schaden 1960). He died a disillusioned man about the fate of pacified Indians. The irony of it was that the telegraph lines Rondon so diligently worked on were already obsolete by the time he completed his job. In fact, as early as 1896, an underwater telegraph line had already been installed between Belém and Manaus. When Rondon reached Porto Velho, he found a wireless telegraph operating between this town and Manaus (Ferreira [1959] 2005: 251). Nevertheless, Rondon persisted in his military job of planting telegraph posts in the Amazon, in a demonstration of disciplinary stubbornness that reminds one of the fanatical British officer in the film *The Bridge of the River Kuai*. Regardless of the ends, what counted were the means.

2. **The Madeira-Mamoré railway** had a similar outcome. It was built between 1907 and 1912 to connect the towns of Porto Velho and Guarajá-Mirim in what is today the state of Rondônia. It resulted from the negotiations between Brazil and Bolivia over the possession of a large area, which is now the state of Acre in Brazil. The Treaty of Petrópolis signed in 1903 put an end to the border dispute between both countries and charged Brazil with the construction of the railway within four years. It was meant to transport rubber through the Amazon and its tributaries toward the Atlantic coast. For

the construction of its 364 kilometers, more than twenty thousand workers from various parts of the world were contracted. However, tropical diseases, particularly malaria, killed nearly ten percent of the labor force (Ferreira [1959] 2005: 209-301). The Brazilian state and the private companies involved in the project ignored several warnings by engineers who argued that the railway was not a viable venture. The colossal expenditure in the construction, they argued, would raise the freight costs to one of the highest in the world. Moreover, at that point, rubber exports no longer justified the building of the railroad (Foot Hardman 1988: 137). When it was completed in 1912, the rubber industry was in full collapse due to the plunging prices in international markets. By that time, the Madeira-Mamoré railroad was an obsolete enterprise also due to alternative routes secured by Bolivia to the Pacific and to the Atlantic via Buenos Aires (Foot Hardman 1988: 137). By 1972, it was no longer in operation and its parts were sold as junk. The “Devil’s railway,” as it came to be called, fell in disuse, in the 1980s was briefly revived for tourism in discontinuous stretches, then laid to rust, until it was posthumously recognized as a national memento with historical value. Replacing the Madeira-Mamoré railway the Cuiabá-Porto Velho highway was opened up in the early 1960s with equally devastating consequences for the Indians (Price 1989).

Besides the 1,552 casualties, the “Devil’s railway” also upset the lives of perhaps hundreds of indigenous peoples in the area, especially the Tupi-speaking Kawahib, and a group known at that time as Karipuna. It is worth noting that the *Comissão Rondon*, which was opening the telegraph line from Cuiabá to Santo Antonio do Madeira, met the railroad construction teams and suffered severe bouts of malaria and other tropical diseases, besides several assaults by Nambiquara and Caritiana Indians. Part of Rondon’s troops were then made up of runaway rebels from various

parts of the country. As an officer of the *Comissão Rondon* put it, the Brazilian Army was comprised of men “coming exclusively from the lower class of society and mostly illiterate, uneducated, and amoral individuals ... a vagrant and unruly rabble who plagued the ranks with their incurable and entrenched bad habits” (Amílcar de Magalhães quoted in Foot Hardman 1988: 161). Those were some of the people charged with establishing first contact with the Indians. “The majority of these men died in a few months, dispersed in camps along the telegraph line” (Foot Hardman 1988: 159).

3. **The Transamazon.** This road network was conceived to be the salvation of both the thirsty Northeast and the hungry North. The idea was to settle drought victims of northeastern states in the heart of Amazonia. It was a major component of the Plano de Integração Nacional (National Integration Plan), or PIN, in the spirit of the megaprojects that oriented the Brazilian military government in the 1970s.

During the Medici and Geisel administrations, Amazonia was the target of large-scale economic schemes that included road construction, colonization, mining, hydroelectric works, and cattle ranching. The region has the largest concentration of indigenous peoples in Brazil; many of them were suddenly exposed for the first time to Western diseases, loss of land and social turmoil. Thousands of workers in poor health and totally unprepared for the complexities of first contact irrupted in Indian areas. Perhaps unwillingly, they caused the spread of epidemic diseases and the subsequent decimation of previously uncontacted peoples. Not so unwillingly, they were also responsible for introducing prostitution and begging among them.

The Medici highway program resulted in no less than 161 indigenous peoples, or more than 90 percent of their total number in the Amazon, were directly affected by the roads which had been opened up for large-scale non-indigenous colonization. The

Cuiabá-Santarém road hit the Panará; in less than 20 months, their estimated population of 400 was reduced to 79 people (Arnt *et al* 1998). The Parakanã were “pacified” during the construction of the Transamazon, which meant the death of 45 percent of their population in 12 months (Bourne 1978). The Yanomami affected by the Perimetral Norte highway in Roraima suffered a loss of about 22 percent of the people in the four villages closest to the construction in 1974-5, the first year; three years later, a further 50 percent of another village cluster died during a measles epidemic (Ramos 1979: 222-223).

Fiscal incentives by the Brazilian government in the mid-1970s encouraged a number of national and international companies to initiate large-scale agribusiness in the Amazon. These operations encroached upon the following indigenous peoples: nine Apalaí and several Kayapó villages in the state of Pará; the Tembé-Urubu Kaapor Indian land in Maranhão; several Shavante villages; the northern groups of the Xingu Park; the Tapirapé Indians; and the Araguaia Indian land in Mato Grosso and Goiás. Agribusiness projects also affected the Yanomami. In the Mucajaí River valley they lost nearly half the area the government had assigned them; the villages in the Apiaú River area were totally uprooted as a colonization project took over their land. Expelled from their territory, the Yanomami at Apiaú dispersed: some of them roamed about other villages while others moved to the newly created town of Alto Alegre (Ramos 1979).

One of the largest colonization ventures in the Amazon was the Polonoroeste Project that straddled the states of Mato Grosso and Rondônia. Planned in the 1970s, it began in 1982, designed to “rationalize” the settlement and productivity of the dense stream of migrants flowing into the area. The plan was to open and pave a network of roads and intensify agriculture by means of a massive colonization program, all backed up by mitigating measures, such as health care, land tenure legalization, ecological

preservation, and protection of indigenous peoples. However, the result fell far short of these promises (Price 1989).

About thirty indigenous groups – approximately eight thousand people in 58 villages – lived in the area covered by Polonoroeste. The Nambiquara suffered a particularly severe disruption with the occupation of the Guaporé valley. With the opening up of the Cuiabá-Porto Velho road – that came to replace the defunct Madeira-Mamoré railway –, the invasion of Nambiquara lands was quick and brutal. From 1968 to 1979, no fewer than twenty-one companies established agribusiness activities in the valley. From an estimated population of twenty thousand in early twentieth century, the Nambiquara population fell to 650 in 1980. Scarcely ten years after coming into permanent contact with national society, had the Guaporé Nambiquara found themselves in a “neon jungle,” in the expression of their ethnographer, David Price (1989).

The 1970s were the decade of the Brazilian economic miracle, when the military regime attracted huge amounts of foreign funding for megaprojects in the Amazon. Severe droughts were devastating large parts of the Northeast and the chronic poverty of the region was treated as a mere consequence of bad climate. To solve the problem of people without water the Medici government promoted the exodus of thousands of northeastern families to the land of water, that is, Amazonia. The creation of the short-lived *agrovilas* along the Transamazon highway was part of this colonization project, which had the extra advantage of contributing to the PIN, the National Integration Plan, a grandiose nationalist scheme for the geopolitical control of the Amazon. Besides contributing to Brazil’s gigantic foreign debt at that time, the miracle decade left a trail of indigenous casualties and plenty of regional conflicts.

The construction of the Manaus-Boa Vista highway in the 1970s brought to the Waimiri-Atroari Indians a great deal of losses. From a probable two thousand in the nineteenth century, they were down to 332 people in 1983. Like the Parakanã, they had to cope with the destructive road-dam-mining triad. Unlike the Tucuruí hydroelectric that affected the former, the Balbina dam built in Waimiri-Atroari lands turned out to be an engineering fiasco: the reservoir is shallow and the numerous islands within it prevent water circulation. It flooded over two thousand hectares, the equivalent of the Tucuruí reservoir, but produces only 250 MW compared to the 7,300 MW of Tucuruí (Ricardo 1991: 77).

A few years after the opening of the Transamazon and the Perimetral Norte, they were hardly drivable, as the jungle quickly reclaiming them and the heavy rains turning them into mud baths. Once again, the folly of conquering the Amazon at all costs devoured enormous sums of money and many lives both human and non-human

4. **Lula's PAC.** Finally we come to President Lula's second administration and his ambitious PAC – Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (Program for Growth Acceleration). In a blatant demonstration of how easily the lessons of history are either forgotten or disregarded, the PAC is incurring in the same, or worse, errors that in the past left deep scars in the country's economy and consciousness.

Brazil is going through a new phase of hard pushing for development. The main target is the production of energy translated into deep-sea oil extraction and hydroelectric power. Again, the specter of futile dams haunts thousands of people in the Amazon and elsewhere in the country. The PAC planners concentrate their attention on the "potential" of two major tributaries of the Amazon River: Madeira and Xingu. Both

areas are home to several indigenous peoples and *ribeirinhos*, regional people who earn their living mainly from river resources.

Undoubtedly, the most important of the PAC projects is the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam on the Xingu River. Formerly known as Kararaô, this project has been the target of continuous criticisms on the part of the people affected by it as well as by a number of engineers and other experts on dams. In 1989, the Kayapó Indians organized and led a huge manifestation against the projected series of dams on the Xingu River. Called the First Meeting of Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu, the event gathered approximately three thousand people in the town of Altamira, 650 were Indians and the rest observers and journalists from Brazil and abroad. A widely publicized incident marked that event when a Kayapó woman, Taira, pressed the blade of her machete on the face of the man who became president of Eletronorte, the state company in charge of the project. For nearly 20 years, the government kept a low profile about it.

Meanwhile the project was renamed as Belo Monte and its dimensions revised. The lake size, originally calculated to be over one thousand square kilometers, shrank to 400 square kilometers. However, the EIA, Estudo de Impacto Ambiental (Study of Environmental Impact), legally required for projects such as that, is severely criticized for its superficiality and deficient information on crucial human and environmental factors. One expert report states that the EIA “shows a clear line of praise for the works, based on the concealment of grave consequences and on the technical patching up of the old project.” The same report emphasizes that Belo Monte will tamper with “a monument of biodiversity.” It proposes a series of disaster-producing measures: To bisect the Xingu River, precisely at one of its richest points (Volta Grande, *Big Curve*); to build two canals on each section 12 km long and up to 500 m wide, plus an eight km

long canal, thus interrupting many important streams; and to erect 28 dams, some 50 to 60 meters high, one kilometer long with branches up to 80-100 meters. This complex network of concrete would cover rural areas and parts of the Transamazon highway. The same report compares the resulting amount of earth, rocks, and excavations to the magnitude of the carving out for the Panama Canal, that is, 200 million cubic meters the destination of which is unknown.

The cost cited in the EIA is an estimated 11 billion reais (about six billion dollars) against the 30 billion disclosed by the media to produce around 11,200 MW of which only 4,400 are permanent, due to the low flood of the river in the dry season (Painel de Especialistas examina viabilidade de Belo Monte. *ISA:: Especial Belo Monte* <http://www.socioambiental.org/esp/bm/esp.asp>. (Accessed 19/05/2010)).

The Panel of Experts also points out that as far as the indigenous peoples are concerned, Belo Monte is a disaster foretold an omen of violated rights. Contrary to the official assertions, the Indians who live in the Xingu region will suffer directly some of the effects of the gigantic dam, touted as the third largest dam in the world (after the Chinese Three Gorges and Itaipu on the Brazil-Paraguay border)! As now planned, Belo Monte will change the flow of the Xingu River and tributaries at the Big Curve, resulting in water scarcity, a permanent dry season and loss of land and river fauna. Unlike what the EIA states, these are not just byproducts, but will have serious consequences for indigenous lives. Moreover, the arrival of thousands of workers in the outskirts of indigenous villages is bound to create health and food problems. The experts conclude: “Brazil doesn’t need Belo Monte, a project full of problems that should be abandoned” not only for its technical flaws, but especially for its extremely serious environmental and social costs.

Mobilization against Belo Monte had a new boost in 2008 during the Second Meeting of Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu when a new organization was launched, the Xingu Lives Forever Movement. Its leader, Antônia Melo, from the town of Altamira, reminds us of previous bitter experiences with dams in the Amazon:

We know about the Tucuruí dam. More than 25 years after its construction, there is still no solution to the crucial problem of compensation to hundreds of people and families who were forcefully expelled from their houses and lands. ... [A]mong the damages Belo Monte will cause the people living both downriver and upriver on the Xingu, are a large number of families losing their lands; increase in land invasions; exodus of rural people to the cities ...; increase in poverty; urban swelling and social disorganization; increase in environmental and economic violence of rural, indigenous, and riverine families; food and water shortages” (ISA: *Especial Belo Monte* <http://www.socioambiental.org/esp/bm/esp.asp>. (Accessed 19/05/2010)).

She goes on to criticize the Lula administration for making State funds available to cover up to 80 percent of Belo Monte expenses.

All these problems transpired in the tortuous auction process that involved a number of private companies, many of which stepped out of the competition due to the uncertainties of the project. The Federal Justice in Altamira succeeded in halting the auction three times before it finally occurred on April 20, 2010. President Lula declared it was insane to abandon Belo Monte and assured that, if all else failed, the government would take it over single-handed. In the end, after a ten-minute auction, the winning parties were reduced to a private firm (Queiroz Galvão) and the State company Chesf (Companhia Hidroelétrica do São Francisco) with precise 49.98 percent of participation.

Add to this the BNDES contribution and other federal sums and Belo Monte will be a virtual government enterprise, very different from the original idea of handing it over to the private sector. A former director of the Petroleum National Agency expressed his concern about this issue: “What shouldn’t happen is the bill be charged to the government if the costs exceed what was originally agreed upon,” and he concludes: “We cannot repeat what happened to the construction of the Balbina hydroelectric in Amazonas. It left a trail of destitution in the region. ... [D]rug traffic and prostitution took over.” <http://portalexame.abril.com.br/meio-ambiente-e-energia/noticias/foi-tacada-arriscada>. (Accessed May 20, 2010).

Meanwhile, the Federal Public Ministry in the state of Pará has filed no less than 13 suits with the Regional Federal Court in Brasilia against the Belo Monte project. An NGO and the Catholic Church (CIMI – Missionary Indigenist Council) have also judicially requested the annulment of the auction and indeed, of the entire hydroelectric enterprise.

Adding insult to injury, one finds that the winning private company, Queiroz Galvão, is involved in a number of investigations for illicit dealings in other contracts, such as frauds in auctions, active and passive corruption, etc. This signals a bountiful season for corruption. <http://www.radiomundoreal.fm/Um-belo-monte-de-negocios?lang=es> (Accessed May 20, 2010).

In short, like other fiascos in the past, this is one more appalling chronicle of a disaster foretold.

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