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Indigenous People, Traditional People, and Conservation in the Amazon

IN A STUNNING REVERSAL OF IDEOLOGICAL FORTUNE, traditional people in the Amazon, who until recently were deemed, at best, candidates for, if not hindrances to, “development,” have been promoted to the forefront of modernity. This change has occurred primarily through the association made between traditional people and conservation. At the same time, indigenous peoples, formerly despised or hunted down by their neighbors, have become role models to dispossessed people in the Amazon.

We felt compelled to write this essay partly in response to two major current misunderstandings. The first one questions the foundations of traditional peoples’ commitment to conservation. Is such commitment a kind of forgery? Is it, more blandly phrased, a case of a Western projection of ecological concerns onto an ad hoc constructed “ecologically noble savage”? The second misunderstanding, clearly linked to the former, asserts that “foreign” nongovernmental organizations and ideologies were responsible for the connection made between conservation of biological diversity and traditional people of the Amazon. This misunderstanding makes for strange bedfellows. Progressive first-world activists and scholars and third-world military leaders and communists alike share in that belief.

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WHO ARE TRADITIONAL PEOPLE?

The use of the term “traditional people” is intentionally encompassing. Yet this should not be mistaken for conceptual fuzziness. To define traditional people by their following of a stable age-old tradition would run counter to anthropological knowledge. To define them as populations having a low impact on the environment and then to go on to assert their ecological soundness would be tautological. To define them as people outside the market sphere would make them very hard to find. True, categories in academic and legal texts are most often described through the properties or characteristics of their elements. But categories can also be described “in extension”—that is, by listing their constituent elements. It is our contention that “traditional people,” for the time being, are best defined by extension—that is, by enumerating their current “members” or the current acceptable candidates for such “membership.” This approach is in consonance with our emphasis on the creation and appropriation of categories. More importantly, it also points to how subjects form themselves through new practices.

This is hardly novel. Terms such as “Indian,” “indigenous,” “tribal,” “native,” “aboriginal,” and “mixed blood” are all products of the metropolis, generated by encounter. And yet, artificial and generic as they were at the time of their creation, these labels have progressively come to be “inhabited” by flesh-and-blood people. This has sometimes been the outcome of the elevation of these terms to a legal or administrative status. What is remarkable, however, is that as often as not, the forced inhabitants of them were able to seize these highly prejudiced categories and turn them into banners for mobilization. Deportation to a foreign concept leads to squatting in it and patrolling its boundaries. This is very often the point at which what was previously defined “in extension” is analytically redefined on the basis of a set of characteristics.

To this day, the expression “traditional people” is at the initial stage of existence. It is a sparsely inhabited class, and yet it has some members as well as obvious candidates for membership. It already enjoys an administrative life: a “national center of traditional people” is a division of Ibama, the Brazilian

official environmental administration. It originally congregated rubber-tappers and Brazil-nut collectors from the Amazon. It has since expanded to cover other people, such as, for example, clam gatherers from southeast Brazil. What all these people have in common is a good environmental record based on low-impact techniques and a stake in retaining or regaining control of the territory they exploit. But more fundamentally, they are ready for a trade-off: in return for control of the territory, they commit themselves to providing environmental services.¹

HOW (SMALL) PEOPLE MAKE HISTORY

Indigenous people in the Amazon have come a long way in the last twenty years. In the 1970s, a state governor unashamedly referred to them as obstacles to progress. Right-wing politicians and many in the military put them under suspicion, finding the international concern with their fate based on nothing more than greed. It was then commonplace to deplore their impending doom. Some attributed their fate to the inexorable March of Development and Progress, while many leftist intellectuals ascribed it to the no less inexorable March of History. The stampede of all these fiercely marching brigades left no room for survival and obscured the violence, the corruption, and the governmental policies that were the true agents of indigenous peoples' afflictions.

Indigenous issues became a prominent national concern in the late 1970s.² In the Constitution of 1934, and in every subsequent Brazilian constitution promulgated until the 1970s (in 1937, 1946, 1967, and 1969), indigenous land and its riches were collectively ascribed to the exclusive usufruct of each ethnic group. Dominion of the land is vested in the federal government, who cannot divert it for any other purpose. Indigenous land cannot be sold or alienated in any manner. On the other hand, in the Civil Code of 1916, indigenous people were classified together with people over sixteen and under twenty-one years of age as "relatively capable." This was an awkward last-minute patch, since the Civil Code was not meant to deal with indigenous issues. "Relatively capable people," because they are easy to deceive, are granted special protection in their

business dealings. Although the concept of tutelage over indigenous peoples sounds derogatory and anachronistic, to say the least, in practice it has provided them with very effective judiciary leverage. Any deal made to their disadvantage and without judicial assistance can be challenged and nullified in court. Moreover, since there was no other case in Brazilian law of a collective land title, indigenous peoples' legal status as wards was commonly understood as the basis for the exceptional status of indigenous land titles. In reality, prior occupation (that is, historical antiquity) is the real foundation of indigenous land rights.

In 1978, a cabinet secretary developed a proposal to emancipate so-called acculturated Indians that would grant them individual land titles, which could then be put on the market. In other words, indigenous land could be sold. The effects of such a measure are well known not only from the United States in the nineteenth century but also from precedents in Brazilian history. Beginning from regulations put in place in 1850 and 1854, it amounted to a three-decade-long liquidation of indigenous titles over land coveted by settlers.³

Military rule, in 1978, still thwarted all political demonstrations. Indigenous issues, however, were not deemed political. Repressed dissatisfaction, to the surprise of everyone involved, seems to have found a channel in such issues. The ban on any kind of political protest could well be the reason why the so-called Indian emancipation project, an issue that seemed remote to most urban Brazilians, channeled such a wide range of protest. The emancipation project was duly dropped, although it has since resurfaced under different guises. But the anti-emancipation campaign was to be the start of a decade of intense mobilization around indigenous struggles. The first pan-Brazilian indigenous organization was founded,⁴ as well as a significant number of advocacy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), joined on a voluntary basis mostly by anthropologists and lawyers. A branch of the powerful Brazilian Catholic Bishops Council, the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), was strengthened to include not only missionaries but very active lawyers as well. The Brazilian Anthropological Association, which at the time numbered around six hundred

members, was also to become quite active on the issue of indigenous rights. The major foundations that supported such work were ICCO, a Dutch organization of Protestant churches, the Ford Foundation, based in Rio de Janeiro, and, to a lesser extent, some German NGOs and British Oxfam. Many legal cases were fought, most of them successfully. There were campaigns for the demarcation and effective protection of indigenous lands.

Although the results of such campaigns were uneven, they had very important outcomes. For one, they helped to clarify the major threats faced by indigenous people. They also built some unexpected coalitions on very solid ground: namely, on the trust that resulted from shared studies, goals, or campaigns. We will stress only two examples.

The first example is the alliance between anthropologists and federal prosecutors, built around the need of the government to defend itself from mostly fraudulent claims for indemnification by alleged landowners in indigenous territories. Having lost case after case in court, and dissatisfied with the assistance it received from the official indigenous affairs agency, Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), the federal prosecutor's office called on the Brazilian Anthropological Association to help establish facts in court. The positive results cemented an enduring relationship of mutual trust that was to bear fruit in the 1988 Constitution.

The other example is the support of a ban on mineral prospecting in indigenous lands by the Brazilian association of professional geologists, whose agenda was to maintain Brazilian mineral reserves against a very powerful lobby of multinational mining corporations. This support was also built over a joint project launched by Centro Ecumênico de Documentação Indígena (CEDI) to map the overlap of indigenous land and areas requested for mineral prospecting. A radar survey of the Amazon had been conducted in the mid-1970s, raising big expectations in mineral riches and causing a scramble for research and extraction concessions. Since ownership of the soil and the subsoil do not coincide under Brazilian law—subsoil resources being federal property—there was a bitter battle

about whether mineral research and extraction could be launched under indigenous land.

By 1987, when a democratically elected Constitutional Assembly started debating a new Constitution, an effective coalition of indigenous leaders, anthropologists, lawyers, and geologists had consolidated. Legal shortcomings impairing indigenous rights had become quite clear, and the aims for indigenous rights in the new Constitution were well defined. With the partial exception of CIMI, which ultimately pursued its own broader Latin American policy, the coalition's agenda for the Constitution was unanimous.

Not surprisingly, the most controversial issues revolved around rights by non-Indians to build hydroelectric dams and to have access to the subsoil of indigenous land. Private corporations' stakes were particularly high in regard to minerals. As a preliminary draft constitution was reviewed, in which access to indigenous subsoil was barred, a press campaign of surprising dimensions was orchestrated against indigenous rights. A few days before the rapporteur was to submit a new draft, five major newspapers in five different state capitals gave week-long full-front-page space to stories of an alleged conspiracy: in order to keep tin prices high, tin-mining companies were conspiring to prevent Amazonian tin from reaching the market by barring cassiterite extraction in indigenous land. Another line of accusations was directed at CIMI, which had insisted on the use of the term "nations" for indigenous societies. This term, ironically an archaic one found in historical documents up until the late nineteenth century when the word "tribe" replaced it, was used to raise alarm. Nations, in contemporary jargon, might entail a claim to autonomy. The signing of a petition by Austrians on behalf of indigenous rights was used as evidence of foreign conspiracy lurking behind indigenous rights. Those and other similarly creative conspiracy charges, and the publishing of forged documents, kept the momentum high until the new constitutional draft came to light. Not surprisingly, in this version, indigenous rights had been drastically cut. The step-by-step recovery, in the final constitutional text, of most of these rights was an extraordinary tour de force. A massive indigenous and particularly Kayapo presence, the negotiating

skills of the late Senator Severo Gomes, and the efficacy of a large group of NGOs are to be praised for it.

Eventually, indigenous rights were included in a whole separate chapter in the 1988 Constitution. The definition of Indian land in Article 231 explicitly included not only dwelling spaces and cultivated areas, but also land required for the *preservation of environmental resources necessary to indigenous peoples' well-being as well as land necessary to their physical and cultural reproduction, according to their usage, customs, and traditions.*

Indigenous land rights were declared "originary," a legal term that implies precedence and limits the state's role to recognizing rather than granting rights. This phrasing had the virtue of linking land rights to their historical foundations (rather than to a cultural stage or an awkward status as wards). Indigenous groups' and associations' legal status, in particular their capacity for suing on their own behalf, was recognized, independently of their guardian's opinions, and an obligation to assist them before the courts was vested in federal prosecutors. All of this resulted in the securing of basic instruments for upholding their rights.⁵ In the process, the visibility and success of indigenous claims on land were enhanced, with the unexpected and paradoxical result that some other dispossessed sectors of society, such as rubber-tappers, began to emulate them.

RUBBER-TAPPERS AS ENVIRONMENTALISTS

By the mid-1980s, rubber-tappers took the lead in establishing a link between their struggle and ecological concerns. By late 1988, in the state of Acre, a coalition for the preservation of the Amazonian rain forest was active under the name "Forest Peoples Alliance," covering both rubber-tappers and indigenous groups. The Altamira rally, led by the Kayapo against the projected Xingu Dam, had itself explicit environmental concerns. By the end of the 1980s, the connection was a matter of course. As against the Yellowstone model that evicted indigenous tribes in order to create a pristine North-American environment, here the vindication was that local communities, who

had conserved and relied on their environment, should not become victims of ecological projects. Rather, in order for the environment to be conserved, they should be in charge of both the management and the control of the resources they depended on. What was novel was the agency that was imparted to local communities. The explicit connection between indigenous people and conservation gained an international dimension in early 1992 with the creation of the International Alliance of the Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, of which COICA (Confederation of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin) was one of the founding members. The Convention for Biological Diversity and Agenda 21, approved during the Rio Summit in June of 1992, explicitly acknowledged the major role to be played by indigenous and local communities.

INDIGENOUS LAND AND CONSERVATION AREAS

Brazil's indigenous population is estimated at 310,000 people, 280,000 of whom live in indigenous areas. While this is a small population, there is a great wealth of diversity among it. There are 206 indigenous societies, 160 of which are in the Amazon, and 195 different languages, most of which can be subsumed under four major linguistic units. In addition, an estimated 50 indigenous groups still have no contact with the outside world.

The Amazon remained, with the short exception of the rubber boom that lasted from the 1870s to the 1910s, relatively aloof from European occupation. As a result, most of the indigenous groups that have survived and most of the land that they have been able to retain are in the Amazon. This history accounts for the large Indian areas in the Amazon, where nearly 99 percent of Brazilian Indian land is located.

As a whole, the extension of Indian land is striking. Indians have constitutional rights to a little less than 12 percent of Brazilian territory, distributed in 574 different areas, and 20 percent of the Brazilian Amazon. Conservation areas in the Amazon where human presence is permitted give Indians as much as an additional 8.4 percent of that region.

In the 1980s, the size of Brazilian indigenous land seemed astounding: too much land for too few Indians. That perspec-

tive is changing: the cover story of *Veja*, a major Brazilian weekly journal, on June 30, 1999, was about the 3,600 Xingu Indians who were "preserving an ecological paradise" the size of Belgium. The point was that very few Indians could take sound care of a large territory. That conservation might best be undertaken by people who have lived and sustained themselves in the areas is also the premise for the creation of extractive reserves.

Not all conservation areas, of course, can be managed by their preexistent human population. But it has also become clear that a sound and viable ecological policy in Brazil has to involve local communities. Moreover, to evict people from conservation areas without offering them alternative means of subsistence is a sure path to disaster.

JUST HOW CONSERVATION-ORIENTED ARE TRADITIONAL PEOPLE?

Opponents of traditional peoples' involvement in conservation argue two things: that not all traditional societies are conservation-oriented, and that even those that are may not be once they enter the market sphere.

For a long time there has been, among anthropologists, conservationists, policymakers, and traditional peoples themselves, what anthropologist Paul Bohannan in another context has called a "working misunderstanding." It revolved around what one could call the essentialization (something that anthropologists nowadays seem fond of detecting) of traditional peoples' relationship to the environment. A cluster of ideas representing indigenous groups as naturally conservation-oriented resulted in what has been labeled "the myth of the ecologically noble savage."⁶ Of course, there is no such thing as a *natural* conservationist, but even if one translates "natural" into "cultural," the issue remains: can traditional peoples be described as "cultural conservationists"?

Environmentalism can refer both to a set of practices and to an ideology. There are, therefore, three different situations that tend to be blurred by using a single term to cover them all. First is the case in which the ideology is present without the actual practices—a case of lip-service to conservation. Second is the

case in which sustainable practices and cosmology are both present. Many Amazonian indigenous societies uphold a sort of Lavoisierian or zero-sum ideology in which all things, including life and souls, are recycled. Theirs is an ideology of limited exploitation of natural resources in which human beings are the sustainers of the equilibrium of the universe, nature and supernature included. Values, taboos on food and hunting, and institutional or supernatural sanctions provide the instruments for them to act according to this ideology. Such societies could easily fit into the category of cultural conservationists. The Peruvian Yagua example comes immediately to mind.⁷

Third is the case in which cultural practices are present without the ideology. In this scenario, one thinks of people who, although lacking an explicit conservation-oriented ideology, follow cultural rules for using natural resources that, given the population density and the territory, are sustainable. It is worth observing that in order to conserve resources, a society does not have to avoid waste entirely. It has just to keep it within limits. If a society approves of killing a whole group of monkeys, females and offspring included, and if such massacre, however distasteful, has no consequence as far as resources are concerned, then this society is not infringing on conservation practices. All one can ask is whether such habits are compatible with sustainable use, not whether they are morally right. We might object to sport hunting in our society, yet it is a fact that North American hunters' associations, such as the Wildlife Federation, have had a strong concern with and positive effect on conservation. Similarly, indigenous groups might conserve and manage their environment with ingenuity and knowledge,⁸ particularly when soil is poor, yet this is not necessarily performed under a conservationist ideology. The management of a more bountiful environment might be much less commendable, but low population density still makes it sustainable.

Indigenous groups and even some migrant groups such as rubber-tappers have indeed preserved and possibly enhanced biodiversity in neotropical forests. Amazonian forests, as botanists put it, are oligarchic, with "subaltern" species being oppressed by dominant ones. These societies seem to have acted as revolutionaries: just by making small clearings in the forest,

they allow oppressed species a new chance to outrun their competitors.⁹

The second argument suggests that, although traditional societies might have exploited their environment in a sustainable manner, frontier populations, which come into contact with such societies, will induce a short-sighted strategy for utilizing resources. There will be a lack of adequate institutions and little information about alternative opportunities. Anomie will morally dissolve groups as young entrepreneurs clash with old customs and reciprocity values.

So, the argument goes, although "traditional culture" might once have fostered conservation, the induced needs and link with the market economy inevitably lead to changes in culture and the overexploitation of natural resources. In fact, it certainly does lead to changes, but not necessarily to overexploitation. For what the balanced pre-contact situation also implies is that, given some structural conditions, traditional peoples might play a central role in conservation.

What this argument fails to recognize is that the situation has changed, and the validity of old paradigms has changed along with it. Traditional peoples are neither outside the central economy nor any longer simply in the periphery of the world system. Traditional peoples and their organizations are no longer dealing solely with frontiersmen. They have become partners with such central institutions as the United Nations, the World Bank, and powerful first-world NGOs.

Nor is the market in which traditional people now move the market of old. Until recently indigenous societies could only get cash from first-generation commodities (raw materials such as rubber, nuts, minerals, and the like). They have skipped the so-called second generation of value-added industrial production. Now they are starting to participate in the information economy of third-generation commodities derived from indigenous and local knowledge.¹⁰ And they have even entered the emerging fourth-generation market of "existence values," such as biodiversity and natural landscapes, whose existence some people deem to be valuable in themselves. In 1994, buyers of one acre of Amazonian land, through an NGO called Nature Conser-

vancy, paid not for using or even seeing that acre, but rather for its preservation.

HOW DOES CONSERVATION ACQUIRE LOCAL MEANING?

A CASE STUDY

The major bottleneck in involving local communities in conservation plans and putting them in control stems from the effort to give these plans local meaning. Agendas have to merge, benefits have to reach the communities, training and techniques have to be provided.

On January 15, 1990, the Juruá Extractive Reserve in the Brazilian Amazon was officially founded. It was the first of its kind: that is, "a conservation area managed by its traditional population." The Juruá Extractive Reserve, with its 500,000 hectares, was largely the result of the work of a coalition of people and organizations at different levels, including grass-roots union members, the national rubber-tapper's council (based in the capital of the state of Acre), academics, the Brazilian Development Bank, federal prosecutors, and Brazilian and foreign NGOs. It was also the outcome of unexpected events and contingent links and considerations.¹¹

Extractive Reserves enjoyed rapid success in Brazil and also internationally, where the idea actually caught on and was articulated with community-based sustainable programs.¹² The term "reserve" first came on the scene in October of 1985, at the first national rubber-tappers assembly in Brasília, organized by anthropologist Mary Alegretti. A delegation of rubber-tappers from the state of Rondonia made the remark that no one was (in principle) allowed to interfere with indigenous reserves. Why could rubber-tappers' areas not be protected by law in a similar way? Why could they not have "reserves"? "Reserve," at that point, had no specific meaning other than referring to a protected area.

The term acquired a more concrete meaning in late 1986. At a meeting of rubber-tapper leaders, an anthropologist explained the statute of indigenous land. Indigenous land, as mentioned previously, is specially protected and is the only case in which collective rights over land are acknowledged under Brazilian

law. At that point, the term "reserve" began to sound interesting to some socialist rubber-tapper leaders, who might have seen it as a collectivization of sorts. After a closed-door deliberation from which the anthropologists were excluded, this inner cabinet chose to claim collective possession of the land.

In the 1980s rubber-tapper leaders were convinced of the importance of their contribution to the economy. This could well be the legacy of the World War II American and Brazilian effort to resuscitate, for strategic reasons, natural rubber production in the Amazon. At that time, following a massive propaganda campaign and offered the alternative of being sent to the battlefields in Italy, a new wave of immigrants was taken to Acre, under the resounding name of "rubber soldiers."

By late 1986 the alliance between rubber-tappers and environmentalists was launched, and one year later, Chico Mendes made it operative.¹³ At that point no one except perhaps one anthropologist, Mary Alegretti, was thinking of defining the reserves as conservation areas. Rather, following in the tradition of the union members, agrarian reform was the motto. Rubber-tappers defined themselves as landless peasants of the forest.

In October of 1989, the left-wing Workers Party lost the presidential elections by a slim margin. Given the political basis of the newly elected president, hope for agrarian reform faded. There was a window of opportunity, however, to have reserves declared as conservation areas. Legal technicalities such as not having to previously indemnify the landowners (as would have been the case in an agrarian reform) made it expedient to define the reserves as conservation areas. Landowners, in this case, would have to seek indemnification in the courts, but this was not a prerequisite. After the Juruá Extractive Reserve was created as a conservation area in January of 1990, three other projects were rapidly presented. After a long interview with some members of the Rubber-Tappers Council and their advisors, the military gave its authorization to proceed and the projects were approved before the deadline of March 15, when the new president was to take office.

To rely on a conservationist alliance was thus a strategy. To constitute the reserves as conservation areas was a tactical

choice. To say that this was strategic does not mean that it was a deception, a scam, a forgery, either in substance or in project. The project itself is still being translated into local meaningful terms. As for substance, rubber-tappers had indeed been conserving biodiversity. In the upper Juruá, as mentioned above, rubber had been exploited for over 120 years, and yet the area was shown to be uniquely diverse with 549 bird species, 103 kinds of amphibians, and 1,536 butterfly species.¹⁴

What is true, however, is that rubber-tappers, like Monsieur Jourdain, had been conserving biological diversity unknowingly. Most thought they were producing rubber, not diversity. Rubber was tangible, individualized, distinctive, since it could be of varying quality and was concretely linked to its producer, who signed his name on his product before it was sold to the estate store and sent drifting downriver to the market. Despite price oscillations, it had a relatively permanent value. When inflation was raging all over the country, and people's wages, at the end of the month, were worth less than half of what they had been at the beginning of the very same month, rubber-tappers could still measure the worth of their labor in a steady currency. They charged a daily wage equal to the market value of 10 kilograms of rubber. As compared to the rest of the country, this was expensive labor. It did not imply that every rubber-tapper would produce 10 kilograms of rubber every day. An average rubber-tapper exploits two trails of rubber trees, each one being tapped two times a week and then only for a maximum of eight months. He would be expected to work on rubber about four times a week, the rest of his time mostly used for hunting in the wet season and fishing in the dry season. Moreover, 10 kilograms of rubber a day is not likely to be obtained everywhere in the area. It is a standard set in very productive areas. As a daily wage, therefore, this standard stood for a man's dignity and independence, what he *could* achieve in a day if only he wanted to, the monetary dimension of which is what economists call opportunity cost.

An average rubber-tapper household relies on rubber extraction for cash, swidden agriculture for basic foodstuffs, and some sheep and possibly a few cows for hoarding, while meat and fish come directly from the forest and the river. Wild palm

fruits and honey are gathered in season, and many more items from the forest are used for house and canoe building, medicine, fish poisons, and the like.

It is well known that rubber in the Amazon cannot prosper in plantations because of a leaf disease. Trees can only remain healthy when dispersed in the forest. A rubber trail will consist of about 120 rubber trees, of the *Hevea* genus. A household will rely on an average of two such trails, and the total area will cover something like 300 hectares (741 acres) or 3 square kilometers (1.15 square miles). This is the minimum area needed. As an average, households used up 500 hectares (1,235 acres) or 5 square kilometers (1.9 square miles). This accounts for the very low population density in a rubber estate—1 to 1.2 persons per square kilometer—which seems optimal for conservation.

As could be expected, conservation varied according to local situations and agendas. In the eastern part of Acre, rubber estates had been sold in the 1970s, mainly to southern corporations or private investors. This was done with governmental incentives for the area to be turned into cattle ranches. Some of the investors actually started cutting down the forest for pastures or simply to expel rubber-tappers and consolidate their legal titles. Rubber-tappers, in this predicament, started defending their livelihood. They would form human barriers to stop wage laborers from cutting down the trees. This form of nonviolent resistance drew the attention of the media and of ecologists.

In the western part of Acre, the old system of rubber estates still prevailed. Corporations had also bought land there, but they were speculating and waiting for roads. The lack of any road made the region unattractive to new ventures, except for some attempts at extracting mahogany. Meanwhile, the new landowners let the traditional system continue. Local bosses (sometimes the previous landowners themselves) would lease the estates and sublease them according to the century-old system. A pyramid of stores would be set at each river and tributary mouth, provisioned with goods available on credit. Storekeepers tried to control all the rubber production along the rivers and prevent the rubber from being smuggled before

debts were paid off. The rubber-tappers of the Juruá, in contrast to those of the more “modern” area to the east, were considered “*cativos*,” a word that means “captives”; in a more archaic sense that resonates to this day, it also means “slaves.” The rubber-tappers in the east, abandoned by their bosses and landowners, were, in contrast, *libertos*: freed, manumitted. Although there is much literature on debt slavery in the Amazon, it is quite doubtful whether the system really qualified as slavery, at least as known in Brazil until 1888. In the absence of any effective control over people spread out in the forest, monopoly over their product was achieved through the system of credit for goods that operated at the stores found at the mouth of each river. In fact, debt was the rule of the whole system, from the merchants in Belem who took advances from their clients in Liverpool to the very last tributary upriver. As one writer put it, one’s worth could be measured by the extent of one’s debts.

Landowners in Acre had a very flimsy legal basis for claiming their estates. In fact, if there was any legal title at all, it would most likely cover but a fraction of the total estate. An annual fee of 30 kilograms of rubber per trail was paid by the rubber-tapper to the estate owner as a rent, or, rather, a tithe. This fee amounted to about 10 percent of the annual production (which was estimated at 600 kilograms over two trails). Again, it had a symbolic rather than an economic significance: it sanctioned the recognition of rubber-tappers as tenants rather than proprietors of the forest and reinforced the bosses’ dubious claims over the land. The rubber-tappers of the Juruá River had no cattle ranchers to fight. What they did have was what they thought of as a degrading state of serfdom. Manumission was their primary agenda. The first efforts toward this end, long predating the extractive reserve project, were several attempts at disrupting payment of the annual 30 kilograms of rubber. The message was clearly understood: to this day, refusing to pay the annual rent amounts to open defiance of the rubber-estate system. It directly challenges landowners’ claims.¹⁵

When rumors of the extractive reserve were circulating, rebellion against rent started again. Then, in a spectacular move, a cooperative store was founded, with a grant from the Federal

Development Bank. This store challenged landowners' monopoly over trade. Overcoming conflicts, arrests, and threats from local authorities, several boats triumphantly entered what was to become the reserve, loaded with blue jeans, watches, radios, and motors for canoes, among other things, in an apotheosis of cargo.¹⁶ The cooperative went bankrupt in little more than a year (among other reasons because no one truly understood money and inflation), but the significance of these two initiatives was not lost. At that point the Upper Juruá Extractive Reserve was founded by the federal government and put under the jurisdiction of Ibama. It was grounded on expert advice and reports by biologists and anthropologists on the biological importance of the area, its high incidence of endemisms, and the serfdom in which rubber-tappers were kept.

In contrast to the struggle for preserving trees in the Xapuri region, there was nothing at first that could be called ecological mobilization in the Juruá. After these heroic times and the initial exhilaration of freedom, a set of institutions started to take root in the area. A large research project, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, was launched, involving a great number of local people, anthropologists, biologists, geologists, and many others. This project had political aims: it set out to prove, through a successful example, that under adequate conditions, so-called traditional people *would* manage a conservation area. Adequate conditions, in our view, include clear legal rights, a good quality of life, democratic institution-building, and access to scientific and technological resources. A number of different goals were achieved, many of which were directed at shaping a conservationist set of ideas in the reserve. Conversely, there was an effort to persuade the public, environmentalists, and the government of the viability of putting traditional people in charge of conservation areas. Evidence of the high biological diversity of the area was collected by the biologists. Reliable and simple methods for the rubber-tappers to monitor degradation as well as quality of life were devised. A land-use code for the area was discussed and adopted in an assembly of the association of rubber-tappers. A project for zoning the area based on local exploitation patterns and ecological significance was set up. "Democratic" institution-building and administra-

tive training took place. Studies of patterns of settlement, mobility, and conflict resolution were undertaken. There was a census, and a registry of land (actually rubber-trail) rights. A study of local knowledge and practices related to the use of the forest and its resources was prepared. Research was carried out on new or enhanced old products with more added value. And links were strengthened with Ibama, encouraging them to delegate some responsibilities to the association and a body of local "environmental overseers or inspectors." Ibama also channeled G-7 funds to the reserve.

The impact of these policies on all aspects of life in the upper Juruá was quite remarkable but not surprisingly very different from what had been expected. For one thing, the Juruá people developed their own version of conservation. While their adult children tended to enter the political dispute on the side of the board of the Association, a group mostly comprised of mature men became part of a body of "environmental inspectors." The policing they undertook was closely modeled on the old *mateiro*, or woodsmen, role. *Mateiros* were specialized workers in the rubber estates of old, who opened up new trails and imposed sanctions if rubber trees were overexploited or damaged. The "environmental inspectors" received a measure of power, but were not allowed to take sanctions. They could merely counsel the culprits and report infractions to the official bureau in Brasília or in Cruzeiro do Sul, which was three days downriver. They pointed out that if given no real power, they would not engage in any confrontations with their neighbors. They nevertheless went at their job with self-righteousness. The major infractions were related to hunting. Until 1998 when a new bill was passed, hunting was strictly forbidden under Brazilian law. Imprisonment without bail was the sentence for hunting, whereas primary culprits of murder could be released on bail. This strict law was translated in local terms not as a conservation policy but primarily as a matter of equity. In the officially approved land-use code, after much deliberation, two practices related to hunting were banned: hunting for the market (and indeed there was a market for game meat in a nearby village, adjacent to the reserve) and using dogs. There are two kinds of dogs in the area: native dogs and the valued *Paulista* dogs (the word refers

to someone from São Paulo). It is uncertain whether these dogs, which entered the region through trade with another river valley (the Tarauacá), were indeed from São Paulo or whether their species name was a reference to their superior predatory abilities. In any case, they are excellent hunting dogs, who will not lose a prey once they have tracked it. The problem, according to the Juruá reasoning, was that these dogs would frighten the game into deserting the area—not only their owner's area, but also a much larger one—thus diminishing hunting returns for neighbors who had no Paulista dogs. So Paulista dogs were forbidden in the reserve according to the land-use code. The ban on dogs became the touchstone of local conservationism. Not to have dogs became the external sign of adherence to the reserve project.

An important dissonance stems from the very notion, introduced with the reserve, of producing and maintaining biodiversity. With respect to the forest, the old rules were restraint, limited exploitation, social sharing, magical precautions, and pacts with the keepers or mothers of what we could call wild realms. Agriculture, on the other hand, has no mother. People are thought to control the whole process, notwithstanding the well-known fact that results are uncertain. There is thus a radical separation between what is extracted from nature and what is controlled by men and women, a sharp disjunction between the domestic and the wild. This can be sensed, for instance, in the fact that there is no category corresponding to what we call "plants." The word "plant" (*planta*) does exist, but it refers only to what we would call cultivated plants. This meaning appears to be self-evident to people who derive the noun from the verb "to plant." "Plants" are necessarily "planted." Since wild species by definition are not, how could one ever call them "plants"?

Another clue in the same direction can be drawn from the distinction between *brabo* and *manso*. In its regional usage, *brabo* could be rendered approximately as "wild, savage, or uncivilized" as opposed to domesticated. It can also more generally refer to the contrast between creatures who flee men and those who are unafraid of him. In the more restricted sense of "uncivilized," the word *brabo* is applied to those unfamiliar

with work and survival in the forest. During World War II, so-called rubber soldiers were somewhat surprisingly called “wild” *brabos*. They were commonly left in the forest with basic food-stuff and instructions, sometimes under the guidance of more experienced rubber-tappers, to be “domesticated.”

The opposition between the wild and the domesticated is a pervasive and radical one. As one rubber-tapper put it, “There is both a wild (*brabo*) and a domesticated (*mansa*) variety of everything in this world: the tapir and the cow; the deer and the sheep or goat; the squirrel and the rat; the nambu bird and the chicken. The same is true even for people: there are tame (*manso*) people and there are wild (*brabo*) people, namely the Indians.”¹⁷

Producing biodiversity, producing nature, is therefore an oxymoron, a contradiction in (local) terms. Yet this is precisely what the G-7 funds are rewarding. How is one to handle this in terms of policy? A straight economic response would be to pay rubber-tappers directly for what the market is actually interested in: namely, biodiversity. Yet this runs counter to local perception. Biodiversity is a by-product of a form of life, the equivalent of what economists call an externality. Externalities are products that result from other processes and are not taken into account by the market. They carry no price tags. Biodiversity and environmental services (or disservice) are presently beginning to be taken into account; their costs or benefits are starting to be internalized, and so they should be. This is the consequence, by the way, of an expanded notion of the total system. If environmental services were to be directly paid for in the reserve, it could mean inverting figure and ground: what was a by-product, an unintended consequence of a way of life, would become the product itself.

On the other hand, Ibama has concentrated on enhancing the value of so-called sustainable products from the forest and expects the reserve to be economically viable on those grounds. But Ibama does not include conservation services in its accounting.¹⁸ The conundrum might be solved by a judicious mixture of enhanced rubber products that would provide cash to individuals and households in conjunction with a fund that would globally reward the maintenance of biological diversity by provid-

ing general benefits (such as education, health, and transportation services) and financing environmentally friendly initiatives. This is already taking place. Conservation was initially a political weapon in a fight for freedom and entitlement to land rights. Presently, conservation money is being used for motors, for boats, for schools, for health facilities. Conservation is becoming embedded within local projects and expanding its relevance.

TRADITIONAL PEOPLE REVISITED

We started by defining the category in terms of the elements that constitute it and suggested that an analytical definition would emerge. From what we have described, a step in that direction would be to state that traditional people are groups that have created or are struggling to create (through practical and symbolic means) a public identity that includes several if not all of the following characteristics: use of low-environmental-impact techniques; equitable forms of social organization; institutions with legitimate enforcing power; local leadership; and, lastly, cultural traits, selectively reaffirmed and enhanced.

Thus, while it is tautological to say that "traditional people" have a low impact on the environment, it is nontautological to say that a definite group, such as clam collectors in Santa Catarina, have become "traditional people," for this is a process of self-constitution. Internally, it requires conservation rules and legitimate leadership and institutions. Externally, it requires making alliances with nongovernmental organizations and academics as well as with governmental institutions.

It should be clear by now that the category "traditional people" is occupied by political subjects who are ready to give it substance: that is, to enter into a covenant. They commit themselves to a number of practices in return for other benefits, foremost of which are land rights. In this perspective, even the most culturally conservationist human societies are nonetheless always in some sense neotraditional or neoconservationist.

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ENDNOTES

¹Although, as we will endeavor to show, traditional people have taken indigenous people as role models, the category of “traditional people” in Brazil does not encompass indigenous people. This separation rests on a fundamental legal distinction: namely, that indigenous land rights are not predicated on conservation, even when indigenous land stands out as an island of environmental soundness within otherwise devastated landscapes. To stress the Brazilian specificity that sets indigenous people apart from “traditional people,” the former will not be subsumed under the latter, and we will be using, when necessary, the longer and cumbersome expression “indigenous and traditional people.”

²The only previously comparable national mobilization around indigenous rights took place in the first decade of the twentieth century, resulting in the creation in 1910 of the SPI (Indian Protection Service). Colonial examples are less clear, although seventeenth-century Jesuit struggles against Indian slavery could, with some anachronism, possibly be included among large-scale movements. The creation of the Xingu National Park, in 1961, although attracting great urban support, was an isolated experiment, to the extent that some would later contend that it had become a mere showcase. Ordinarily, massacres, evictions, and other kinds of violence were not treated as national issues, but rather as unfortunate types of local level violence. The structural conditions under which such violence could occur were not perceived.

³Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, 1993 *Legislação Indigenista no século XIX* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo e Comissão Pro-Índio, 1993).

⁴This was UNI (Union of Indigenous Nations), which was to play a significant role in the 1980s despite or maybe because of its urban origins. It was to be followed in the late 1980s and the 1990s by active indigenous organizations either ethnically or regionally grounded.

⁵Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, “L’état brésilien, les Indiens, la Nouvelle Constitution,” in Marie Lapointe, ed., *L’État et les Autochtones en Amérique Latine/au Canada* (Symposiums du Congrès annuel. Association Canadienne des études latino-américaines et Caraïbéennes, Université Laval, 1989), 133–145; republished in *Ethnies* 11–12 (1990).

⁶Kent Redford and Allyn M. Stearman, “The Ecologically Noble Savage,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 15 (1) (1991): 46–48; Kent H. Redford and Allyn M.

Stearman, "Forest Dwelling Native Amazonians and the Conservation of Biodiversity: Interests in Common or in Collision?" *Conservation Biology* 7 (2) (1993): 248–255.

⁷Jean-Pierre Chaumeil, *Voir, Savoir, Pouvoir: Le chamanisme chez les Yagua du Nord-Est Peruvien* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1983).

⁸William Balée, "The Culture of Amazonian Forests," *Advances in Economic Botany* 7 (1989): 1–21; William Balée and Alfred Gely, "Managed Forests Succession in Amazonia: The Ka'apor Case," *Advances in Economic Botany* 7 (1989): 129–158; Anthony B. Anderson, "Forest Management Strategies by Rural Inhabitants in the Amazon Estuary," in Arturo Gomez-Pompa, T. C. Whitmore, and Malcolm Hadley, eds., *Rain Forest Regeneration and Management* (Paris: UNESCO, 1991), 351–360; Kent H. Redford and Christine Padoch, eds., *Conservation of Neotropical Forests: Working from Traditional Resource Use* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), chap. 5, 83–107.

⁹William Balée (*Footprints of the Forest* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 119–123) provides a detailed review on the evidence of Amazonian societies enhancing environmental resources, be it rivers, soils, wildlife, or plant diversity.

¹⁰Andrew B. Cunningham, "Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity: Global Commons or Regional Heritage?" *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Summer 1991): 1–4; Gurdial Singh Nijar, *In Defence of Local Community Knowledge and Biodiversity* (Penang: Third World Network Paper, 1996); Stephen Brush, "Indigenous Knowledge of Biological Resources and Intellectual Property Rights: The Role of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 95 (3) (1993): 653–686; Manuela Carneiro da Cunha with Marilyn Strathern, Philippe Descola, C. A. Afonso, and Penelope Harvey, "Exploitable Knowledge Belongs to the Creators of It: A Debate," *Social Anthropology* 6 (1) (1998): 109–126; Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, "Populações Tradicionais e a Convenção da Diversidade Biológica," *Estudos Avançados* (1999); also published in French: "Populations traditionnelles et Convention sur la Diversité Biologique: l'exemple du Brésil," *Journal d'Agriculture Traditionnelle et de Botanique Appliquée* (1999).

¹¹Mauro Almeida, "The Struggles of Rubber Tappers," unpublished manuscript.

¹²Eleven other such units had been created by 1997, totaling 2.5 million hectares, and two others at least are in the process of being created. The largest extractive reserve is Chico Mendes's with close to 1 million hectares. Mary H. Allegretti, "Extractive Reserves: An Alternative for Reconciling Development and Environmental Conservation in Amazonia," in Anthony B. Anderson, ed., *Alternatives to Deforestation: Steps Toward Sustainable Use of the Amazon Rain Forest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 252–264; Stephan Schwartzman, "Extractive Reserves: The Rubber Tappers' Strategy for Sustainable Use of the Amazon Rainforest," in John Browder, ed., *Fragile Lands of Latin America: Strategies for Sustainable Development* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 151–163.

- ¹³Chico Mendes, *Fight for the Forest: Chico Mendes in His Own Words* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1989; 2d ed. 1992); Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (London: Verso, 1989); Alex Shoumatoff, *Murder in the Forest: The Chico Mendes Story* (London: Fourth Estate, 1991).
- ¹⁴Keith Brown Jr. and André V. Freitas, "Diversidade biológica no Alto Juruá: avaliação, causas e manutenção," in Manuela Carneiro da Cunha and Mauro Almeida, eds., *Enciclopédia da Floresta: O alto Juruá* (São Paulo: Ed. Cia das Letras, forthcoming).
- ¹⁵Mauro W. B. Almeida, "Rubber Tappers of the Upper Juruá River, Acre: The Making of a Forest Peasantry," Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1993.
- ¹⁶This is a reference to the literature on the cargo cult in Melanesia.
- ¹⁷Antonio Pereira da Silva, "seu Lico," personal communication.
- ¹⁸Nor did Ibama, until recently, relying on the old naturalized idea of forest people being conservationists, by their very essence, reserve funds for administration costs, providing for the local government of the reserve.