

Chapter 7

Human Rights in Third Place

The Green Economy, Environmentalism, and Social Justice in the Brazilian Amazon

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Human rights concerns in the Brazilian Amazon have gone hand in hand with environmental change since the days of the initial exploration and subsequent colonization of the region. In modern times, Brazil has been in the spotlight extensively because it plays host to environmental justice concerns that intersect with human rights violations and imperatives for economic growth. Bartholomé de Las Casas was notable for raising an initial alarm in the Latin American context. The echoes of his concerns have sounded throughout the centuries and in recent years have taken on newfound resonance, especially as the intersections between environmental and human rights concerns have moved closer together legally, economically, and politically than ever before. Perhaps most notably among Amazonian nations, the realities of life in the Brazilian Amazon from the mid-twentieth century onwards have been emblematic of Las Casas' concerns and calls for action. Brazil's record has been fraught with concerns on both environmental and human rights fronts, but, paradoxically, the nation has also often been at the forefront of global initiatives to handle these concerns responsibly. In this essay I examine the modern history of sustainable development and "green development" in Brazil, with an eye towards human rights and equity challenges as these ideas come into practice.

A few brief snapshots of Brazilian environmental and human rights concerns point to the contradictions of accomplishing these aims in tandem with one another. The Brazilian economy is booming, but in 2012, the number of employers in Brazil found to treat their workers in slavery-like conditions neared 300, the highest number since the list first began to be compiled in 2004.¹ In the Xingu River Basin in the Amazon region, Bishop Erwin Krautler wears a bullet-proof vest to Mass out of concern that he may be assassinated at any time because of his opposition to the Belo Monte dam project, which

is slated to become the world's third largest dam. Workers burn giant tractors and other equipment on the Madeira River, where another massive Amazonian dam is being constructed. Still, Brazil is lauded internationally for being at the forefront of clean energy development and for approaching an energy-independent future. Selected as the host for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics, the world now looks to Brazil's cities as exemplars of success, excitement, beauty and bounty. But in the first half of 2011, the police in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo Brazil were responsible for well over 500 shootings.² For much of its history, Brazil has struggled with balancing economic growth with its diverse population and its wealth of natural resources. It is perhaps just as full of contradictions in the present day as when the colonizers first praised its beauty and wealth, and then proceeded to pillage its resources and wreak havoc upon its indigenous populations.

The international stage for debating sustainable development has often been set in Brazil, and for good reason. Brazil has long been a symbolically-charged case for evaluating the merits of the sustainable development and "green development" paradigms. Brazil's role as a host country and leader of the global debates on these topics has been formidable. The Brazilian Amazon has become emblematic of the challenges of environmental management and social justice, typifying frontier geopolitics through the considerable levels of rural violence, illegal occupation of lands, and an absence of government presence throughout that region.³ As such, Brazil is regularly in the international spotlight as a test case for evaluating the politics and practice of sustainable development. It continues to serve as an illustrative case of how the new international political framework of "green development" is manifest, for its merits as well as for its shortcomings.

The inquiries central to this article concern examining how the "green economy" and sustainable development framework have come into practice in the context of the Brazilian Amazon, and assessing what these mean for human rights. The essay proceeds by discussing the history of the sustainable development paradigm in the region, with an analytic focus upon the ways in which social-environmental activism and human rights norms have been integrated into approaches to development in the Amazon. I argue that the historical trajectory of human rights and environmental concerns in the Brazilian Amazon is gradually improving, though generally, human rights are still taking a backseat to the central priority of economic development and also lag behind environmental considerations in terms of their political importance and policy integration.

The Amazon holds substantial national significance in Brazil for its potential in re-shaping the face of the nation's economic development through its wealth of natural resources and its expanse of land, which constitutes approximately half of the geographic territory of Brazil. Because it is host

to such an immensity of natural resources and indigenous groups, Amazonia is a political hot-button for development debates. Amazonian environmental concerns have long been flash-points for world-wide attention, although ultimately such concerns have fallen in the domain of sovereign countries to resolve, rather than to a strong framework of international law and policy. While the Brazilian Amazon has largely been the focus of Brazil's economic growth priorities and the centerpiece of its environmental reputation, ways in which environmental justice considerations have taken shape in the region have received relatively little attention, both from campaigners and scholars alike. The scholarship about people in the Brazilian Amazon has both lauded and critiqued the environmental behaviors of small-scale farmers, traditional populations that live off of natural resource extraction (for example, through collection of nuts, fishing, and rubber tapping), and indigenous peoples.⁴ The region plays a unique role within a collective global imagination about the world's remaining vast and "wild" ecosystems even as it serves as the last frontier of capitalist expansion.⁵ Amazon-focused environmental campaigns have led to substantial international attention to the relevance of the region with regard to global climate change, agricultural trade, forestry, freshwater, and biodiversity issues. These concerns are of fundamental importance to the economic development and environmental conservation problems which are faced at national and local levels, as well as those faced within the context of global environmental change and economic expansion.⁶

In the following sections, my discussion turns to a socially-focused history of the modern Brazilian Amazon, interrogating the extent to which social priorities and justice frameworks have been taken into consideration as the region has charted its path from developmentalism into sustainable development and, today, towards the "green growth" economy. This discussion is primarily based upon a historical-political analysis of different eras of Amazonian social-environmental politics, or *socioambientalismo*. I set the stage by offering a brief political-historical analysis of the period from 1966 until 1990, when developmentalism as an orientation triumphed. Then I examine the stage of sustainable development as the political framework for approaching social, economic, and environmental issues in the Amazon from 1990–2005. Lastly, this essay provides an overview of the primary engagements that fall under the auspices of the "green development" framework, understood as the predominant policy approach from the year 2005 through to the present. The analysis of this recent political-ecological history points to a political trajectory that has frequently ignored or dismissed many human rights priorities articulated in the region, while the competing priorities of development and environmental issues have involved complex and often contradictory realities for Amazonian residents.

DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES AND THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON: 1966–1990

Amazonian economies have long played an important role in Brazil's history, most notably during the rubber booms of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following rubber's boom-and-bust cycle, the region again became crucial to national economic growth in the mid-1960s as Brazil fell under military rule. The 1966 'Operation Amazonia' sought to expand colonization into Amazonia and promised tax incentives for entrepreneurs willing to reinvest their profits in the region. The early and mid-1970s witnessed a focus upon creating new 'development poles' in cities and townships along newly-cut roads in order to encourage private investment and infrastructure development.⁷

Social pressures sparked Amazonian development trajectories in significant ways during the early 1970s. A substantial drought in the Brazilian Northeast pushed a new wave of peasants into poverty, and the government responded by offering both emergency assistance and employment to 500,000 people for "work fronts" of road-building projects.⁸ The government promised to "repeat the pioneering feat of the conquering of the Western USA during the first decades of the last century,"⁹ and businessmen responded by establishing huge cattle ranches in the Amazon, often preventing peasant families from gaining an agricultural foothold.¹⁰ Colonization along the Transamazon highway aimed to convince people from all over Brazil that Amazonia was a land of productive promise and opportunity, and encouraged a massive wave of settlement along the unfinished dirt road through the jungle. However, the support offered to these new farmers was minimal, their lands were of poor quality, and illegal land claiming became the order of the day. Violent rural conflict became "an inevitable feature of life in the Amazon Basin."¹¹

Development of the Amazon was also sought through the construction of new infrastructure. Amazonian development was linked to development in other parts of the country, so as to link regions of the Brazilian nation that previously had been isolated, unable to get resources out to markets, and potentially vulnerable to foreign interests. Under the Plan for National Integration (*Plano de Integração Nacional*, or PIN) of 1971, major financing would create new highways across the Amazon basin, linking east-west and north-south routes to production centers and distribution ports, and providing a basis for the Amazonian lands themselves to be controlled and traversed. These priorities also became enmeshed with the national rhetoric of "integrate so as not to forfeit" (*integrar para não entregar*) Amazonian territories, such that developing infrastructure and colonization within the Brazilian Amazon became a strong part of the national vision for growth, security, and establishment of national sovereignty.

The government's large projects also entailed the construction of major dams, which included the Tucurí, Balbinas, and Samuel dams in Amazonia. Through these mega-projects, cheap energy from Amazonia was sought to drive the engines of the industrial growth in the south of the country.¹² Important, too, were the mining projects which drove the growth of many Amazonian cities and brought many people to the region. Mining for iron in Carjás, as well as for bauxite, aluminum, manganese, copper, and gold in many other parts of Amazonia, brought major migrations and environmental impacts to Amazonia in the short time period between the late 1960s and the 1980s.¹³

To many observers, the Amazonian occupations during this era appeared disorganized and unplanned, and the projects often fell short of their stated objectives. Since that time the debate about Amazonia's future has been framed around the dominant perception: "the problem is that they're burning all the forest down."¹⁴ At the same time, the opposing conviction that "smoke is a sign of progress" captured the Brazilian leaders' view towards Amazonia. The vastness of the Amazonian space and the magnitude of its forest, water, and minerals gave an impression of limitless resources. Brazilians felt strong resentment towards northern countries which promoted environmental protection without giving adequate priority to development, and they championed their own sovereignty in choosing how Amazonian resources should be used.¹⁵

By the mid-1980s, as the nation transitioned out of military dictatorship and into a young democracy, its leaders began paying heed to the calls for conservation in Amazonia and started reforming many of the political institutions that had stifled democratic expression during the dictatorship years. Still, however, an Amnesty Law passed in 1979 (No. 6,683) provided that no one would be held accountable for the crimes committed during the dictatorship years. At the same time, even as environmentalism became popular worldwide, the nation remained staunchly committed to development, allowing little in the way of environmental considerations to impede national growth priorities. Attention to social development in the region continued to remain a low priority, and, with the vastness of the region, many Amazonian areas became havens for illegal activities where lawlessness flourished. In response to these persistent problems, a social-environmental framework that took form in both political norms and social activism had begun to emerge in Brazil during its re-democratization process as early as the 1970s. By the 1980s, *socioambientalismo* had become "the driving force in the nationalization of the environmental movement" in the country.¹⁶ Social-environmentalism began to emerge as a Brazilian movement emphasizing democratization and the negative effects of capitalist development upon the middle and lower classes that viewed environmental problems on equal footing with social justice concerns.

By 1988, the Brazilian government began to acknowledge environmental concerns, and it published a conservation plan called *Nossa Natureza* (“Our Nature”) that took on a nationalist tone, but addressed concerns of pollution from gold mining activities and promoted the creation of new national parks and protected forest areas. *Nossa Natureza* recognized the “forest dwellers” of Amazonia, including *garimpeiros* (artisanal gold miners), *ribeirinhos* (riverine peasants), rubber tappers, and indigenous tribes, and also acknowledged their particular suffering from adverse environmental degradation.¹⁷ Just as *Nossa Natureza* was being released, however, rubber tapper Chico Mendes was assassinated by ranchers and their hired gunmen in late 1988. He had become internationally famous, representing the human dimensions of the importance of Amazonian conservation and the threats to the rainforest from ranchers and development projects.¹⁸ Mendes’ murder became an Amazonian “shot heard around the world” for the problems of Amazonian deforestation. International financial organizations, for the first time, were held with their feet to the fire to consider the environmental impacts of their lending and development policies. International environmental movements also gained strength and campaigned in favor of protections for both the forest and the people in the region.¹⁹ Moreover, also in 1988, a meeting of indigenous groups in the city of Altamira, in the Amazonian state of Pará, was the largest meeting of indigenous peoples ever recorded. This meeting, which united thousands of indigenous peoples from the Xingu River Basin to protest the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam, also captured an international media spotlight.²⁰ Thanks to this media attention, as well as a strengthened system of laws protecting indigenous rights, the rubber tappers and indigenous peoples were being recognized as “legitimate participants in the debate” by the mid-1980s.²¹ Newly democratized Brazil had any number of political and economic barriers to surpass, but the environmental conditions in Amazonia remained a focus of international attention, and hence, began to influence governmental priorities.²²

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TAKES HOLD: 1990–2005

The recently democratized Brazilian nation played host to the world during the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the Earth Summit). As a leader of the nations of the Global South, Brazil became seen as a critical locale in which to test the political muster behind the sustainable development concept. As such, political opportunities were open for the Brazilian and transnational environmental movement to mobilize around Amazonia, and they did so using the framework of sustainable development.²³ Sustainable development is a significant political as well

as discursive framework for policy, and is a concept that has largely been conceived as entailing the merging of economic growth priorities along with environmental concerns and social equity considerations. Paradoxically, while widely critiqued, the sustainable development paradigm has also been widely adopted. The discourse of sustainable development has been challenged, ultimately justifying business-as-usual approaches, for simultaneously being vague and jargon-like in its use, as well as contradictory. In the context of less-developed countries, the development side of the sustainable development equation was emphasized, creating a framework for environmentalism which perhaps unintentionally influenced the terms of debate and the actors involved in local struggles. Economic development and national sovereignty concerns were held in higher regard than environmental concerns in nearly every position that Brazil took at the Earth Summit in 1992. After contentious forestry negotiations and climate change discussions at the Earth Summit failed to yield an international treaty, deforestation rates in the Brazilian Amazon continued to rise. Between 1991 and 1994, some estimates cited a 34 percent increase in annual Amazonian deforestation.²⁴ Media pressure mounted for the nation to take action to counter the shockingly high rates of deforestation occurring in Amazonia, which by 1996 were at record levels.²⁵

The strongest steps for environmental conservation and human rights protections in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Brazil were measures and new land use instruments that established national parks and also extractive reserves (RESEXs), which were a new type of conservation area. The extractive reserves effectively granted traditional populations like riverine peasants and rubber tappers the rights to use the lands for their low-impact extractive activities, based on the notion that those who used the forests' resources in renewable and traditional manners would be its greatest defenders. Such projects offered a strong means of reducing both forest loss and violence to human populations from the illegal claiming of land, while providing residents of the areas with support and markets for their production.²⁶ Still, challenges remain, since the lack of markets and adequate pricing to support the natural-resource based production from these reserves leaves many of their residents living at subsistence levels.

New land use categories like the RESEXs also embodied possibilities for meshing environmental conservation harmoniously with social priorities. The idea that environmental human rights were not just about the protection of environmental defenders began to take hold, as activists began to adopt discourses of *socioambientalismo*. This stream of activism was premised on the inextricable link between human livelihoods and environmental integrity. The movement took cues from the nascent North American environmental justice movement, but also was based independently upon a vision of

Amazonians as a group of people whose lives were linked fundamentally to the integrity of the natural environment and to social equity concerns. Social-environmentalism, as a young movement in Brazil, championed small-scale farming, land reform, and an end to the modernist and capitalist models of development that sought to construct large dams on Amazonian rivers. Perhaps quixotically, many in the movement adopted paving the Transamazon highway as part of its activism; completing the unfinished business of Amazonian colonization efforts from the 1970s was central, they argued, to guaranteeing that the region could be viable for all of its peoples. As one leading social-environmentalist group argued, “If it was a mistake to bring us here, to abandon us is a crime.”²⁷

The Amazonian landscape was shifting and so, too, were its heroes. Small-scale colonists had only a decade earlier been castigated as inimical to Amazonian environmental futures because they were outsiders and often lived along the front lines of deforestation frontiers. By the early 2000s, they were able to begin articulating a space and enacting land use practices that showed that environmental conservation could take place through small-scale farming and agro-forestry systems. In the face of Amazonian urbanization and large-scale agribusiness, small-scale family farming offered environmental and equitable promise for the region.²⁸

THE AMAZON'S “GREEN DEVELOPMENT”: 2005–PRESENT

Recent supporters have heralded “green development” in the Brazilian Amazon as a means of achieving sustainable development and as having significant analytical reach and policy applicability.²⁹ Opponents have argued in favor of de-growth, contending that green growth is essentially a substitute discourse for further entrenchment of a contradictory and neo-liberal dominated political agenda.³⁰ Thus Amazonian “green growth” and “green development” policy discourse, though still new, is largely embedded within the sustainable development legacy, and is no less polemical. Highlighted as the central framework for discussion at the Rio+20 Conference in June of 2012, this discourse is grounded in the conviction that economic growth and environmental sustainability have greater synergies than contradictions. This framework places the imperative of ecological sustainability predominantly within the realm of economic considerations.³¹ The Brazilian nation was accused of making the conference statement, in the end, a non-committal catch-all; controversial language was eliminated from the final conference document, thereby leading to a final resolution that was agreeable to all governmental parties, but largely devoid of firm policy statements and thus a disappointment to most NGO observers.³²

Social-environmental activists began embracing new conservationist strategies in the early 2000s, coinciding both with trends in global environmental politics and also with the policies of President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva. During these years, the movement broadened its alliances and furthered its impact by gaining more direct political influence, engaging in activism for conservation-oriented land uses, and advocating for payments for ecosystem services and standing forests. Simultaneously, however, this new era of “green development” has been marked with contradictions. While deforestation rates are lower, environmental progress has come on the heels of tragic assassinations. The government has remained largely callous to the human rights abuses taking place on the Amazonian frontier, instead privileging export-oriented commodities as the foremost development priority in the region. Thus the age of “green development” in the Amazon, not unlike earlier phases of sustainable development, has been coupled with human rights violations and an emphasis on resource exploitation that would continue to promote Brazil’s economic growth, even as it has striven to balance environmental concerns by creating new protected areas for conservation. This new era of “green development” was ushered in by the 2007 Growth Acceleration Program (*Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento*, or PAC), which notably emphasized infrastructure, energy grid increases, transportation, and construction projects as the foundations upon which the Brazilian economy was to be built. Human rights and environmental considerations were also given additional prominence in this new wave of Brazilian development, although more often in a tokenistic manner than in ways which reflected deeply-embedded environmental concerns or which promoted human rights norms.

Environmental conservation and land organizing efforts in the Amazon are tiny compared to the hundreds of billions of dollars slated for the annual growth plans in the country through the PAC and PAC 2 (the renewed Growth Acceleration Program launched in 2010, and initiating a strategy from 2010–2014). The government has prioritized creating new conservation areas and annually commits itself to protecting new Amazonian lands, so as to slow the pace of landscape changes in the region. Efforts at creating new forest reserves have protected 20 million hectares in various types of forest reserves since 2004, while the costs of combating deforestation annually total millions of dollars.³³ The critical juncture that the Amazon basin faces has not been lost on forest and climate models; researchers predict that 55 percent of Amazon forests will be destroyed within the next 20 years if deforestation, fires, and climate change continue, whereas the scenario is considerably more optimistic if conservation strategies are implemented on a widespread basis.³⁴ Not only will the direct losses of biodiversity and changes in the human population be drastic if these conservation strategies are not successfully implemented, but “the damage will release 15 to 26 billion tons of carbon into the

atmosphere, adding to a feedback cycle that will worsen both warming and forest degradation in the region.”³⁵ These new infrastructure developments thus have the potential to alter the face of the Amazon radically in terms of its human populations and its environmental resources.

Marina Silva’s tenure as Minister of the Environment in Brazil from 2003–08 is illustrative of these tenuous social-environmental gains. A former rubber tapper and early friend of Chico Mendes as well as a founder of the rural worker’s union in the state of Acre, Marina Silva was a vocal *socioambientalista*. Her most notable contributions as Minister of the Environment were the creation of new parks and federal extractive reserves that contributed to a substantial lowering of deforestation rates in Amazonia during her five-year tenure.³⁶ Still, the merging of “green” concerns with the traditionally “red” interests of the Worker’s Party (PT) was one in which alliances were more pragmatic than deeply ideologically aligned. During this period, Brazil retreated from its position as one of the opponents of genetically-modified organisms, ultimately opening the country up for further agribusiness ventures, and the push to construct large dams was re-ignited as a central political priority for the Amazon region by the PT-led government. Meanwhile, the re-education process on the part of the land reform movement that began during the early 2000s continues: “The Landless [Worker’s] Movement [MST] is internally discussing the question of biodiversity preservation, trying to create a new way of thinking around the subject. But this generates a war against what was taught and practiced in previous times by the *campones* . . .”³⁷ Ultimately, however, many of these ideological priorities succumbed to political priorities and long-standing political allegiances. Marina Silva resigned from the Ministry of the Environment over objections to dam building and human rights abuses in the Amazon, while other concerns that had once been cornerstones of the social-environmental movement were subverted within the politics of the PT party, leading to what became an even stronger coalition of *ruralistas* (large-scale landholders) who advocated for a weakening of environmental safeguards as part of their political agenda. The two largest social movements in Brazil—the MST and MAB (the *Movimento dos Antingidos por Barragens*, or Movement of People Affected by Dams)—chose to continue supporting the PT party even through the 2010 election of Dilma Roussef, in spite of the governmental positions taking increasingly diluted (or even disingenuous) positions on forest conservation, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), dam construction, and family farming.

Particularly illustrative of the “green development” era as it intersects with environmental and human rights concerns in the Amazon is the story of Sister Dorothy Stang and the region where she worked. Sister Dorothy, who was a 73-year-old, U.S.-born Catholic nun, was assassinated in a rural area along the Transamazon highway in February of 2005. Having worked

in the Amazon since the mid-1980s, Sister Dorothy stood in solidarity with small-scale farmers and actively denounced slave labor, illegal land claiming, and deforestation in the region. After her assassination by a group of local ranchers, many of whom had strong political influence locally, Sister Dorothy became an important martyr and emblem of the continued struggle in the region for human rights and the environment in the Amazon. Reminiscent of Chico Mendes' assassination in 1989, international attention focused on the challenges of Amazonian conservation and the encroachment of deforestation on the remaining native forest areas. In the wake of her death, the Brazilian government almost immediately created a huge mosaic of conservation areas in the Xingu River Basin; the region became one of the world's largest biodiversity corridors. There have been some landmark steps forward for justice in Sister Dorothy Stang's case; her assassins are now in prison, as is one person of the suspected group of conspirators who paid for her to be killed. In the broader perspective, however, her struggle for guaranteeing livelihoods and security for the people of that region continues to be a hard-fought one against the strong tide of local power-holders and state and federal policies. Indeed, to many Amazonian social-environmental activists, the gains won for environmental conservation seem tokenistic in light of the broader developmentalist goals at hand.

In the state of Pará, along the Xingu River in an area less than fifty miles from where Sister Dorothy Stang was assassinated, the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam is currently being constructed. If forecasts prove true, when completed it will be the third most productive dam in the world.³⁸ It will likely flood an area of 510 square kilometers, an area that is relatively small in relation to its productivity and in comparison with other Amazonian dams, but one that would immediately affect nearly 20,000 Amazonian residents.³⁹ The Belo Monte dam promises to bring new urban growth and windfall kilowatts of energy through its construction, but at the same time, the Brazilian government has responded callously to any human rights claims made against it resulting from the Belo Monte project. Indeed, a case brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2011 found that the Brazilian government had violated human rights agreements on several fronts. Rather than altering its behavior, however, the Brazilian government immediately responded with sharp criticism of the Commission's finding and withdrew its ambassador to the Organization of American States.

Among the infrastructure developments of PAC and PAC 2, large hydroelectric dam construction projects will mean substantial changes for the face of Amazonian development. The government plans to construct dozens more Amazonian dams by 2030 to meet its growing demand for energy.⁴⁰ The Brazilian government promises that developing hydroelectric dams will provide a crucial supply of renewable energy as the nation seeks to develop its

industrial base as well as its capacity to meet growing consumer demand for energy. Earlier projects, however, such as the Tucuruí dam and the Balbina hydroelectric dams, both constructed in the early 1980s, have yet to deliver on their promised benefits to the nation in terms of energy output, and compensation for the dislocation of many people affected by the dam has yet to be adequately resolved.⁴¹ The recent construction of two major hydroelectric dams on the Madeira River, as well as the Belo Monte project on the Xingu River, also pose significant concerns for indigenous communities and environmental activists, who criticize the projects for coming precipitously close to destroying biodiversity hot spots permanently while simultaneously threatening the heritage and livelihoods of thousands of indigenous and traditional peoples. These examples, as well as the subsequent treatment of those most closely affected by those dams, raise serious doubts as to the sincerity of Brazilian “green development” as a credible alternative to the developmentalist plans of the past.

Road paving projects in the Brazilian Amazon follow much the same line of argument and present many of the same dilemmas in terms of sustainable development as the hydroelectric dams. On one hand, they promise greater connectedness of previously isolated regions, while on the other hand, asphalt correlates strongly with forest fires and logging, human rights abuses, and unregulated land uses. The construction of Amazonian highways, which were initiatives birthed out of a will to render Amazonian lands “productive” and to develop the nation as part of intensive growth-promotion projects in the 1970s, have met with sharp criticism from the international environmental and human rights communities. Road paving projects continue to be discussed for a number of Amazonian localities since the annual rainy season renders dirt roads virtually impassible, leaving communities living along these roads in geographic isolation for weeks at a time. Thus road improvements are not only being demanded by a majority of Amazonian peoples, but also are being promoted by the Brazilian government through a variety of active and passive mechanisms, in large part stemming from a view that sees road expansion as necessary to the economic vitality of the region and the nation as a whole.⁴² Significant debate continues to be generated, however, over the appropriateness of the government’s proclivity towards road expansion in terms of the trade-offs of sustainable development. Some point to roads as a “fundamental cause” of forest destruction and urge that the government curtail its road expansion plans.⁴³ Others, however, suggest that the social and political needs of the region mandate road improvements, and that the negative effects of roads may be counter-balanced with policies that create new conservation areas and present effective alternatives to deforestation.⁴⁴

Extractive industries and resource-intensive production of commodities have ultimately guided the development trajectory of the Brazilian Amazon,

impacting lives and landscapes in the region at least as much as the creation of new conservation areas in the region. Cattle ranching, bio-fuels production, soybean monocultures, and mining in the Brazilian Amazon are all on the rise as major economic contributors, with profound implications for the future of Amazonia and Brazil as a whole. These huge growth industries form the centerpieces of Brazil's current economic success, but they are being built upon commodity price fluctuations and a promotion of global exportation that typically include significant environmental externalities and dire social costs.

Brazil is currently expected to lead the world in terms of beef exportation, although the effects on soil quality, watershed health, climate, and biodiversity are likely to be severe. The human costs are also substantial; slave labor in Brazil is often linked with cattle ranching, especially in Amazonian states.⁴⁵ Deforestation rates are also strongly linked to commodity prices for both cattle and soybeans.⁴⁶ Much of this increase has come from expanding markets for exporting Brazilian beef, and an opening up of Amazonian lands to supply the rapidly growing market demands.⁴⁷ Soybean production has nearly tripled in Brazil since 1988 and, in particular, skyrocketed following Brazil's legalization of the use of GMOs in 2005.⁴⁸ Although there has been a ban in place on growing soy on newly deforested areas since 2006, most scientists concur that the soybean market has nevertheless continued to drive deforestation significantly because it has increased land prices and provided an impetus for infrastructure improvements that have encouraged additional clearing of forested land.⁴⁹ As Brazil makes substantial strides towards oil independence, bio-fuel production and exportation have substantially increased.⁵⁰ Converting forested lands into arable fields for bio-fuel production ultimately could have very high costs in terms of carbon emissions, especially in Amazonian contexts.⁵¹

A recent study found that the number of mining operations in Amazonia continues to grow, including in areas that are environmentally-protected.⁵² The Carajás iron mine, located in the eastern Amazonian state of Pará, produces iron ore for export to Japanese steel mills and represents the pinnacle of the global trend to transform raw materials into globally-traded commodities.⁵³ So influential is the economic yield of Carajás that a remarkably extensive railway (890 km) was constructed specifically for transporting the iron ore to the distribution port, which is now one of the largest in the world. Additionally, in western Amazonia blocks of land equal in size to the state of Texas are currently being bid upon for oil and gas company contracts, threatening the pristine and remote ecosystems there as well as the land rights of several groups of indigenous populations.⁵⁴ The high price of gold and other minerals has also accelerated the pace of mining. Along with considerable environmental damage wrought by mining, deleterious social conditions often accompany this form of resource extraction. Deforestation near mines

is conducive to malaria, threatening public health, and lawlessness and prostitution typically become commonplace in the isolated regions in which the mines are located.⁵⁵

There are some indications, however, that the Brazilian government is making positive strides towards human rights accountability in this age of “green development,” suggesting that even tokenistic moves towards human rights improvements are better than none at all. At the national level, the fight against corruption has made significant strides, most notably with the trials of around forty elected officials for corruption charges related to the Mensalão scandal. Cases of historical abuses by police and military leaders, especially those which took place under the dictatorship, are increasingly being scrutinized. The 2012 conviction of two police officers involved in a 1996 massacre of nineteen land rights activists marked a notable step forward for the Brazilian justice system and also signals a major step forward for Brazilian human rights.⁵⁶ The Inter-American Court on Human Rights ruled in 2011 that Brazil should investigate cases of the sixty-two disappearances in the Araguaia massacre of the 1970s. While Brazil formally rebuked the Court’s ruling, the government did take steps soon thereafter to establish a truth commission on the military’s abuses. The commission represents a small step forward for addressing past human rights abuses, but it will not involve public hearings or any legal ramifications for offenders, given that the 1979 Amnesty Law remains in place.⁵⁷ Journalists and others seeking to uncover past human rights abuses are still faced with threats to their safety.⁵⁸ In the Brazilian Amazon, human rights abuses continue, including the assassinations of over 1,500 people in the past thirty years.⁵⁹

BRAZIL’S RECORD: HUMAN RIGHTS IN THIRD PLACE

The path to economic development, both in historical context and in the present, too often has come at the cost of destroying the environment and depleting natural resources. Such actions have long-term consequences that may not always be recognized at the time by national and international governments. The historical experience of indigenous groups and other residents in the Brazilian Amazon is full of lessons about the value of incorporating the rights of these groups into policy development and implementation, as well as the risks—both human and ecological—of ignoring their social-environmental well-being. Developmental policies that in the present day value producer income and foreign exchange earnings over environmental conservation and human rights must begin finding ways to do so with an adequate balance in mind between the conflicts that often arise between these priorities. As the

framework shifts in global policy orientations from sustainable development to “green development,” the risk of neo-liberal market logic triumphing over human rights norms, and also diluting, or backsliding on, environmental concerns, becomes more and more apparent.

Increasingly, strategies employed for the sustainable management of Amazonian ecosystems involve managing logging and opening markets for certified-sustainable timber from the forests in the hope of minimizing the illegal claiming of lands and the security threats that often correspond to land-claiming in otherwise unregulated frontier areas. Additionally, as new Amazonian “miracle fruits” such as *açaí* become more popular in international markets, it is quite possible that long-term positive benefits will be reaped for forest preservation as well as for the interests of local economies. Finding solutions for Amazonian deforestation through conservation initiatives most recently has been considered in high-profile international policy discussions about climate change that propose creating financial mechanisms through carbon emissions credit markets, where compensation would be offered for reducing deforestation and avoiding forest degradation (REDD and REDD+). Essentially, this would extend carbon emissions credit markets to pay for preserving existing rainforests, thereby significantly exceeding their current application. A dispute remains over the extent to which these options ultimately lead to sustainable approach to livelihoods and conservation in the region, but at a minimum, they do offer a novel approach towards solving such problems, and they provide a response that balances global market interests, environmental priorities, and human rights and development considerations in ways that take all of these priorities seriously.

Granting human rights equal footing with economic and environmental concerns remains a long-standing challenge, given the history of abuses and lawlessness in the Amazon region. In today’s context, temptations to exploit Amazonian natural resources for the benefit of short-term profits render this all the more challenging. Such exploitation may serve to win the affections of populations in the south of the country that stand to benefit most immediately from energy or resource gains. Still, meeting these interests at all costs is hardly a satisfactory answer, for current trends suggest that the environmental and social costs of such development policies are taking an enormous toll on the populations of the region. The strength and vitality of Brazil’s democracy is put to the test whenever measured by the wellness and safety of its most marginalized populations. Giving greater political seriousness and awarding priority to environmental protection and human rights on an equal footing with economic concerns in the Amazon region is one major way in which Brazil may cement its place as a global leader and establish itself as a democracy that is truly accountable to all of its citizens.

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