After the Rubber Boom

When the first ‘conquistadores’ travelled down the Amazon in the 16th century, they found populous settlements, hierarchical chiefdoms and complex agricultural systems all along the main river. The ‘Indians’, they reported, raised turtles in ponded freshwater lagoons, had vast stores of dried fish, made sophisticated glazed pottery, and had huge jars, each one capable of holding a hundred gallons. They also noted these peoples had flotillas of canoes and traded up into the Andes and down to the mouth of the great river. Their numerous warriors carried wooden warclubs and thick leather shields made of the skins of crocodiles and manatees. Behind the large settlements, they noted ‘many roads that entered into the interior of the land, very fine highways’ some so broad they likened them to a royal highway in Spain. These stories were later discounted as the puff of promoters trying to magnify the importance of their ‘discoveries’, for since the late 18th century the banks of the Amazon have been almost entirely depopulated. During the 20th century the archetypal Amazonians were ‘hidden tribes’, groups of hunters, gatherers and shifting cultivators, who lived isolated in the headwaters of the main rivers, eschewing contact with the national society.

With the benefit of hindsight and new insights from history and archaeology, we can now see that these two perceptions of Amazonia are strangely and tragically related. Archaeology now teaches us that lowland Amazonia, even in areas of poor soil and blackwater like the Upper Xingu, was indeed once quite heavily settled. Regional trade and dynamic synergies between Amazonian peoples had led to the sub-continent being densely peopled by widely differentiated but inter-related groups, who specialised in local skills to work and use their specific environments in diverse and subtle ways.

The onslaught of western societies brought much of this complexity to an end. Warfare, conquest, religious missions and the scourge of old world diseases reduced populations to less than a tenth of the pre-Colombian levels. Slave raids, both by European soldiery and by other indigenous groups, who traded the ‘red gold’ of enslaved ‘Indians’ for the products of western industries, stripped the lower rivers bare of any remnant groups. Raiding, slaving and competition for trading opportunities with the whites created turmoil in the headwaters. The myth of the empty Amazon became a reality, as any survivors moved inland and upriver to avoid these depredations.

In the late 19th century, overseas markets and advances in technology created new possibilities of exploitation. In particular, the discovery of the process of vulcanisation, led to a global trade in a non-timber forest product, rubber, which could now be hardened for industrial use. The onerous task of bleeding latex, yoked to global trade, yielded fortunes for entrepreneurs prepared to penetrate the headwaters, enslave local tribes and force them to work the scattered stands of rubber trees. International capital flooded in to make the most of these opportunities. Tens of thousands of indigenous people perished from the renewal of slaving, the torching of settlements, the starvation of survivors, the forced labour and diseases. The process also led to further waves of surviving indigenous peoples fleeing deeper into the forests, seeking to break off contact with a changing world that brought them death and cultural degradation.

Of course, not all the indigenous peoples in the Amazonian headwaters are refugees escaping the brutalities of contact, but the impact of the outside world on even the remotest headwaters is often

underestimated. For many indigenous peoples in the Amazon and also in other parts of the world, the search for isolation has been an informed choice – the logical response of peoples who have realised that contact with the outside world brings them ruin not benefits. Life in the forests without trade may have its hardships, not just because the absence of the metal goods like axes, machetes, fishhooks and cooking pots makes subsistence harder work, but also because customary trade, barter and exchange between indigenous peoples were also once ways of making life more varied and richer. But it is these peoples choice.

21st century industrial societies are now being drawn into the last reaches of the Amazon, where these indigenous peoples now live in voluntary isolation, for other globally traded resources – not slaves or rubber this time, but timber, oil, gas and minerals. If we deplore the horrors of death and destruction that ineluctably accompanied previous penetrations of the Amazon, can we now show that modern industrial society is more civilised? Can we respect the choice of other societies to avoid contact and leave them in their homelands undisturbed until, perhaps, some future time when they themselves decide on the risky venture of contacting a world that they have learned by bitter experience is not safe to interact with? If we can't, then it is almost certain that future generations will condemn us for the same avarice, indifference, selfishness and greed, for which we today condemn the conquistadores and the rubber barons.

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