
Brazil: Indigenous peoples in isolation and policies to defend and protect them

In the first place, it is important to clearly define what we are talking about when we refer to peoples or populations in “voluntary isolation.” This term and similar ones (such as “separate,” “isolated,” “autonomous”) attempt to describe “a situation or a historical context.” The background or basis they all have in common is that they seek to define peoples (ideally) or populations (perhaps closer to reality) that have little or no systematic contact with Western agents (in general commercial companies or missionaries). That is to say, they do not “depend” on our economic system to survive – and even less so on the symbolic system. In general such “autonomy” originates in the geographical context – and there are many peoples and human populations that could be included in the definition of “isolated” on the basis of a certain geographical niche that is inaccessible to systematic contact (populations of the Andes, the North Pole, Kalahari, the African or Asian deserts, the mountains of New Guinea, etc.). These peoples and populations have a residual contact with the dominating economy (and ideological system) and continue to maintain independent standards of survival with relation to the dominating economy in function of internal social and cultural resistance established voluntarily. However, what we have seen is that such autonomy can last while the niche they occupy is not the object of a (“capitalist”) valuation of the natural resources (or the symbolic ones, in the case of “strategic” territories for the Western powers).

However, this context does not apply to Indigenous Peoples or populations “in isolation” in the Amazon. In this context, when we define Indigenous Peoples and populations “in isolation” we are referring to peoples and populations who are closer to the state in which Christopher Columbus would have found them. They are not only in geographical isolation, but mainly, in historical isolation. This is the crucial difference in relation to the other peoples and populations “in voluntary isolation” on the planet. It is true that throughout this time (500 years!), they sought or took refuge in isolated regions, or rather, regions that were not coveted by the mercantile (or missionary) rage of our “expansion front”. In the Amazon (mainly the Brazilian Amazon but also in the Bolivian, Peruvian, Colombian, Venezuelan, Ecuadorian and Guyanese Amazon) we estimate that there are still dozens of Indigenous Peoples living almost in the same way as they lived five hundred, six hundred or a thousand years ago: garbed in their feather headdresses, or loincloths, surviving on hunting, fishing, gathering and small-scale agriculture with stone axes and fire, suffering from no virus diseases in a fully abundant environment. They may even know some of our instruments (iron instruments, glass bottles, plastic containers, etc.) that reach their hands by accident or because of previous contacts that were disastrous to them.

It should be emphasized that they remain in this state because, on the one hand, the conditions in the immediate surroundings of their habitat enable them to do so and also because these peoples aggressively produce and mark a distance (a frontier) with relation to us or to other already contacted Indigenous Peoples, seeking to maintain their living conditions through aggression and open (but disproportionate) conflict. However, not all of them have managed to maintain this distance.

It is a fact that today the majority of the isolated peoples in the Amazon are living in an extremely serious situation vis-à-vis the advance of predatory (logging and mining) frontiers towards the last

virgin areas in the region. Harassed and attacked by these predatory expansion fronts (which very often have recourse to already contacted Indigenous Peoples and their enemies in the past), they have started to use fleeing strategies, decreasing the signs of their passage or changing their subsistence patterns – not opening clearings visible from planes, changing the form of their dwellings to camouflage them in the vegetation, moving more frequently and dispersing their population. Under these circumstances, many of these peoples – if not the majority – stop carrying out their rituals, radically change their subsistence routines and even those of procreation, by avoiding conception or even by aborting.

In Brazilian legislation (Law No. 6001 of 19/12/73) the denomination “isolated Indigenous Peoples” appears as a legal concept defining human populations with a pre-Columbus culture that have kept themselves geographically and socio-culturally at a distance from the Western population, which subsequently became the majority population in the country. This isolation is so strong that no knowledge exists of their demographic composition, just some traces of their existence and little or no indication of their material culture, customs or languages.

The physical, ethnical, linguistic, cultural and cosmological specificities of isolated Indigenous Peoples are an invaluable human heritage. Its diversity and existence are threatened every day by the actions of a segment of national society with the only objective of irrational exploitation and getting rich at the cost of the native populations and total degradation of the natural resources and biodiversity concentrated in their territories.

The frequency of records of isolated Indigenous Peoples is concentrated in remote territorial niches, many of these in strips along the frontiers of Amazon countries – demanding multi-national efforts. In South America, only Brazil has a specific coordination for matters concerning isolated peoples, the “Coordenação Geral de Índios Isolados – CGII” (General Coordination for Isolated Indigenous Peoples), linked to the official Indigenous body of the Brazilian Government, FUNAI. This department has records of 38 reports on isolated peoples in Brazilian territory. The resistance undertaken by these peoples is also seen in the protection of vast areas of Amazon ecosystems, as their physical and cultural reproduction is traditionally made possible by using natural resources in a way that is fully compatible with the conservation and protection of the ecosystems where they live.

The presence of Indigenous Peoples in isolation has been confirmed in various South American countries. In Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela, the existence of Indigenous Peoples living in the same conditions of social isolation and secrecy has been recorded, resisting penetration in their domains, frequently with violence. In any of these countries the situation is always the same: forced to migrate, deprived of their traditional territories, submitted to all sorts of tragedies during the successive cycles of expansion and appropriation of economic and social frontiers undertaken by national societies in Amazonian territory.

Colonizing actions and occupation of the Amazon territory for centuries have been based on predatory activities, disorderly extractivism and the exploitation of slave labour, promoting the drastic depopulation and extinction of innumerable Amerindian peoples. An unknown portion of Indigenous Peoples subsists under conditions of “isolation,” undertaking a bitter and silent struggle to survive the exterminating action of the enveloping society. Public ignorance of concrete data making their “social visibility” possible to civil society and an absolute absence of specific legislation guaranteeing State protection, safeguard and support, have maintained these peoples, and what is left of them, permanently exposed to extinction, promoting continued environmental dilapidation and degradation of their habitat.

The rhythm of extinction of peoples in isolation estimated in Brazilian ethnography, in accordance with the few researchers devoted to the issue, is enough to express the devastating genocide of the saga. The anthropologist, Darcy Ribeiro, exemplifies the dramatic depopulation that took place between 1900 and 1957 in his comprehensive work “Os Índios e a Civilização” (published by Cia. das Letras, 1996) stating that over this period of 57 years, 87 ethnic groups which had maintained themselves in isolation have disappeared. In spite of the fact that new peoples in isolation have been “discovered” in more recent decades, the proportion of extinguished peoples or peoples in permanent contact with national society is considerably greater, in a bitter statistic, a task still to be carried out. Statistics and demographic charts will never be able to express the human and cultural content of so much extinguished life, still taking place under indifference of civil society and the acquiescence of governments.

Therefore, Indigenous Peoples in isolation are seen as the last and least favoured pariahs, without a voice, without a physical presence, without any social or even human recognition, only and sporadically remembered by the isolated voices of more informed segments of society. This dramatic picture only goes to reaffirm the immense and urgent social responsibility corresponding to the national States in this process, as well as that of the diverse sectors of society committed to democracy, human rights, environmental conservation, and the cultural and immaterial heritage of humanity. It is the State's duty to assign substantial efforts aimed at the protection of Indigenous peoples in isolation to satisfy their essential needs and implement public policies and legal measures that reaffirm their constitutional and ethnic rights and their specific and differentiated protection.

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