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The Few Remaining: Genocide Survivors and the Brazilian State

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Images of naked indigenous people with exotic ornaments and primitive weapons have made the rounds in recent years of social media, the press, and anthropological debates: they are the isolated, the autonomous, the free, the last relic peoples who hark back to our pre-modern past. The images conjure the excitement, danger, and magic of that moment we call “contact”: an alien civilization seen up close, for the first time. Despite the supposed novelty of it, so many seem to arrive with pre-existing categories to classify these peoples and respond to the situation. Some blame their isolated condition on the vagaries of fate. Others propose bold strategies of how to control the process of contact, or imagine what kind of magic our modern science can bring to them. As contact situations become imminent in a tropical country, northern academics seem eager to remind their colleagues down south that they should heed their scientific wisdom: this attitude was clear in the controversial recent *Science* editorial by Rob Walker and Kim Hill (2015).

The idea of contact with an unknown society unleashes Edenic images and messianic discourses, in academia as much as everywhere else. The encounter between civilized, connected modernity and wild, isolated, primitive tribes has been constructed with a wide variety of metaphors and meanings over the years. Whereas missionaries, scientists, and government agents from prior generations saw this encounter as a chance to tame savage peoples and bring them the benefits of rationality and progress, today’s disenchanted world tends to see “uncontacted” tribes as the last remnants of pre-modern innocence and ecological harmony. Both perspectives obscure the realities of colonial domination and render invisible these peoples’ history of resistance to territorial expansion.

Contact is a myth: it is a colonial myth created by scientists and reproduced by journalists in the global north who propose intervening in the unenlightened policies of tropical nations. Instead, they should pressure their own countries to stop financing, directly and indirectly, the global processes that fuel the invasion of territories occupied by isolated indigenous groups: logging, gold mining, drug trafficking, gas and oil exploitation. In this short comment, we focus on a question that an author, Felipe Milanez, raised at the last SALSA meeting in Gothenburg, and it was apparently misunderstood by some colleagues. His point was concerning the precarious and urgent situation of certain isolated indigenous peoples in Brazil, survivors of genocide who continue to resist outside intervention. What should we, as intellectuals, do in order to mobilize the Brazilian state to act? The most common answer one hears is simply: “leave them alone, and get the government out of it.” These are Clastre’s “people against the state,” after all.

But who are “they” that we should leave alone, and who are “we,” and how are we supposed to “leave them alone”? Sydney Possuelo is a *sertanista* or “backwoods contact agent” of Brazil’s National Foundation of the Indian (FUNAI) who ultimately reversed the agency’s catastrophic “contact” policies and established a special department to defend isolated peoples’ territory. In his words,

Let’s call them *restos*, “the remnants, the few remaining,” and I apologize for using this word, I don’t mean it in a pejorative, but rather in a tragic sense. They are the relics, all that’s left, the ones who survived. Not meaning that they don’t belong or are useless, just that they’re what is left. I’m talking about the Akuntsu and Kanoê in Rondonia, the “Indian of the Hole,” the Karapiru, Awa-Guaja, and others that our teams found, and did the possible and the impossible to protect them (Possuelo, 2015: 239; authors’ translation).

FUNAI has documented some 70-80 indigenous groups living in isolation in Brazil, and half of these are extremely small groups of people ranging from one, two, or a few, and sometimes as many as 10 or 15. They are widely spread in Brazil throughout the entire Amazon basin from Rondonia to Maranhão, with perhaps even one last, small group of Ava-Canoeiro in Goiás in Central Brazil. Close to the Belo Monte dam project on the Xingu River, and among one of the many socio-environmental conditions to be met for the dam's operating license, FUNAI is monitoring and trying to ensure the protection of an isolated group first encountered by sertanista Afonso Alvez da Cruz in the 1970s.

Stories of contact are almost always tragic: waves of epidemic illness, social disintegration, massacres, and other forms of abuse and exploitation at the hands of loggers, ranchers, gold miners and sometimes even FUNAI employees themselves. Despite the mystique of that first moment of contact, when journalists and filmmakers crowd in to register the first dramatic images and stories, recently contacted peoples' numbers dwindle quickly, they put on clothes, start hunting with shotguns, their stories become entangled in dealings with outsiders, the media move on to other headlines, and anthropologists and linguists seldom show interest, and if they do, they are rarely allowed access to document what, if anything, remains of these "remnant" people. Likewise FUNAI's Department of Isolated Indians loses its prerogative to protect their territory and investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of any violence that happened to these people prior to "contact."

There are several well-known cases that illustrate these dynamics in Brazil. The "Índio do Buraco" ('Indian of the Hole'), also known as Tanaru (for the river that passes through his territory) is a man who lives alone and treks frequently in the forests of Rondônia in the vicinity of the Akuntsu (population: 5) and the Kanoê (population: 3). He has refused all attempts by FUNAI to approach him and has threatened and even wounded FUNAI employees with his arrows. He probably has his reasons. Filmmaker Vincent Carelli, working with two *sertanistas*, Marcelo dos Santos and Altair Algayer, documented what appears to have been a genocide perpetrated in 1995 by ranchers against a previously unknown indigenous group (Carelli, 2009; Dos Santos, 2015; Algayer, 2015). The name "Indian of the Hole" comes from the fact that this man, apparently the sole survivor, maintains a series of small houses throughout this territory, most provisioned with a grave-like hole for him to suspend his hammock: he may have survived night-time massacres, and the hole may be a way of shielding himself from gunfire. Santos also recorded references to a rancher who poisoned a group of isolated Indians who used to visit his ranch in the 1980s (Dos Santos, 2015).

Some of the nearby Akuntsu still have bullet-scars from attacks they suffered in the 1980s. The story of the three remaining Kanoê is less well known. Together, the Akuntsu and Kanoê share the demarcated Omere Indigenous Land, but the "Indian of the Hole" does not have a demarcated reserve, only a small territory interdicted by FUNAI in order to prevent the depredations of loggers, at least, as long as they can demonstrate he is still alive.

A similar problem is faced by two Piripkura people, named Ticun and Mandéi, living in northern Mato Grosso near the city of Colniza. The Piripkura, a Kawahiwa group of the Tupi-Guarani family, first appeared in FUNAI records when a woman was found enslaved on a ranch in northern Mato Grosso in the early 1980s. The woman, who came to be called Rita, was transferred to Ji-Paraná in Rondônia, the closest city with a FUNAI office. There, she was identified as being the member of a previously unknown indigenous Kawahiwa sub-group. The fate of the rest of the Piripkura was unknown until 1987, when two men were encountered. After initial bad experiences with FUNAI, they disappeared back into the forest and were not seen for another ten years, when one of them fell ill and sought assistance. A "new contact" then occurred when they visited a ranch, and the owners summoned FUNAI. The sick man was taken to a hospital, and when they returned to the ranch after treatment the pair disappeared again into isolation in the forest. Yet a decade later, in 2007, the Piripkura were contacted once again by FUNAI *sertanista* Jair Candor (Milanez, 2007; Candor, 2015).

Over the past ten years, their territory has been severely impacted by deforestation, logging and illegal land speculation. FUNAI has encountered another group of Kawahiwa, perhaps related to these three Piripkura, in the same region. Though FUNAI got close enough to make visual contact in 2005 and 2011, this isolated group has all other attempt at contact. These various subgroups form part of the Kawahiwa nation described by Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*, and who suffered violence, displacement, decimation, and genocide during the "Brazilian miracle" of the 1970s ("Victims of the Mira-

cle”, S. Davis, 1977), when roads were opened into previously remote parts of Rondônia and Mato Grosso. In the 1970s, a land speculator massacred a group of people in this same vicinity, (Milanez, 2007), and FUNAI has documented at least three other references to small Kawahiwa groups. Attempts to demarcate indigenous lands occupied by this small group of perhaps 15 people, referred to as the Kawahiwa do Rio Pardo, have been blocked by Brazil’s Ministry of Justice under pressure from politicians in Mato Grosso. The Piripkura territory, inhabited by the two men mentioned above, is also only “interdicted” (not demarcated). Informally has been said that the two men, like the “Indian of the Hole,” are “not able to reproduce,” and hence do not have the right to demarcation of indigenous lands under the terms of the Brazilian Constitution. These groups do have rights to their territory, to their lands, even if they cannot “reproduce:” the violence done against them must be investigated, the perpetrators of murder and genocide should be brought to justice, and the land they have inhabited should be protected even after they cease to exist, otherwise they will only be expropriated to benefit their killers.

What do we do with them? Should we support the international outcry to “leave them alone?” This response is not only simplistic and idealistic, but irresponsible. Leave them alone to what, be killed? Decimated by diseases?

While FUNAI has been rightly criticized for many errors over the years, especially its disastrous “contact” policies through the 1970s, the generation of *sertanistas* currently retiring or recently retired has a wealth of hard-earned (sometimes tragically so) practical experience in the dangerous and chaotic experience of “contact” with isolated groups. While their knowledge of anthropological theory and scientific debates may be limited, they have decades of practical knowledge about the groups they have been studying and tracking, no longer to contact, but to delimit their territories, understand their movements, and hopefully avoid further tragedies. A dialogue with these *sertanistas* is a first step to deciding how best to prepare for the future.

At the same time, we must challenge scientists who claim that their expertise is sufficient to guarantee “controlled contact.” This scientific language depoliticizes the reality of isolated peoples’ decades-long, even centuries-long resistance and turns our attention away from the violence perpetrated against these groups. Bringing attention to the genocide committed against these “few remaining” is an important intellectual and moral duty. It is easier to talk about the noble groups modern development has produced the destruction of their life, we must engage in a serious commitment to provide them the possibility to die with dignity. Despite this history of resistance, we cannot deny the reality of their extreme vulnerability to disease, violence and exploitation. It’s not a matter of scientific epistemology or technical expertise: it is a political issue. Contrary to idyllic visions of pre-modern people living beyond, even “against the state,” this is ultimately not a problem for scientists or journalists but for the Brazilian state, via its designated authority for indigenous peoples, FUNAI.

Sertanista Altair Algayer describes his experience with the Kanoe, Akuntsu and the “Indian of the Hole”:

How do we deal with these questions in this situation? It is game of patience and sorrow. There is nothing to do but offer minimum conditions of survival and their dignity. Protect their territory, leave it alone, so then can be at peace in their remaining days. It is all that we can aspire to achieve (Algayer, 2015: 375; authors’ translation).

The rest of the world may want for us to “leave them alone,” but for this to result in anything, but more genocide, the Brazilian state, acting through FUNAI, must apply its constitutional mandate and hard-earned expertise to defending the territory of isolated indigenous people through established, legal means. This involves as much bureaucracy as it does science and philosophy. It is not altogether sufficient or easy, but it is a right that these “people against the state” have won, through the efforts of many pro-indigenous scientists, lawyers and *sertanistas*, from the very state they happen to be up against.

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