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Review of *The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes* by Scott Wallace

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***The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes* by Scott Wallace. New York: Random House. 2012. 479 pp., notes, maps, references.**

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The unknown, the unmapped, the untouched, in short, the uncivilized, or in journalist Scott Wallace's terms, the "unconquered," have always destabilized western colonial notions of the proverbial "other" and provoked different desires and fetishes. Isolated from "us," the "moderns," the "globals," the "nationals," those "under the rule of law, order and the state," and by eluding the reach of the state and capital, some indigenous collectives challenge the colonial myth of "contact" and "integration." The book, *The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes*, is a detailed account of an expedition within the territory of the Arrow People, the "Flecheiros," in the Terra Indígena Vale do Javari, Brazil's western Amazon region in the state of Amazonas. The expedition was led by Sydney Possuelo, one of a special class of wilderness savvy employees of the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) dubbed "sertanistas," charged with monitoring and contacting uncontacted indigenous groups.

Wallace is an experienced and talented journalist. He has been contributing to *National Geographic*, reporting on the Amazon for over 20 years, with previous in-depth experience covering conflicts and wars in Latin America for various magazines and newspapers such as *Smithsonian*, *Newsweek*, and *Outside*. In the early 1990s, he investigated struggles for land in southern Pará, Brazil, reporting on land occupations by *posseiros* (squatters) and on death threats leveled at Liberation Theology priest, Ricardo Resende, in Xinguara, and sister Dorothy Stang in Anapu as a consequence of their advocacy on behalf of poor people and the environment. Earlier, he also denounced the character assassination directed at Kayapo leader and environmentalist, Paulinho Payakan, by the right-wing conservative magazine *Veja*, during the Rio Earth Summit of 1992. In 2002, Wallace received "the chance of a lifetime," an invitation by *National Geographic* to cover the Alípio Bandeira expedition, named in honor of a sertanista employed by the institutional predecessor of the FUNAI, the Indian Protection Service—Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI). "The journey offered an opportunity for exploration and adventure that had all but vanished from our planet by the dawn of the third millennium" (p. 12).

This book came out almost a decade later, first published in 2011 by Crown Publishers, after the author had had time to reflect on this trip and to update his research. Brazilian journalist, Leonêncio Nossa, from the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, also joined the expedition, along with Wallace and *National Geographic* photographer Nicolas Reynard, who later died in a plane crash in the Amazon in 2004. In 2007 Nossa published his book *Homens Invisíveis (Invisible Men)* based on this expedition. For his part, Wallace debated about whether he should publish his account and struggled with how to relate the extraordinary journey he had experienced and the complex character of Sydney Possuelo, who Wallace found challenging to fairly characterize on the basis of a single fieldwork experience. The result is an astonishing book, beautifully written, a gripping and, above all, deeply honest story. It thus comprises a historical document depicting a time period. It is a must read for those aspiring to understand and reflect upon the contradictions of Brazil's indigenist politics that encompass both its merits in safeguarding indigenous rights and its colonialist approach in exploiting Indian labor and territory.

Wallace addresses the reader in a tone that is serious, yet flowing and insouciant. By writing in the journalistic present, he conveys the reader along with him during the entire expedition, allowing the reader to glimpse his thought processes, anxieties, doubts, and

distress. He is able to hold the reader's attention throughout the book, sustaining the expectation of an imminent contact that, since the beginning of his story, we know will not happen. In this sense, the account calls to mind the marvelous film from the British filmmaker Adrian Cowell, *The Tribe that Hides from Man* (1970) that documents the unconsummated contact of the Panara when the expedition led by the Villas Boas brothers sought to preempt conflict provoked by the Brazilian military's plans to build the BR 163 highway through Panara territory. In a different way, the Alípio Bandeira expedition did not seek out contact, but rather to gather information about the territory inhabited by the elusive Arrow People and to draw media and political attention to the situation of "isolated" indigenous peoples a year after the Javari reserve was officially registered as indigenous land containing more than 8.5 million hectares. This land area was demarcated in 2000, and the area officially designated the following year. An intense and sustained mobilization by local indigenous groups, led by UNIJAVA (União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari), succeeded in overcoming fierce opposition to the demarcation led by local elites and the military.

I reread Wallace's book after learning about a series of turbulent events that transpired in the Javari Valley at the end of 2015 in order to understand the conflicts between different indigenous groups and their relationship with FUNAI and the Brazilian state and to obtain a descriptions of the actions and omissions of these institutions. *The Unconquered* was written in the genre of popular adventure with all of its limitations. Nonetheless, thanks to the fairness of Wallace's description, it greatly contributes to understanding and contextualizing the contemporary situation and its challenges.

It was reported that, after he first read the book in English with the help of his wife, Possuelo was disappointed with Wallace. However, Possuelo softened his stance upon receiving favorable reviews of the book's Portuguese translation. Reviews by *O Globo* newspaper and the *Veja* newsweekly placed Possuelo in a more positive light, headlining such praises as "a luta de Sydney Possuelo para resguardar a tribo dos flecheiros" (the struggle of Sydney Possuelo to save the tribe of the Arrow People), and "salvar os isolados" (to save the isolated). Both of these reviews pleased Possuelo.

From one angle the book shadows Possuelo, and in portraying him, investigates the complex consequences of the straightforward policy mandate of "no contact" with "isolated" indigenous groups. We can also read the book for the attention it pays to the subaltern position occupied by the "contacted" peoples in the Javari, namely the Matis and the Kanamari. Although it was not the focus of the book, the dedication of the Matis in implementing and enforcing the policies protecting their uncontacted "relatives" is notable. Wallace describes their deep knowledge of environment and territory as they actively move about, seeking clues to the presence of the "isolated." The reader is certainly led to believe that the Matis could have found the "isolated" groups in the forest any time if they so chose: "I was drying off when Nicolas dashed over. 'D-did you hear?' he stammered. 'The Matis have found a camp of the Arrow People! Come on, let's go!' 'Hurry!', Txema (one Matis member of the expedition) shouted" (p. 221).

For his part, Possuelo is described as an idealist who believes in the role of the state in defending indigenous rights, exhibiting a blend of authoritarian and paternalistic persona, while at the same time managing to maneuver through different social and political groups to call attention to his cause. During his term as FUNAI's president, which coincided with the Rio 1992 Earth Summit, he learned how to strike a resonant chord between environmental concerns and indigenous political causes. This turned out to be a clever move, particularly when he renamed the FUNAI Contact Fronts unit as the "Ethno-Environmental Protection" Fronts unit. Earlier, he also took the lead in establishing FUNAI's Department of Isolated Indians in 1987 and drafted the agency's internal regulations in which the avoidance of contact was adopted as an explicit political goal (the so-called *prerrogativa do não-contato* [non-contact prerogative]). Coming two years after the end of Brazil's military dictatorship, which cost the lives of at least 8,000 natives according to the National Truth Commission, the new anti-contact policies were mainly a response to prior removals of indigenous groups performed on orders from the Brazilian government in order to facilitate development projects. The implementation of new policies required a lot of new information to guarantee the rights of indigenous groups without trespassing on their territory or eliciting their direct testimony. As Wallace writes, "Starting in 1987 with Possuelo in charge, the newly created Isolated

Indians unit investigated reports of fresh sightings of uncontacted Indians and took action to protect them” (p. 16). Measures included the creation of Indian Lands and different techniques to monitor the groups, such as aerial reconnaissance and treks through their territory. In answer to Reynard’s question regarding his opinion of the sertanista, Wallace sums up Possuelo’s complex character:

Since that night ten years before at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, I’d followed Possuelo’s career from afar, in occasional headlines, as he presided over FUNAI and resumed his role as head of the Isolated Indians Department. He’d gained renown over the years as a monomaniacal zealot who went to the ends of the Earth for Brazil’s Indians and pursued his goals with frightening single-mindedness. Detractors within FUNAI called him a dictator—o rei de tudo, the “king of everything,” as one put it. “A cross between Jesus Christ and Che Guevara,” said another. In short, you either loved him or you hated him; there was no middle ground (pp. 16–17).

Possuelo started working for the FUNAI in 1972. To thoroughly document his long career would require another volume, since it follows the history of Brazil from the period of the dictatorship (1964–1985) to the New Republic (which for all practical purposes suffered a coup in 2016). As FUNAI’s chief sertanista, he worked throughout the Amazon—in the Javari Valley of the Amazonas state, the state of Rondônia, in Maranhão among the Awá-Guajá (where he saw turbulent contacts, rescues, and tragic epidemics), in northern Pará with the Zo’ê, and along the Transamazon highway. He also led an expedition in the *cerrado* of Goiás to find survivors of the Avá-Canoeiro, the only known “isolated” people in Brazil living beyond Amazonia’s equatorial forest. He gained international recognition, receiving such honors as a gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society and the Spanish Bartolomé de las Casas award—all in the face of critics who lambasted his politics of protection as self-centered. At the same time that Possuelo created and strengthened FUNAI’s Isolated Indians Department, he worked together with an activist NGO, the CTI, *Centro de Trabalho Indigenista* (Center for Indigenist Work), to acquire and manage resources from international foundations to increase the budget of the department he led. Since their initial partnership the relationship between the CTI and FUNAI has undergone many changes, especially since Possuelo’s dismissal from the agency in 2006 after publically criticizing Mércio Gomes, FUNAI’s president between 2003 and 2007.

Towards the end of the expedition, Wallace writes:

My relationship with Possuelo wasn’t nearly as cozy, and I didn’t want it to be. I tried to steer a middle course among the factions. If I could have avoided him altogether, I probably would have by this point. But I still needed his cooperation—not only for my own survival, but for the story I was there to write. Like the topographic maps of the land there were still large uncharted spaces in my knowledge of Possuelo. I needed to get more on his thoughts, on his personal history, on the reasons for the choices he’d made and those he was making even now. It became a source of constant anxiety. But when I tried to pin him down, he was coy and elusive (pp. 292–293).

Countering the common perception held by many anthropologists, Possuelo is not portrayed, nor does he present himself, as a “hero” or a selfish man in search of personal aggrandizement. He can be rude, sometimes arrogant, and at other times paternalistic. But his character belongs to a man who has worked in the Javari since the early 1970s and who, over a long career, acquired some of the controlling traits of the military-era FUNAI, even as he sought to defend indigenous rights during the period of authoritarianism and military rule. As FUNAI president from 1991 to 1993, he was the first executive of this agency after its return to civilian control to purge it of pervasive military influence. Along with other FUNAI co-workers, such as his close friend, Wellington Figueiredo, he learned how to use the agency’s bureaucracy in his favor, how

to countenance adversity, and how to build alliances with members of the press, the army, and indigenous groups. Most importantly, he fathomed that sertanista work entails the political context of its acts and, more than anything, a sense of urgency and the need to think and act quickly. This insight is probably what FUNAI lacked during the conflict that emerged in late 2014 and erupted into violence by the end of 2015 when the Matis accused the agency of not being there for them and therefore remiss in its responsibilities.

When Wallace recounts how the Kanamari took flight from Possuelo's camp to visit the Arrow People's villages without his consent or the many times that Matis-led treks encountered vestiges left by these people, we realize that the expedition, as other FUNAI interventions, constitutes an intrusion into indigenous lives and territories. It was Matis Tepi and Bina Matis who discovered a large ceramic pot buried in a mound of dried leaves, and it was also the Matis who found blowguns and other weapons left along the way by the Arrow People. They always knew the Arrow People were not really isolated, since according to their accounts, they have lived in close proximity from far back in time.

After being informed of a contact situation with twenty-one "isolated" Korubo (on September 26 and October 10, 2015) and being briefed on conflicts that had led to casualties among the Matis and the Korubo, I wrote about this in the Brazilian newsweekly, *Carta Capital*, in November 2015. My text generated a lot of discussion on the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) listserv, and sparked a debate on what was proper to publically disclose about the situation. After the publication of my article, FUNAI admitted that seventeen deaths might have occurred (in a public response to my article "at least" eight Korubo, while an internal report noted fifteen Korubo deaths, along with two Matis, Damë e Ivã Xukurutá). Following these events, there has been news of three other "new contact" situations in the past two years, almost all of them disastrous (with the Indians relating stories of epidemics and massacres immediately prior to contact). These encounters have raised important questions about Brazilian policies regarding so-called isolated Indians and the interventions of the Brazilian state, non-governmental organizations, and Brazilian anthropologists working among the different indigenous peoples living in the common territory known as the Javari Valley.

This series of contacts and conflicts called into question what had been considered an exemplary and successful model of "ethno-environmental protection fronts" in an area inhabited by distinct indigenous societies within Brazilian state territory that had been living in different situations and degrees of "isolation." The general idea that peaceful coexistence is possible between indigenous groups living in different contact situations was challenged. FUNAI officially categorizes degrees of contact in terms of "isolated," "contacted," and "integrated." The *Terra Indígena Vale do Javari* (Javari Valley Indian Land) found itself in a state of crisis after the sequence of contacts, conflicts, and deaths. Local indigenous leaders criticized as colonialist NGOs such as the CTI and the FUNAI. Subsequently, they have insisted in directly participating in any policy measures affecting their lives and territory. The expedition organized and led by Sydney Possuelo in 2002 provides substantial background information to assess these conflicts, the politics of indigenism, and of the role of the Matis and other indigenous groups in searching for autonomy from Brazilian colonial institutions whether in the guise of the state or the NGO sector.

The precise account given by Scott Wallace enables us to appreciate the experiences of the Alípio Bandeira expedition, with all its merits and contradictions, and represents the important role that the media has historically played in defending indigenous rights. As Darcy Ribeiro once noted in his *Os Índios e a Civilização*, the public denunciations of journalists have saved more Indian lives than the SPI and FUNAI. In this respect, it is no coincidence that, in the last five years—a period when four different "contact" situations transpired in the Amazon—FUNAI has systematically prohibited access to these fronts by independent journalists.

Indigenous groups in the Javari Valley are not isolated from one another but from the distant purview of politics in Brasília, lobbyists, NGOs, and from financial capitals worldwide. At one particular moment, Possuelo tells Wallace, "They know we're here now. No question about it" (p. 239). The same could be said about the Matis, who have been ignored since Possuelo left and who have embarked on a letter-writing campaign to

raise awareness of the complex situation they face in dealings with their old neighbors such as the Korubo and the Arrow People, as well as with different levels of government. Wallace writes in the opening of Chapter 16 that, “The Matis led the way forward” (p. 240) in the trek. It is my hope that the Matis and the other indigenous groups in the Javari, no matter their situation of contact or categorization by the Brazilian state, will be able to lead their own way forward as well. In sum, Wallace’s book provides an essential account of at least two different aspects of contact: (1) the role of the Brazilian state and (2) the role of the Matis, Kanamari, and other indigenous peoples in relation to the implementation of policies and actions involving what has been termed “isolation.”

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