

# Reflections on Brazilian Amazonia and International Policies

*Lilian Cristina Duarte*

Nowadays, that part of Amazonia which is situated on Brazilian territory is more and more the focus of attention for communication methods and the international agenda. This enormous expanse of land covered by tropical forest of unequalled beauty, extending over several Brazilian states, possesses an extremely rich biodiversity, with a vast potential reserve of natural resources of all sorts, and inspires admiration as well as inevitable greed. The intensification of human activity in the region has given rise to problems such as deforestation and a resulting loss of organic matter whose importance has yet to be properly evaluated; it has also led to conflict between the different local groups, such as the indigenous population, gold prospectors and the big landowners, and to the degradation of quite extensive areas, thus provoking questions on how best to promote sustained development in the region.

Compared to an international community which is laying an ever greater importance on conservation of the environment, Brazil appears, on more than one occasion, to be a real environmental maverick, whose policies on Amazonia are judged to be either extremely predatory or simply inefficient when it comes to dealing with the interlinked questions concerning the equilibrium of such a fragile environment. As a result, international solutions are proposed quite regularly, in an apparent attempt to ensure the preservation of the region, but they are basically aimed at limiting or eliminating Brazilian sovereignty over it, and have often disguised the complex interests of widely differing groups.

It is true that Amazonia is still suffering from the effects of inadequate policies and disastrous projects undertaken over the years.<sup>1</sup> As early as the nineteenth century the 'economic cycle of rubber' gave the region its first promise of wealth, quickly followed by disenchantment: apart from the expansion of Manaus (the capital of Amazonia) and the beginnings of exploitation of products such as jute and Brazil nuts, the local population did not derive much advantage from it, nor did it benefit from this new economic frontier, which was exploited mainly by international enterprises. At the end of the cycle, at the beginning of the twentieth century, economic decline in the region was rapid and inexorable. Another attempt to 'promote civilization' in this region was undertaken in the 1930s by the North American industrialist, John Ford, at Fordlândia and Belterra. The use of agricultural techniques inappropriate to the local soil and continual conflict with the workers eventually brought about the failure of the project. Since the mid-1960s the military government, concerned by the lack of population in the region and lax surveillance on the borders, and with financial backing from abroad, took a series of measures to encourage occupation of the territory and drew up projects to open up the region based

on the construction of main roads to the big mining enterprises. The prospects of better living conditions attracted incomers from all parts of Brazil, but most of all from the Brazilian Nordeste, a region where the scarcity and uneven distribution of resources have caused the mass exodus of the population. Since the 1970s the degradation of the region has intensified, with the use of slash-and-burn to clear the land and prepare it for cultivation, and with disputes over which areas are to be used for agriculture, panning for gold (*garimpo*) and traditional crops.

It was at this time that the first condemnations came from all over the world, drawing attention to the dangers to Amazonian ecosystems – and to the planet – from the disorganized and predatory occupation of the region. During the 1980s, in a climate of increasing world interest in environmental issues, Brazilian policies came under very severe attack. The country was denounced in international forums and the suggestion was made that the Brazilian government cede part of its sovereignty to the international community, which was considered to be a more competent and legitimate body to manage the local resources in a sustained manner.<sup>2</sup> At first, the defence of national sovereignty by the government of José Sarney (the first president of the new democratic age) was judged by the international community to be excessively nationalist and totally inappropriate. But a series of measures for the region, improved by his successors and linked to a firm defence of national interests by certain sectors of society, including politicians (henceforward democratically elected), the army, the diplomatic corps and civil organizations, eventually gave a more balanced view of the environmental situation in Brazil.

Brazilian society's rejection of the international proposals and accusations, which manifested itself in various ways, originated within several sectors of the population. Firstly, with the return to democracy, it was possible to initiate a debate on the actual conditions in the region, with more reliable information available and the involvement of both governmental and non-governmental sectors. This reduced the risk of authoritarian projects being formulated which did not reflect the interests and opportunities of the local population.

Secondly, two factors need to be considered in order to explain greater international participation in the environmental protection of the region. The economic development of Amazonia has always depended on intensive investment of international capital. From the extraction of rubber to the big agricultural and mining companies, the Brazilian government has always relied on strong interest in the region from foreign businesses. Big development projects received start-up funds from the World Bank, but it was only as a result of strong international pressure that the World Bank started to demand that these projects include measures to evaluate their impact on the environment. A separate chapter could easily be written on the varying proposals made at international level for the occupation of the region. In the nineteenth century, Germany, France, Great Britain and the United States tried to impose unrestricted navigation of the River Amazon on the Brazilian government, in the name of free trade; after the American Civil War, the United States proposed that the emancipated blacks should be sent to colonise Latin America, including Amazonia, in order to avoid social conflict. Ford's ill-fated programme in the 1930s has already been mentioned. During the 1960s, the Brazilian government learned of a Japanese plan to settle thousands of Japanese immigrants in colonies in the region.<sup>3</sup> The picture became even more confused when it became apparent that the North American Hudson Institute planned at the same time to flood vast areas, transforming the region into an enormous lake, with obvious and incalculable losses to local ecosystems, and that

the transformation of the region into a sheltered zone in the event of a nuclear catastrophe<sup>4</sup> was also being discussed.

Proposals to internationalize Amazonia also attracted attention, due to possible violations of international law. Naturally, the environmental question continued to challenge a certain inflexible conception of sovereignty, since ecological problems transcend politically-designated borders. However, statements such as that by the then American President, George Bush senior, in which he declared his readiness to send troops to occupy Amazonia if necessary, and the suggestion by the French President François Mitterand, amongst many others, that Brazil should cede part of its sovereignty to the international community,<sup>5</sup> constitute an unjustified attack on the sovereignty of a state even though it is actively participating in international forums on the environment, and is involved in negotiating international environmental treaties and promoting reforms in both domestic and foreign policy which will guarantee the consideration of environmental matters at all levels of decision-making.

In addition, several sectors of Brazilian society, including known ecological militants,<sup>6</sup> have voiced the following criticisms of the international community's arguments:

a) There are certain ecosystems rich in biodiversity, such as the *Mata Atlântica* (the Atlantic Forest, which has been almost completely destroyed) and the *cerrado* (similar to the maquis in the Mediterranean), which are practically ignored by the international community. Is this perhaps because they do not possess the same wealth of mineral and other, equally tempting, resources?

b) Brazil has urban environmental problems, made worse by poverty, which affect sectors of the population much more numerous than that of Amazonia; however, these issues are ignored. Are urban misery and pollution not of interest to foreign environmentalists?

Thirdly, since the 1990s, the Brazilian government has been trying to exploit international interest in the Amazonian territory in order to form partnerships to promote sustained development in the region, whilst at the same time seeking to re-establish links with its neighbours in the Amazon Basin and to increase its control there. As well as projects to conserve the forest, in partnership with the developed countries and the World Bank, Brazil has also agreed to improve the *sistema de Vigilância da Amazonia* (SIVAM,<sup>7</sup> the Amazonia surveillance system). This system deals with the protection, *sensoriamento remoto* (observation at a distance) and surveillance of the region in its widest sense: from control of frontiers, resources and air space to the slash-and-burn system and the ecosystem as a whole. The government has recently instituted the *Política Nacional de Florestas*<sup>8</sup> (national policy on forests), which is intended to promote an integrated approach to the development of forest resources, support the exchange of information on ecosystems, intensify the fight against the slash-and-burn system and encourage international co-operation between those involved in the management of the forest. The Brazilian government's interest in Amazonia can only intensify, since it will also be necessary to contribute to the search for solutions to conflicts linked to drug-trafficking and the social imbalance in neighbouring countries. North America favours militarization of the region and seeks to increase its political and social instability, and this constitutes a delicate time for relations both for the two hemispheres and for the local environment.

The decision-making processes on plans by the government to exploit Brazilian Amazonia must be based on accurate knowledge of the region's resources, and must encourage participation by local groups and the Brazilian population as a whole. The

effectiveness of this formula has been demonstrated in recent years by, for example, the extremely lively demonstrations which greeted the new reform proposal for the *Código Florestal* (forest code), which would have allowed the destruction of vast indigenous areas. International co-operation plays an important role in the conservation of the global environment and is always welcome when it represents a pooling of efforts to promote shared values. Values which, in this day and age, invariably all lead to the creation of mechanisms whereby the Brazilian States can assume responsibility under international law, with no need for intervention; and also to respect for global democracy, which includes respecting the wishes and decisions of sovereign peoples.

Lilian Cristina Duarte

*Universit  Est cio de S , Br sil*

(translated from the French by Rosemary Dear)

## Notes

1. There are excellent descriptions of the attempts to occupy Amazonia. Of note are the studies by Bertha K. Becker (1990), *Amaz nia*, S o Paulo:  d. Atica; Manoel Miranda Neto (1986), *O Dilema da Amazonia*, Bel m: Cejup; Shelton Davis (1977), *Victims of the Miracle*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
2. For the poor environmental image which Brazil had at the time, see, for example, Andrew Hurrell, 'Brazil and the International Politics of the Amazonian Deforestation', in Andrew Hurrell and Benedict Kingsbury (1992), *The International Politics of the Environment*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 398–429.
3. Rubens Bayma Denys (1998), *O engessamento da Amazonia*, in *A D fense Nacional*, 779, pp. 44–5.
4. Commission on Development and Environment for Amazonia. Amazonia Without Myths. IDB/UNEP/ Amazon Co-operation Treaty 1992, p. 8.
5. Paulo Tarso Flecha de Lima (1997), *Caminhos Diplom ticos. 10 anos de agenda internacional*, Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, pp. 189–206.
6. Henri Acselrad, (ed.) (1992), *Meio Ambiente e Democr cia*. Rio de Janeiro: IBASE.
7. Cl vis Brigag o (1996), *Intelig ncia e Marketing: O Caso SIVAM*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record.
8. For more information, see [www.mma.gov.br](http://www.mma.gov.br).