

Received
2021-12-16Accepted
2022-09-12**Ana Maria de Souza Mello Bicalho**
Scott William Hoefle

What are indigenous and traditional populations? A relational approach to ethnic territories and conservation in Brazil

This article explores the contradictory relationship between identity politics and environmental conservation in Brazil. First, the rationale for setting aside territories for ethnic groups in Brazil that have been historically discriminated against is examined and legal definitions for such traditional populations are presented. Second, ethnographic and philosophical critiques of essentialized ethnic identity are used to highlight how traditionality and conservation are conflated in Brazilian environmental policies. These policies, in turn, are related to another bundle of contradictions in Western bio-centric preservation which (erroneously) essentializes nature and excludes the human presence from within reserves. Research findings from two remote regions located in critical biomes for conservation in Brazil are presented succinctly to illustrate different kinds of contradictions between ethnic territories and conservation. In conclusion, a relational research agenda is offered which avoids the pitfalls of essentialized identity and nature.

Key words: essentialized identity, ethnic territories, environmental conservation, Amazon, Pantanal, Brazil.

Ovaj članak istražuje kontradiktorni odnos između politike identiteta i očuvanja okoliša u Brazilu. Prvo se ispituje obrazloženje za uspostavljanje teritorija za etničke skupine u Brazilu koje su povijesno diskriminirane te se navode pravne definicije za takve tradicionalne populacije. Potom se etnografska i filozofska kritika esencijaliziranoga etničkog identiteta koristi za isticanje kako su tradicionalnost i očuvanje povezani s brazilskim politikama zaštite okoliša. Te su politike, pak, povezane s još jednim skupom kontradikcija u zapadnjačkoj biocentričnoj zaštiti koja (pogrešno) esencijalizira prirodu i isključuje ljudsku prisutnost iz rezervata. Rezultati istraživanja iz dviju udaljenih regija smještenih u kritičnim biomima za očuvanje u Brazilu sažeto su prikazani da bi se ilustrirale različite vrste kontradikcija između etničkih teritorija i očuvanja okoliša. Zaključno se predlaže relacijska istraživačka agenda kojom se izbjegavaju zamke esencijaliziranoga identiteta i prirode.

Introduction

A strong nexus exists between sustainable-use conservation and ethnic identity policies in Brazil but, depending on the regional and national political context, one people's social inclusion can provoke the exclusion of other groups. Four cases drawn from long-term research in different parts of the Amazon rainforest and the Pantanal wetlands illustrate how relationships between local subaltern groups can vary over space and time, alternately being characterized by open conflict, tense co-existence, or alliances of mutual cooperation (Fig. 1). Conflicting situations are shown to be caused by basic flaws in Brazilian federal- and state-level policies concerning conservation, traditionality and ethnic identity, which give rise to social and environmental injustices.

The contradictory nature of Brazil's socio-environmental policies has become increasingly apparent in field research undertaken by the authors in the Amazon since 1975 and in the Pantanal since 2002. Over the



Fig. 1 The case studies in the Amazon and the Pantanal.

Source of base map: IBGE (2016)

years, curious empirical situations were encountered, which led to a growing awareness that what environmentalist and indigenous activists called “traditional populations” did not always forge alliances of mutual benefit. Indeed, it became increasingly clear that, until quite recently, the exact opposite often occurred in the Amazon when indigenous territories are established along the main rivers, the historic peasantry present in the same space was removed. This took place during decades of eco/ethno-friendly government in Brazil, but started to change in the 2010s when the territorial needs of both concerns were sacrificed to the expansion of large infrastructure projects, mining, logging, and the agribusiness sector. Furthermore, both eco and ethnic movements suffered outright hostility from the right-wing federal administration in power between 2019 and 2022, which was categorically opposed to both environmental conservation and ethnic identity politics. The third and fourth cases examined herein show how this caused indigenous and peasant groups to put aside their differences and work together.

The evolution of network theory of the 1990s to relational ontology in the 2000s, with regard to intertwined nature-society and socio-political networks, has permitted a better understanding of the contradictory relationship between different types of conservation policy in Brazil and traditional populations. This approach involves horizontally viewing interactions between different local social actors and their respective trans-local alliances, while political ecology investigates vertical relationships between local actors and other actors with various scales of political power. Research focussing on top-down power relations is certainly of great importance, but it may overlook conflict and/or cooperation between different sets of local actors of the same general social class.

A relation perspective can also supplement the shortcomings of specialized research based on *a priori* Weberian ideal types, in which specific social actors are studied by different researchers. We will show how the scientific division of labor in Brazilian social research can cause engaged research to morph into empirically-blind political partisanship, e.g. “my people against all others”. A number of practical socio-ecological strategies are offered in the conclusion for overcoming this sort of zero-sum thinking.

Brazilian conservation policy and ethnic territories: in search of the “traditional”

During the 20th century, conservation policy in Brazil mimicked the US model of national parks and forests. The Brazilian *Forest Code* of 1934 enabled the creation of the first three full-preservation National Parks and the *Forest Code* of 1965 created new kinds of conservation of units: full-preservation Biological Reserves where only research can be undertaken and National Forests where economic activities can occur. Finally, at the end of the century, neo-liberal Private Natural Reserves were authorized.

In 2000, the National System of Conservation Units (SNUC) was implemented and introduced a variety of full-preservation units and other nature reserves with multiple sustainable uses. National Forests, Extractive Reserves, Sustainable Development Reserves, Private Natural Reserves and Indigenous Lands fall in this latter group. This kind of conservation arose in the aftermath of the implementation of the 1988 Constitution which established basic human rights for the rural poor, who have repeatedly suffered dispossession over the centuries. Hence, if low-impact land use were to be undertaken, prior residents of newly established conservation units must be allowed to stay, particularly if they are “traditional populations”, such as Amerindians and historic peasants.

“Traditional peoples and communities” are legally defined in Brazil as: “culturally differentiated groups that have their own forms of social organization and who occupy and utilize territories and natural resources for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral and economic reproduction by employing knowledge and practices that are transmitted through tradition...” (translated from Federal Decree no. 6,040 of 7/2/2007, Article 3, Clause I). The decree also prohibits the removal of such populations from conservation units, even those types which normally do not normally permit a resident population. Federal laws and regulations seem

to be straight-forward enough but biologists and environmental engineers with bio-centric worldviews, i.e. separating nature from (human) society, who have no training in the social sciences, consider humans to be a menace to the rest of nature, and have great difficulty understanding that sustainable use is more than pure subsistence production.

Traditional populations are numerous in remote areas of Brazil, particularly in the Amazon, where most sustainable conservation units are concentrated. Full preservation conservation units are usually the norm in the rest of Brazil, even in private natural reserves, which in theory fall within the sustainable use group. Consequently, the only option available for the poor rural population in the face of bio-centric environmental injustice in most of Brazil is to solicit the creation of ethnic territories. This is a contentious process, given the fact that access to such territories is based on the scientifically questionable but socially powerful concept of race (cf. Kahn, 1989), which regulates access to exclusive territories meant to redress the situation of two historically discriminated ethnic groups: “indigenes” and “negroes” (which includes “blacks” and “browns”).

Unfortunately, such affirmative action has proven to be difficult to implement in a country like Brazil where there is considerable ethnic hybridity and one’s ethnic identity is self-defined according to which aspect is most advantageous at any given moment. The different cases treated below explore contradictions provoked by the use of essentialist concepts of “traditional”, “race”, and “conservation” which can be avoided by using a relational socio-ecological framework.

Ethnographic and relational critiques of identity

In philosophical and political terms, a relational approach defines identity in terms of a person’s position within social networks and not according to biological properties that an individual is thought to possess within, i.e. according to cultural ethnicity and not biologically defined race. Therefore, in Latour’s view identity is not considered to be an inherent internal *essence* of separate *individuals* considered to be *subjects*, *beings-as-beings*, who *are*. Relational identity deals with *persons* who are *beings-as-others*, *quasi-subjects*, defined by their *articulation in external networks* composed of intertwined *quasi-subjects* and *quasi-objects* and *have attachment-ATT* (intense common interests). Essentialized identity defined by racial group perhaps seems to be more permanent, secure and rooted, but this focus on difference and diversity interferes with the detection and construction of networks involving wider political affinity, i.e. in reassembling the social fabric, not deconstructing and fracturing it (Latour, 2005, 10–11; 2013, 353, 425).

This basic difference in the aforementioned approaches can be seen in the currently fashionable concept of the *indigenous*. The United Nations uses the term, and an IGU commission on indigenous populations was formally recognized, appropriately, at the Brisbane Regional Conference in 2006; and the concept is highly pertinent to the Brazilian cases presented below. Valeggia and Snodgrass (2015) defined an indigenous population as one that is “native, original and historically in place”. These authors contrasted two different approaches to defining identity: one used by biologists and physical anthropologists and one used by social anthropologists and sociologists-as well as human geographers. While the former use genetic markers for defining identity, i.e. an internal essence, social scientists define identity in terms of political status and the recognition of biological and cultural kinship in common, which constitute mutual relations between people situated in specific inhabited landscapes over a long period of time.

Blanchard et al. (2019) in an article with the suggestive title “We do not need a swab in our mouth to prove who we are” showed how Native North Americans rejected the biological approach to identity as defined by Genetic Ancestry Testing (GAT) because it usurps decades of legal, social, and political militancy in favor of long-denied basic human rights. They are particularly suspicious of GAT because of the historical imperialist role of Western Science in aiding and abetting ethnic cleansing, genocide, eugenics, forced assimilation, and suppression of indigenous knowledge.

Social definitions of indigenous identity can also be politically problematic. Almost echoing Latour, but coming from an ethnographic perspective based on long-term research in the Philippines, Frake (2014) strenuously questioned validating ethnic status of individuals as members of a collective social group invented by external non-governmental and governmental organizations. He showed how, in recent decades, the term “indigenous” has substituted other previous categories that were historically imposed by dominant social groups to negatively characterize marginal peoples as isolated and backward. The idealized indigene today is imagined to live in a “traditional” setting with a self-sufficient economy and to have a political system led by a “chief” who supposedly mobilizes his people toward the common good. Frake contrasts this caricature to the complex political past of the Philippines and questions whether the material advantages gained from GOs and NGOs compensate the risk of assuming an invented identity and becoming even more stigmatized within the dominant society. Consequently, as in the case with the concept of “traditional”, “indigenous population” is a grab-bag category in which different social segments that have little in common are thrown together in an attempt to construct collective political movements of dubious viability. Diamond (1973) once observed that such concepts often involve a Rousseauian reverse mirror: seeing the “idealized primitive other” as the exact opposite of the “corrupt civilized self”.

Even the territorial criteria of sharing an inhabited landscape over a long period of time can be questioned. Alexiades and Peluso (2015) and McSweeney and Jokisch (2007) observed that the vast majority of indigenes in low-land South America now live in cities and not in the ethnic territories set aside for them. In 2010 42% of the indigenous population of Brazil lived in cities (FUNAI, 2010). The rest lived in territories that can be located near cities and indigenes work in nearby urban areas or as temporary laborers on commodity farms. Even those who officially live in remote territories can sometimes live for long periods of time in cities.

Overcoming conflict between ethnic territories and conservation in the Amazon and Pantanal

Over the last thirty years, the Amazon has been a great laboratory of bottom-up green governance involving a variety of conservation, ethnic self-determination and sustainable development initiatives undertaken by the historic population in reaction to existential threats posed by mega-infrastructure projects, gold prospecting, strip mining, and settlers arriving from elsewhere in Brazil.

In decades of field research undertaken on the advancing frontier in the southern and eastern parts of the Amazon as well as in preserved parts to the west and north, various rural social actors have been identified¹ In regard to ethnic ancestry and region of origin, agricultural systems, market articulation, settlement patterns, cultural identification and environmental ethics and worldview, remote Amerindians, settlers from the Northeast region, and settlers from the South region are quite different from one another (Fig. 2). However, considerable ambiguity exists between indigenes and peasants who have historically lived juxtaposed in areas along the main rivers and have been articulated to the capitalist world system for centuries. This ambiguity in turn drives social and environmental justice.

¹ Over the years, research methods shifted from classic cultural ecology ethnography used in fieldwork on the Yanomamö and Ye'kwana Amerindians in the locality of Auaris in 1975 to a more regional political ecology approach employed in research undertaken in the Central and Western Amazon from 1997 to 2019. A gradient of social actors was investigated along important highways, such as the AM-10, BR-174, BR-319, BR-230 e BR-163, and along large navigable water courses, such as the main course Amazon River and the Madeira, the Negro and the Tapajós tributaries. Detailed empirical research on bottom-up green governance included all the relevant social actors and not just local leaders to the exclusion of their followers and rivals. While the methods remained firmly anchored in political ecology and multiple levels/sites of governance were investigated, a priori scalar assumptions concerning targeted social groups were avoided and conclusions were only reached after all relevant social actors had been researched. Productivist and non/post-productivist Amerindian, indigenous, riverine peasant, and commodity farmer families were interviewed (n = 662) as well as indigenous, riverine, and settler leaders concerning use of land and natural resources, environmental ethics and perception, farming systems, labor regimes, market articulation, sources of income, family structure, out-migration, access to public services, and political mobilization in the Central and Western Amazon. Interviews were also undertaken with representatives of the Brazilian Federal Environmental Protection Agency (IBAMA), the Federal Parks Service (ICMbio), the Federal Amerindian Protection Agency (FUNAI), the Federal Land Office (INCRA), farm unions, municipal and state government bodies, and religious institutions concerning agricultural and conservation policy, community development, and partnership networks.






Remote tribal Amerindians	Main indigenes hybrid ethnic	River peasants complexity	Northeastern peasants on roads	Southerners on roads
				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • headwater refuges • villages (defensive) • long-fallow cropping • hunting, some poultry • migrate for money income • indigenous language, some 'Portu-Spanish' • animist worldview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hybrid historic population • dispersed along rivers, today live in communities • medium-fallow cropping • small domestic animals, some cattle • semi-subsistence production • almost all only speak Portuguese • spiritually bifurcated Christian worldview + some animist elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recent settler coming from deforested landscape • some old indigenous ancestry • no fallow cropping • small domestic animals + cattle • semi-comercial production • dispersed along roads or live in communities • spiritually bifurcated Christian worldview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recent settler from deforested landscape • European biotype • cattle, commodities • highly comercial • high quality homes on farm or in town • Gaucho cultural centers → apartheid • secular worldview 	
<p>Photographs: Field research (1975, 2005, 2010, 2008, 2005).</p>				

Fig. 2 Cultural distance between social actors of the Amazon spatially expressed from north to south and west to east.

Sources: Bicalho and Hoefle (2008, 2010, 2012, 2015); Hoefle (2009, 2012, 2013) in which variation at the level of individuals is provided.

The Amazonian Amerindian and indigene movement COIAB (Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira) is a highly successful ethnic political movement. Aided by an impressive assembly of Brazilian and foreign anthropologists, environmentalists and religious organizations, the different Amerindian groups of the Amazon formed a consortium in 1989. By the end of the 1990s, COIAB included 56 organizations representing 163 indigenous peoples and about 204,000 individuals in the nine states which comprise the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB, 1991-1998). In 2022 the organization included 75 organizations representing 160 groups and close to 430,000 indigenes (COIAB, 2022). Over the years, COIAB has successfully lobbied to set aside about 110 million hectares of indigenous land in the Amazon, as well as obtaining basic health and education services and funding for community development programs (FUNAI, 2018).

However, COIAB's success was detrimental to a similar movement undertaken by the historic riverine peasantry which based its strategy for staying in place on sustainable conservation reserves. As these peasants also have pronounced Amerindian ancestry, the crux of the conflict between them and the other two subaltern actors revolves around simplistic ethnic policy, which sets aside land (territories) for Amerindians in which non-indigenes are no longer allowed to live (despite having lived there for generations). This might have made sense in the past (and sadly once again over the last four years of right-wing federal government) in order to protect Amerindian groups living in remote areas from violent gold prospectors. However, an ethnically complex population has existed for centuries along the main rivers of the Amazon where it is hard to draw a fast line between indigenes and peasants.

Great injustices have occurred in a case from the Upper Amazon, while open conflict was replaced by uneasy co-existence in a second case from the Lower Tapajós. In contrast to these cases, an alliance between indigenes and riverine peasants was forged in the Middle Tapajós in reaction to changing national politics

toward development, conservation and ethnic identity from the mid-2010s onward. This latter instance of alliance gives hope that the historic population of the Amazon can overcome its differences and unite in order to struggle against a common adversaries during periods when the historic despoilers of the land control state and federal government.

Case 1: Dispossession of riverine peasants on the Upper Amazon

The first case involving conflict between ethnic groups is located near the city of Benjamin Constant (Amazonas State), where Brazil borders both Peru and Colombia at the confluence of the Javari River with the main course of the Amazon River. Field work was undertaken in 2005. All riverine farmers interviewed were born and raised locally but communities are separated or fragmented internally according to ethnic group (Amerindian, hybrid historic peasant), nationality and language (Brazilian Portuguese speakers and Colombian and Peruvian Spanish speakers), farming system and market articulation and religious affiliation (Catholic, Protestant and the dissident Catholic sect Cruzista).

In this immense area only four small cities exist: Benjamin Constant (13,732 inhabitants in 2010) and Tabatinga (36,371 in 2010) in Brazil; Leticia (48,144 in 2018) in Colombia; and Islandia (~3,000 in 2020) in Peru. This area is ten to twelve days travel by river boat from Manaus, the principal consumer market of the Western Amazon and, as such, even the most resilient of perishables like bananas cannot be transported to this city of more than a million and a half consumers. There are only a handful of capitalized fruit and vegetable producers on islands located close to these small cities but the local consumer market is so small that they are able to meet all of the limited local demand. It is interesting to note that these producers include both indigenes and riverine peasants.

Other indigene and riverine peasant farmers who are located beyond these islands have great difficulty in finding buyers for their produce and they also have problems with the lack of good quality soil. In the upper basin of the Amazon (the Solimões), floodplain lands suitable for agriculture are in short supply, basically restricted to alluvial islands. Vegetables will only grow in the floodplains and will not grow directly in the highly acidic soil found off the floodplains. Regional fruit trees grow outside of the floodplain but farmers complain that there are no buyers so they end up planting a large number of different food crops and fruit trees for self-provisioning and only sell manioc meal, because it can make the long trip to distant markets. However, nearly all of the municipalities of Amazonas State sell manioc meal to Manaus and the additional transport cost associated with being located so far from main market hubs puts farmers of the Upper Amazon at a disadvantage. Consequently, income and living standards were found to be much lower than elsewhere in the Amazon. Riverine peasant producers earned only US\$363 per year in 2005 on average and 30% of them had no monetary income from farming at all.

When the Tikuna Indigenous Territory of Santo Antônio was set up in 1991 and the Tikuna Indigenous Territory of Bom Intento in 1996, local riverine peasants were removed and resettled inland to an INCRA colonization project set up for them. This was located away from the Amazon River where they had lived for generations. Soils are poor in comparison to alluvial land encountered along the Amazon River and, as is often the case with INCRA projects situated in remote places, roads were not properly maintained. Consequently, the peasants lost access to the reasonably good land they had farmed for generations as well as the spatial mobility they enjoyed along the main course of the Amazon River.

Even though the city of Benjamin Constant is located at a distance of ten to twenty kilometers from these farms, during the rainy season, when most crops are harvested, roads become impassible. This severely limits the types of crops that can be planted. Instead of selling higher-priced vegetables and fruit to a nearby urban market, as some riverine communities situated along the mainstream Amazon River do, the farmers living along the road were reduced to selling cheap manioc meal.

Consequently, these relocated peasants have little income and were among the poorest groups encountered in all of our fieldwork experience in the Amazon. Houses were small, made of roughly hewn wood with a straw or tin roof and furniture was limited to a crudely-made table and a bench or two. By contrast, one Tikuna leader who was elected to the municipal council and grew watermelons (which require the use of purchased fertilizer) had a relatively large house furnished with factory-quality furniture and a number of domestic appliances. We may ask: who is being discriminated against here?

This border area was recently in the news due to the horrific murder of an indigenous agent and a British journalist further up the Javari River where illegal fishing and logging are once again threatening Amerindians, indigenes, and riverine peasants. As we shall see below, in the case of the middle Tapajós River, a common threat could possibly induce greater cooperation between the different groups present in the upper Amazon.

Case 2: Ethnic conflict on the Lower Tapajós

Much of the increase in indigenous population in the Amazon over the last two decades has come from convincing the riverine peasants situated along the main rivers that it is more politically advantageous to be considered indigenes than *caboclos* (hybrids). The unrealistic restrictions imposed by bio-centric conservation staff of conservation units had a good deal to do with this.

In research undertaken in 2010, 2013 and 2019, the community-based forestry movement of the riverine peasants of the Tapajós National Forest was found to occupy a socio-ecological middle ground between bio-centric conservation and unfettered development of the Amazon. This movement is one of the most successful examples of resisting environmental dispossession in the region and eventually became the benchmark for sustainable forestry in Brazilian National Forests and Extractive Reserves. However, the Tapajós movement had to overcome the initial biocentric bias of the TNF staff whose first action after the unit was created up in 1974 was to try to remove the long-resident population in order to prevent “anthropic action”.

Today the community forestry system is overseen by the local rural population and not the commercial firms which first worked in the TNF because of a thirty-year struggle for rights, in which strengthening collective goals produced the social capital necessary to later take over and manage community-based forest management. The initial land dispute involved two rival actor-networks, one made up of the TNF, forestry researchers and logging firms on one side, and a network including the local population, municipal governments and the Federal Land Office (INCRA) on the other side.

Most of the population present within the TNF is made up of a historic peasantry with pronounced Amerindian ancestry that has a common social background of kinship and community ties. These people were better organized politically than the few INCRA settlers present within the TNF and were more active in pressuring for tenure rights. Their movement has its roots in the 1970s, when the Catholic Church started to promote community organization throughout the Amazon in an attempt to facilitate fishing and farming activities between neighbors as well as to pressure local government bodies for public education and health services (Bicalho, 2009; Hoefle, 2000; Kadt, 1970). This community organization was fundamental for channeling general land tenure resistance into alliances with INCRA and municipal government against the federal forestry and environmental agencies.

Between 1997 and 2005 these community associations became formal legal entities of collective representation for negotiation with public institutions, which enabled participation in alternative sustainable timber and non-timber forestry projects based on wider alliances with local, national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, three inter-community associations were set up to represent different spatial clusters of communities. The three associations then came together to

create a TNF-wide cooperative which became the vehicle for overseeing and managing collective logging and other forestry projects (see Bicalho and Hoeffe, 2013; 2015).

In opposition to the community-based forestry route to resisting environmental dispossession, another movement emerged after 1988 when new Brazilian ethnic-identity policy permitted taking a faster track to definitively gaining land via ethnic territories. The Tapajós National Forest has three communities of Munduruku Amerindian descendants who migrated to the area in the past. Today they number about 500 individuals and live in Bragança, Marituba, and Taquara villages located along the Tapajós River (ICMBio, 2014; ISA, 2014). As part of COIAB, the three communities declared themselves to be Amerindians in order to receive indigenous lands. Under the jurisdiction of FUNAI they also gained access to potentially better schools and health services than those provided in the countryside by municipal governments. As an indigenous population, they also have guaranteed land rights and not a mere twenty-year concession from the TNF like the peasants (which may or may not be renewed in the future). Most importantly, they are no longer subject to unrealistic “subsistence” restrictions imposed in national forests on raising cattle, selling fish, and farming more than one hectare of land.

The problem with all of this is that the people of the other communities of the national forest are physically and culturally indistinguishable from the self-defined indigenes. Both groups have accentuated Amerindian biotypes, the same small-scale, slash-and-burn farming system based on manioc, fishing and raising chickens, identical wattle-and-daub or wooden houses, most people speak only Portuguese and share a spiritually-bifurcated, syncretistic Christian worldview that incorporates aspects of Amerindian animism. However, in the case of indigenous lands, only self-declared indigenes can be present and the “non-indigenous” must be removed, and this causes conflict within communities and even within families.

One territorial strategy employed by a group indigenes presented a direct threat to the riverine peasants. In addition to the 10-km strip of land along the Tapajós River that the peasants used, the indigenes also claimed a large area located on the other side of the national forest, claiming that it was an ancestral hunting ground, exactly where the peasant cooperative had developed its sustainable logging operations. The TNF defused the issue by ceding another area further south to the peasants and the latter agreed to train the indigenes on how to manage collective forestry.

Case 3: Ethnic alliance on the Middle Tapajós

In what can be considered the latest phase in the relationship between ethnic groups in the Amazon, after 2013, an alliance between indigenes and riverine peasants arose in the middle Tapajós, which demonstrates how the two groups successfully pooled their resources against a common foe—in this case governmental priority given to polemical hydroelectric projects. The resulting reluctance of the federal government, by both left- and right-wing administrations, to demarcate new indigenous and sustainable development reserves in the much-pressured Terra do Meio conservation and ethnic mosaic of Pará State, and increasing logger, prospector and rancher encroachment, resulted in the rise of a joint movement of indigenes and riverine peasants with the goal of demarcating their respective territories (Amazônia.org, 2019). The two groups also created a network of country stores which shortened marketing chains and allowed cheaper access to necessities and the sale of forest products for a better price (ISA, 2016). This is hardly the behavior of isolated tribes or subsistence-minded peasants.

The increasingly adverse regional context for socio-ecological conservation/community development in the Amazon also had much to do with the fact that three successive highly unpopular federal administrations needed support from important politicians in Pará State, who represented settlers and logging firms involved in the predatory exploitation of natural resources, to enact policy.

The huge neighboring Amazonas State represents the polar opposite because it is sustained by the industrial complex of Manaus and less by primary extraction. Amazonas is a checkerboard of federal and state conservation units. It is the best-preserved state in the region and has been a pioneer in socially-inclusive conservation strategies, such as the *Forest Grant*. In addition to federal indigenous lands and national parks, Amazonas State earmarked almost all of its river basins as Sustainable Development Reserves in order to protect riverine peasants from predatory fishing and logging interests.

It should be noted that socio-ecological policies in Amazonas were the direct result of decades of political militancy on the part of riverine peasants who comprise an important bloc of voters in the state (Hoefle, 2000; Bicalho and Hoefle, 2010). Consequently, riverine peasants are not *caboclos* who are politically passive like Peixoto et al. (2012) alleged—something the authors would have discovered if they had done relational research in the Amazon instead of essentialized research on a single group seen as a Weberian ideal type.

Case 4: *Ethnic alliance against bio-centric conservation in the Pantanal*

A fourth case of resistance to social and environmental injustice along the upper Paraguay River was researched in 2015.² Two rival networks were found to be locked in conflict, one representing bio-centric conservation units and another promoting socio-ecological land use by historic riverine peasants.

The Pantanal of western Brazil is the largest wetlands complex in the world and has been the object of conservation actions undertaken by GOs and NGOs since the 1980s. The wetlands are located at the junction of three major biomes, the Atlantic Forest, the Cerrado, and the Amazon, which is the basis for the great biodiversity of the area. In 1981, an important federal national park for the Pantanal biome was set up in Mato Grosso State. Since then, enormous areas of land on the western and eastern banks of the Paraguay River have been purchased by wealthy investors from urban areas of the industrial Southeast region for the purpose of setting up private nature reserves. Under the umbrella of conservation and environmental compensation, historic ranches of the Pantanal were acquired and consolidated into enormous land holdings which could double as hobby ranches, fishing camps or mere repositories of value masquerading as private conservation units, all of which contributed to what Carlson (2019) called the return of the latifundium in Latin America, under the guise of green accumulation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2014).

Ironically, the area of permanent swamp where conservation efforts are concentrated in southern Mato Grosso State and northern Mato Grosso do Sul State is a relatively new landscape that was created by an extreme weather event of prolonged intense rainfall in 1974. Extensive erosion and sedimentation partially blocked the Paraguay River and its tributaries and the flood waters never receded. What was once seasonally flooded prairie became a swamp. Practically overnight, ranches were inundated and roads submerged; cattle could not be evacuated fast enough and died by the thousands. Ranches went bankrupt and workers were dismissed, many of whom left the area and never returned. The riverine peasants still present are those who accepted reducing their livelihood to a semi-subsistence level.

Outside investors took advantage of this depressed situated to acquire enormous swaths of land at low cost. To give the impression of functional use, the new owners took advantage of neo-liberal conservation policy introduced in the late 1990s, and formally enacted in 2000 and 2006 legislation, which encouraged

² Fieldwork undertaken in 2015 consisted of interviews with 32 riverine peasant families of a total of 64 living in the Serra do Amolar Conservation Area. The peasants were asked about their use of land and natural resources in both the past and present, environmental ethics and perception, farming systems, labor regimes, market articulation, sources of income, family structure, out-migration, access to public services, and political mobilization. The manager and five employees of one of the larger of the thirteen nature reserves were interviewed concerning the same subjects for the conservation unit as a whole as well as concerning their individual life paths. Finally, with this knowledge in mind, the research group participated in a public hearing held in the community of São Lourenço by the Federal Public Defender's Office, which mediated the dispute between the reserve and the local population.

the private sector to establish conservation units. In 2009, the private reserves of the Pantanal formed a network led by a shady local NGO with paramilitary connections based in Corumbá, which included the active involvement of the Pantanal National Park and the NGO Ecotrópica (IHP, 2016). These actors even succeeded in having this new landscape declared a UNESCO World Natural Heritage area (ICMBio, 2010).

Private reserve documents speak glowingly of promoting sustainable conservation but, in practice, the private reserves tried to expel the remaining traditional population and so distort nature (Figure 3). However, this runs counter to a 2007 Federal decree, which corrected some of the environmental injustices caused by full conservation in Brazil and guaranteed basic rights of traditional peoples and communities to remain on their land and to practice their customary way of life. When this kind of population is present, conservation units should be of the sustainable use type or at least permit traditional kinds of land use by the historic population living there; and certainly not remove them.

Public and private conservation reserves straddling the state line between Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul now occupy 276,087 hectares (Instituto Acaia, 2014; MMA, 2016). If other conservation units and indigenous lands located further north in the Pantanal are included, this adds up to 496,803 hectares of protected land. In the study area, we are dealing with a mere 64 families of riverine peasants. We may ask: how can such a minute population of former semi-subsistence fisher-farmer peasants (25% to 50% monetary activities), who after 1974 were reduced to quasi-subsistence fishers (only 10% to 25% monetary activities), represent a threat to conservation in such an enormous area?

The target of the nature enclosures are hybrid descendants of Guató Amerindians and settlers from other parts of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay who have lived in the wetlands for generations. During their lifetimes, these people have drifted up and down the rivers of the Pantanal seeking work as ranch hands or following annual variations in fishing conditions and channel movements. During times of unusually high flooding they would spend several months on certain points of higher land, which are now located within conservation units and were declared off-limits to them by the new owners. Given their hybrid ancestry, what these people suffered qualifies as environmental racism in addition to persecution of a traditional population. In regard to this, the initial documentation for setting up the private reserves was intentionally false, cynically stating that there was no local population present, when in fact there was.

As squatters, the riverine peasants could potentially become involved in land ownership disputes so the new land owners tried to preemptively remove them from land located on the river margins. However, this land is in fact public domain located in the federal right-of-way of fifteen meters from the high water mark on either side of the Paraguay River. First, the peasants were removed from the west bank of the river and were not legally compensated as squatters should be. Indeed, tactics of removal were violent, cruel and inhumane. Families were usually given one day to leave and no help in moving possessions which did not fit in a canoe. One pregnant woman miscarried due to the physical effort involved and duress suffered. Another woman had her house burnt down when she spent a day away from home taking her deceased husband for burial in a cemetery. These are classic land grabbing tactics in Brazil and perpetrators are called *grileiros* (who are universally despised).

Once thrown off the land, the peasant conservation refugees ended up settling in squalid conditions on the east bank which is more prone to flooding. In other words, a marginalized population became even more vulnerable. Even there the peasants were not free of violent harassment. The private reserves usurped the function of the federal environmental protection agency (IBAMA), which inspects compliance with land use restrictions outside public conservation units as an excuse to seize and destroy the peasants' fishing equipment and thus make it impossible for them to make a living. Then, land owners on the eastern bank of the river, in conjunction with the shady NGO mentioned above, tried to remove the peasants from there as well.

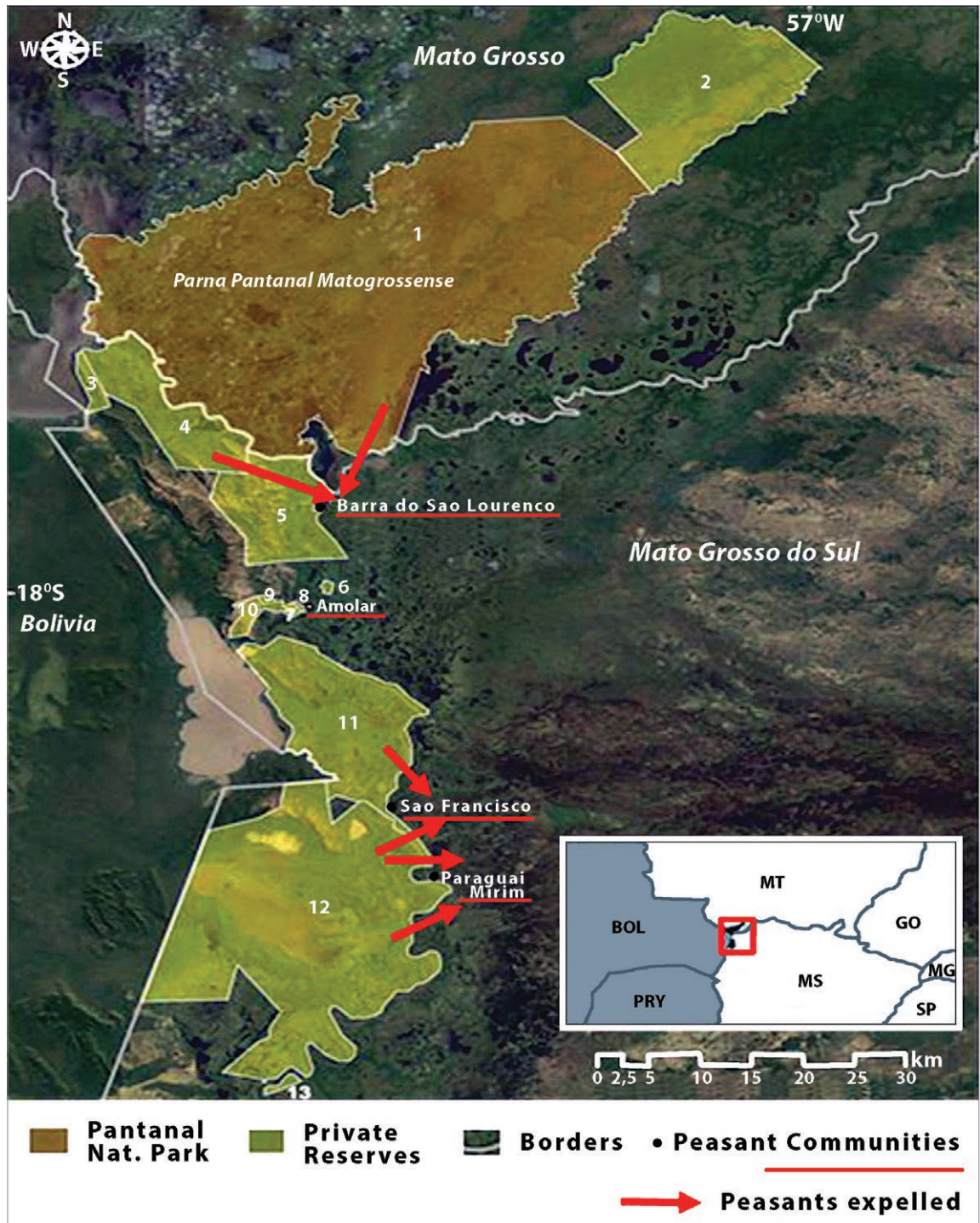


Fig. 3 Nature enclosures expel riverine peasants.
Source: adapted from Instituto Acaia (2014).

Such blatant environmental injustice attracted the attention of researchers, socio-ecological NGOs, the Public Defender's Office, and the press, which in turn provoked a class-action law suit between the two rival actor-network assemblages. Beginning in 2013, the peasant network solicited and was granted a

series of formal concessions from the federal government guaranteeing residence rights in public domain areas along the river and the right to take seasonal refuge from the annual floods on higher ground. They also were permitted to use natural resources in buffer areas and certain places within the nature reserves. To better guarantee these rights, since 2013, the peasants and their allies have sought the creation of a sustainable development reserve of the type which is common for riverine peasants of the Amazon.

During the process of resisting removal, the riverine peasants received the support of the Guató indigenes who have an ethnic territory located further up the Paraguay River. These indigenes had gained their territory in 1996 and are connected to a polemical movement to retake land from commodity farmers in Mato Grosso do Sul State, which infuriates the Brazilian right wing. In important hearings, the Guató representatives attested to the indigenosity of the riverine peasants. Many of those interviewed are relatives and one elderly man is the last native speaker of Guató. The indigenes also taught riverine women how to make crafts from local materials which can be sold to tourists. It needs to be pointed out that, unlike in the Amazon, indigenes and riverine peasants constitute tiny minorities in Mato Grosso do Sul State and this made it easier for them to join forces instead of engaging in zero-sum competition.

However, the proponents of bio-centric nature reserves include powerful regional and national elites who have consistently contested court decisions at every point of legal proceedings. They may yet overturn the hard-won achievements of indigenes and riverine peasants (see Bicalho et al., 2020 for greater details).

From difference/diversity to reassembling the social in politically dangerous times

These ethnic territory strategies of resisting environmental injustice used throughout Brazil are now on trial in the Brazilian Supreme Court, in a test case pitting a full preservation conservation unit located in a mountainous area of Atlantic Forest biome of Santa Catarina State against an indigenous territory which was created within it—much like what occurred in the lower Tapajós case discussed above. At stake is a decree made by the current right-wing federal administration in power from 2019 to 2022 which tried to annul all indigenous territories set up after the approval of the 1988 Constitution. That government claimed that the clause which protects ethnic territories only applied to territories which already existed when the Constitution entered into effect and not to those created afterward. The use of this decree by the park staff in Santa Catarina exposes how cynical bio-centric conservation can be (see Hoeffle, 2019; 2020).

What, then, would a research agenda look like in a time when poor traditional peoples and discriminated ethnic groups of Brazil are threatened by environmental dispossession? Relational research strategies based on horizontally-situated social actors that could dovetail neatly with the vertical scalar focus of political ecology could fill the bill. However, Lave (2015) showed how political ecologists have uncritically incorporated relational methods in response to Latour's (2004) ontological critique of political ecology, which put forth the view that it involved much more is involved in political ecology than the mere struggle over natural resources. Lave stated that researchers with a relational agenda can be uncritical and insensitive to inequality and she is partially correct. It is true that in *Reassembling the Social* Latour only briefly mentions social inequality in the form of a huge social pyramid with a top-down pecking order (2005, 183), but this was corrected in *Down to Earth*, when Latour placed widening global social inequality squarely alongside environmental degradation as the two greatest intertwined issues of our time.

Moreover, as we have demonstrated in this article, the opposite also occurs when zealously engaged researchers target one specific social group and rely too much on the self-serving views of its leaders and extra-local partners. An ethnologist can spend a whole career seeking to protect her “people” or a biologist his “nature area” and thus inadvertently contribute to socio-environmental injustice towards others. This

is the result of what Latour (2013) called “double click” (DC): i.e. jumping directly from subject to object or from the beginning of a process to the final outcome, without exploring the intermediate processes/interactions in the relational chain. To avoid this, we suggest the following guidelines for research:

- 1) do not target only one specific group for study, research the relationships between all actors present;
- 2) do not go directly to the local site, work through all scales/locales/sites of power;
- 3) do not idealize and segregate indigenes/traditional populations, as this can result in them becoming further stigmatized within the encompassing society or even provoke backlash from other social groups;
- 4) do not essentialize and segregate nature or subsistence production, rather it is better to promote sustainable territories and economically-viable livelihoods that enable people to remain on their land; and
- 5) replace zero-sum diversity politics with inclusive universal programs for all disenfranchised people so that they become natural allies in maintaining progressive programs that neo-liberal politicians wish to eliminate.

Consequently, in politically dangerous times when deconstruction and social constructionism fracture politics and play into the hands of extreme-right schemes of political disenfranchisement, a relational approach which stresses reassembling and reinforcing socially inclusive structures is needed. Instead of seeing identity as racial essences of “blackness”, “whiteness”, “brownness”, “*n*-ness”, segregated, divided and conquered by historically dominant social groups, relational identity stresses social complexity. Aspinall (2009) cited new trends in census taking which concretely illustrate this. First, in a number of countries, census taking now permits interviewees to declare multiple ethnic origins. However, defining identity does not stop there and should ideally involve social reassembly through combining *identification by group* (how members of an ethnic group identify themselves) with *social categorization* (how outside observers define a group). Instead of poor social groups being objects of derision by dominant groups or considered to be autonomous subjects resisting oppression, a collective identity would emerge from the interaction of quasi-subjects and quasi-objects arrayed in chains of power relationships. Once duly recognized as such, all actors could then benefit from progressive universal programs of social inclusion; social structures would thereby be reassembled and more equal, rather than separate and unequal.

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Authors

Ana Maria de Souza Mello Bicalho

anabicalho@ppgg.igeo.ufrj.br

PhD, Full Professor, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Geography Department, Ilha do Fundão,
Rio de Janeiro, 21941-590, Brazil,

Scott William Hoefle

scotthoefle@acd.ufrj.br

PhD, Full Professor, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Geography Department, Ilha do Fundão,
Rio de Janeiro, 21941-590, Brazil