

SOS AMAZON: THE SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE AND THE URGENT CALL TO OUR GENERATION

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I can only begin by thanking my colleague and friend Prof. Élide Valarini Oliver for this invitation and a warm welcome. And for her coordination and conception of this Conference sponsored by the Center for Portuguese Studies here at UC Santa Barbara.

I want to say that I will return here, with you, with the updates that the worsening condition of our beloved Amazon is demanding, a topic that has mobilized me for many years and that, more recently, occupied me in several lectures and conferences. Only in last year, I addressed this topic in academic events in Manaus and Tefé, in the Brazilian State of Amazonas; em Dublin, Ireland; and in Beijing and Shanghai, China. And it is necessary and very sad to note that, since then, the socio-environmental emergency in the Amazon has only worsened, in a particularly tragic way, signaling, for the whole world, an SOS signal as a call to the urgent responsibility of our generation.

The Amazon is not just a matter for the populations that live, suffer and die there, or for the groups of invaders that continue predatory exploitations there – especially in deforestation and mining, many times in a clandestine way – that date back to the colonial past. The Amazon is a biome that concerns 9 of the 13 countries that make up South America. In Brazil, it embraces 60% of our national territory. But, above all, today, it must represent a new centrality for Brazil, Latin America and the World. Its preservation is also a necessary condition for the survival and continuity of human life and all natural forms of life on our planet. Therefore, I come here and make a new appeal: a call to all these sensitive youth committed to the best causes so that, together, we can act to save the Amazon, which means - save us all!



Map of the International Amazon (South America) and Brazil's Legal Amazon.

In the city of Tefé, more than 500 km from Manaus, I was able to see with my own eyes in February of last year the effects of the devastating drought affecting the Solimões River¹ (and, there, particularly, the immense Lake Tefé). Since then, the situation has only gotten worse!

I repeat here what I said last March, at the Centre for Global Intercultural Communications of Trinity College, in Dublin, Ireland, which, in 2024, chose as its general theme: Global Intersections. There and here, the same call: the Amazon as the greatest contemporary challenge for all our intersections!

My friends: I began studying the contradictory relations between the Amazon and the formation of the Brazilian State four decades ago. By the end of the 80's, I published the book *Trem-fantasma: a ferrovia Madeira-Mamoré e a modernidade na selva*. I discussed the various attempts to build a railroad over 400 km long in the far west of the Amazon, in the former territory of Guaporé, later the state of Rondônia, up to the Bolivian border, with US capital and involving thousands of international workers (about 30 thousand), which resulted in the deaths of at least 6 thousand of them (or perhaps as many as 10 thousand), mainly victims of malaria. These enterprises, which were partly unsuccessful, took place between 1868 and 1912. The main economic reason was to transport and to sell látex extracted from the Amazonian rubber plantations. When the railroad

¹ Solimões River is the name, in Brazil, of the Amazon River, before its confluence with the Rio Negro.

was finished in 1912, the international price of rubber was already falling. It soon became a ghost railroad.

For those who think this is a legendary story from a distant past, it is not. Today, one of the greatest threats to the Amazon biome is an unfinished highway, the BR-319, which attempts to connect Porto Velho, the capital of Rondônia and the birthplace of Madeira-Mamoré railway, to Manaus, a distance of almost 900 km. It is a road that brings tragedy wherever it goes!... It is no wonder that the Amazon Water Forum, which met in late October 2024 in Manaus, with the participation of 32 associations from the Amazon, published its Letter addressed “to society and decision-makers”, in which it proposes: the closure of the BR-319, as well as the renationalization of “water and sewage services in Manaus”, in addition to combating “environmental policies that threaten ecosystems and national sovereignty, putting millions of lives at risk”².

Among the modern Brazilian writers who traveled and reflected on the Amazon in a pioneering way is Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909). He traveled extensively along the Amazon and Purus rivers during 1905. He was impacted by this travel. In a posthumous, partly unfinished work, *À Margem da História*, we can research the origins of socio-environmental thinking in this author, who was sympathetic to socialist or social-democratic ideals. I researched this in more detail in several essays of my book *A Vingança da Hileia*³, whose first edition was published in 2009. In the second revised edition of this work, in 2023, I suggest that these incursions and essays provide the outline of what we could call a “new utopia of History,” granting the Amazon the centrality that we now see as urgent. 🌿

There are several misunderstandings about these texts by Euclides da Cunha about the Amazon as a “land without history.” He was rightly criticizing the fact that the so-called official or national history tended to exclude the presence of this crucial region, if only because of its size of around 60% of the national territory. But not only this. Euclides, in a manuscript that was later lost, speaks to us of “ancient brutality” regarding the tragic history of the Amazon region, between colonial occupation and predation. This refers to a violent colonial past, both in relation to the original indigenous inhabitants and in relation to natural resources, starting with the forest and its woods and minerals. Our writer, it is worth remembering, was a witness, right there, to the boom in latex extraction for the nascent rubber industry.

² Cf. “Fórum das Águas no Amazonas divulga Carta com alerta para os riscos de colapso dos biomas”. Jornal GGN, 27/10/2024, 14:12. A Carta trata também da destruição do Pantanal, outro bioma único e ameaçado no Brasil.

³ O termo hileia deriva do grego “*hilaed*”, que significa floresta tropical densa, mata virgem inexplorada. Deve-se a utilização dessa palavra para referir-se à floresta amazônica ao naturalista alemão Alexander Von Humboldt, que por lá viajou entre 1799 e 1804.

And, throughout the 20th century and up until the first decades of the 21st century, all attempts to incorporate the Amazon region into the time-space of national development were made in a predatory, neocolonialist and violent manner against the indigenous peoples and the natural biome. A particular moment in this trajectory of destruction occurred in the 1970s, during the military dictatorship in Brazil, when the ideology of “Pátria Grande” was associated with the project of a giant highway, the Transamazônica, over 4 thousand Km long, in an east-west direction, from the state of Paraíba, in the Northeast, to Lábrea, in the borders of the state of Amazonas. It also remained unfinished as a “ghost highway”. A trail of violence against indigenous populations was its main legacy. In addition, it served as propaganda for the authoritarian regime.

It is also important to remember the BR-174, approximately 780 km long, a highway that connects Manaus to Boa Vista, the capital of the state of Roraima in the far north, towards the border with Venezuela. As is well known, its construction, from 1972 to 1977, led to the genocide of the Waimiri-Atroari people, who lived in an indigenous reservation crossed by the “secret” and undiscussed route of the highway. It is estimated that at least 2 thousand indigenous people were killed, and that the military dictatorship even resorted to aerial bombings, probably with *napalm*, on rebel indigenous villages. This issue only gained national and international attention after the work of the National Truth Commission (2011-2014), established during the presidency of Dilma Rousseff, as well as its respective State Committee in Amazonas⁴, which worked to investigate and record crimes against humanity committed by agents of the military dictatorship.

More recently, during Bolsonaro’s *desgoverno* some terrible images have spread around the world, from the genocide of the Yanomami people, also in the state of Roraima, in a vast area bordering Venezuela. In this case, their main enemy, in addition to the negligence of the State, are illegal gold miners and clandestine prospectors, right in the middle of their Indigenous Land. The health situation of those people is precarious, taking into account the contamination of the waters by mercury. The new Lula government, starting in 2023, has taken important measures to protect that Indigenous Land, with concrete actions by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Defense, but the condition of those populations is still very precarious and vulnerable, and requires permanent care.

Before concluding, I would also like to mention the solidarity correspondence between students of Portuguese and Literatures of the Portuguese Language at Peking University, where I worked as a visiting professor between 2019 and 2020, and Tikuna Indian villages in the Alto Solimões region, on the edge of the state of Amazonas, near the borders with Colombia and Peru.

⁴ Cf. *A Ditadura Militar e Genocídio do Povo Waimiri-Atroari*. Campinas: Curt Nimuendajú, 2014.

As I recorded in the last of my 15 chronicles written at that time in Beijing, several students wrote messages of solidarity, in Portuguese, addressing the T'ikuna indigenous community that was severely affected by the effects of Covid-19⁵.

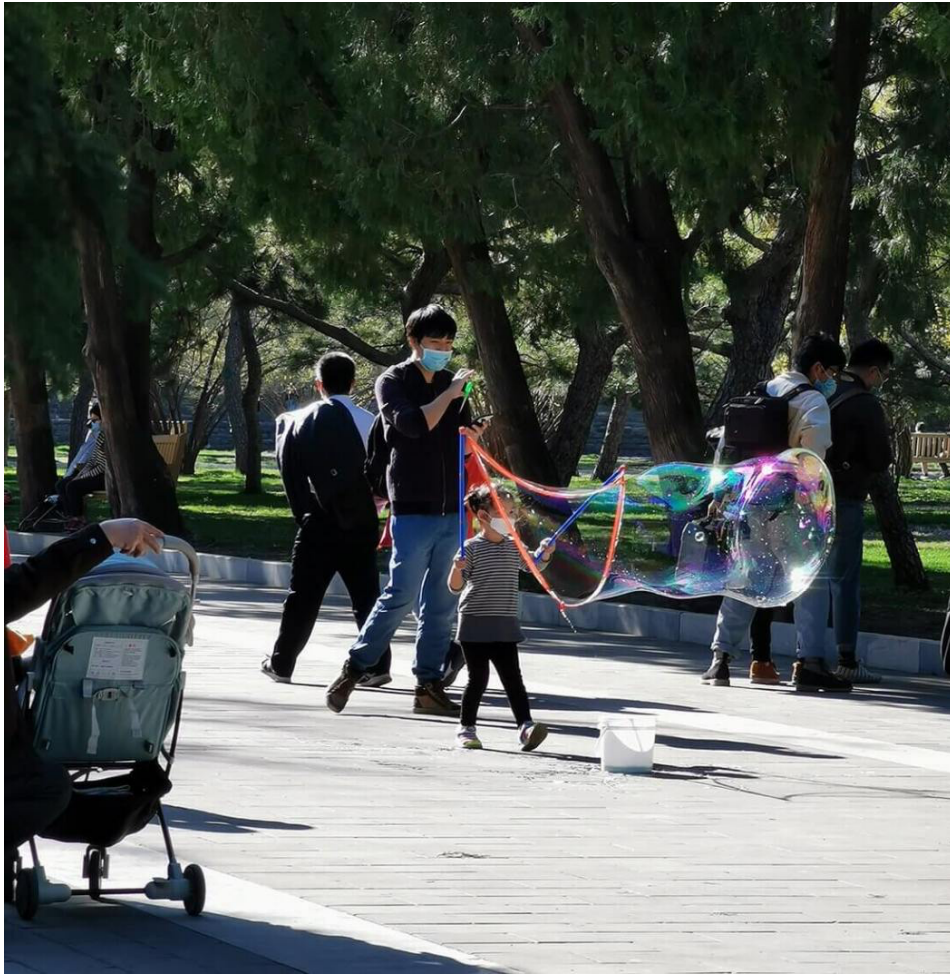


Group of students of Portuguese language and Portuguese-language literatures at Peking University, fall 2019. Photo by Francisco Foot Hardman.

This chronicle, by the way, was published here in the USA: it was published in the magazine *Mediapolis – a journal of cities and culture*, in June 2020, thanks to the interest and commitment of my colleague Zhang Ling, from SUNY at Purchase⁶.

⁵ Cf. F. Foot Hardman, “A Última Crônica: de Estudantes da Universidade de Pequim para Indígenas do Alto Solimões”. In: *Minha China tropical*, São Paulo, Ed. Unesp, 2024, pp. 93-102.

⁶ The Last Chronicle: from Peking University Students to the Indigenous People of Alto Solimões. *Mediapolis: a journal of cities and culture*, 5 (2), June 16, 2020.



Landing page, or “cover,” of *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture*, SUNY Purchase, June 2020. Photo by Francisco Foot Hardman.

But, with your generous patience, I will read to you a small Addendum that I made to this last chronicle, at the beginning of 2024, therefore about a year ago:

“In the city of Tefé, Amazonas, where I spent a week last February on an academic exchange with professors and students [...] from the State University of Amazonas (UEA), I gave a radio interview on Rádio Rural FM, on a Saturday afternoon, on the program Ampliando Vozes, [...] produced by my colleague Guilherme Gitahy de Figueiredo and hosted only by women, undergraduate and graduate students at UEA. It was a very touching experience.

“Here is a remarkable example of bridges that bring us closer together. They really wanted to know about the solidarity action, in 2020, by their colleagues from the University of Peking with the indigenous Tikuna of Alto Solimões, in Amazonas. Among them, next to me, was Darlene Ferreira Soares, of the Tikuna ethnic group and resident of a rural community near Tefé.

“How many turns the world takes!... For example: from Beijing to Alto Solimões. From Alto Solimões to Campinas. From Campinas to Manaus and Tefé. And from Tefé to Beijing. To all my interviewers and their

director, my many thanks! The voices of the forgotten Amazon now echo, certainly, in many hearts and minds. Let us continue our journey in varied dances and peal of voices. In new links of meaning. In search of a habitable, humane and peaceful planet. Because this is how our dreams are intertwined. And no one can touch that."⁷



Tefé, Amazonas, February 2024, Rádio Rural FM at Amazonas State

And, to conclude, my friends, I will also use here the verses of the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), in his play *The Cure at Troy*, a dramatic version of Sophocles: *History says, don't hope // On this side of the grave. // But then, once in a lifetime // The long-for tidal wave // Of justice can rise up, // And hope and history rhyme*⁸.

Post Scriptum

The great filmmaker Jorge Bodansky, famous worldwide for his film *Iracema, a Transa Amazônica* (1974), co-directed with Orlando Senna, and which was censored for years by the military

⁷ Op. Cit., pp. 101-102.

⁸ Que eu me permito ler aqui numa livre tradução em português:

*A história diz: não espere
Deste lado da cova.
Mas, então, uma vez só no tempo da vida
A tão desejada onda gigante
Da justiça pode erguer-se,
E esperança pode rimar com história.*

dictatorship, recently released an impressive documentary, entitled: *Amazônia, a Nova Minamata?* (2022). In this film, with the direct participation of indigenous leaders from the Tapajós River region, in western Pará, including representatives of the Munduruku, such as leader Alessandra Korap, we witness the devastating effects of mercury pollution on that entire river basin, resulting from illegal gold mining in the territory of the original peoples, which began several decades ago and accelerated since then.

The parallel that is drawn is with the very serious mercury contamination of the population of the city of Minamata, in Japan, following the installation of a large plastics industry there, in 1932. This tragic parallel, widely documented in the Amazon of Pará and in the Japanese city, warns us, once again, about the urgency of collective actions by society and governments to immediately stop the destruction of the common home of poor communities that survive on what the jungle and the waters give us.