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Violence in the Amazon: Governmentality based on failure

A violência na Amazônia: uma governamentalidade baseada no fracasso

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Abstract

The Brazilian Amazon is a region of precarious development and high rates of violence. Most security and defense experts point to the lack of development and the abandonment of public power as the main cause of the conflicts that plague the region from the first half of the twentieth century to the contemporary advance of the criminal factions of drug traffickers. In this text, I want to demonstrate the limitations of applying this negative thesis, which I call absence discourse. From the point of view of Brazilian sovereignty there was never normative abandonment of the Amazon; quite the opposite, the legal and political control over the region was always inflexible by systematically denying autonomy to its peoples and communities. My conclusions, supported by Michel Foucault's relational analysis of power, point out that violence is not the undesirable surplus of natural power relations, given the precarious contextual conditions. On the contrary, it is the positive effect of normative-oriented production of illegalisms that keeps Amazon's complexity under the regime of colonial governmentality based on failure and the constant weakening of its best internal potential.

Keywords: Amazon; Extreme violence; Governmentality.

Resumo

A Amazônia brasileira é uma região de desenvolvimento precário e altos índices de violência. A maioria dos especialistas em segurança e defesa aponta a falta de desenvolvimento e o abandono do poder público como a causa principal dos conflitos que assolam a região desde a primeira metade do século XX até o avanço contemporâneo das facções criminais de narcotraficantes. Neste texto pretendo demonstrar as limitações da aplicação dessa tese de caráter negativo a que chamo de *discurso da ausência*. Do ponto de vista da soberania brasileira jamais houve abandono normativo da Amazônia; bem ao contrário disso, o controle jurídico e político sobre a região sempre foi inflexível ao renegar sistematicamente autonomia a seus povos e comunidades. Minhas conclusões, com o suporte da analítica relacional do poder de Michel Foucault, apontam que a violência não é o excedente indesejável de relações naturais de poder, dadas as condições locais. Em contrário, ela é o efeito positivo da produção normativamente orientada de ilegalismos que mantém a complexidade amazônica sob o regime de uma governamentalidade colonial baseada no fracasso e na constante fragilização de seus melhores potenciais internos.

Palavras-chave: Amazônia; Violência extrema; Governamentalidade.



Introduction: Yesterday's violence and today's violence

Throughout Brazil's history the Amazonian region has always been the subject of colonial normative discourse. The political-administrative autonomy of the peoples and territories under effective conditions of development has never been an agenda of any central government in the country. Even today, its 9 states, 808 municipalities, over 180 native nations, countless traditional communities, and almost 60% of Brazilian territory remain the most precarious and threatened in the country, exposed to such extreme levels of violence that it seems to be plagued by what Michel Foucault called in one of his courses in the early 1970s the "*massive practice of illegal acts*" (Foucault, 2013, p. 148).

The most recent phase of this troubled history seems to have begun in the second half of 2010s, when disputes between local drug trafficking organizations and those from the south of the country caused homicide rates and prison conflicts to spiral in most of the Amazonian states. In the last ten years, most experts say that this problem grew because of drug traffickers getting into other criminal activities, such as illegal mining, land grabbing, and deforestation.

Could this be the reason for a new dynamic of violence in the Amazon? Is the impact of this new wave of violence changing Amazonian conflicts? Is the extreme violence of recent times an obstacle to the economic, social, and political development of the region? How does violence affect socio-environmental justice and Amazonian societies as a whole? In this article, I will demonstrate how the relationship between violence and development has long been part of the Amazon's precarious political identity and propose to re-dimension the effects of the most recent waves of violence on the traditional way in which this relationship operates. My aim, using Michel Foucault's relational analytical model of power, is to help understand what I consider is more fundamental than the intensity and frequency of violence: its positive function in the general framework of illegal activities to maintain Amazonian peoples and territories as the object of an insurmountable colonialist governance.



1 The genealogy of violence in Western Amazonia

In 1940, when President Getúlio Vargas visited Belém (Pará), Manaus (Amazonas), and Porto Velho (Rondônia), the integration of the Amazon territories into the national economy was already an important political objective for the federal government. In his “March to the West,” a policy initiated in 1938, the president intended to settle the “green hell,” that is, dominate the forest and the native peoples to promote population growth and economic development of the region (Guerra, 1953). To fulfill this objective, Vargas followed an ideal constructed by the narratives of military engineers Euclides da Cunha and Alberto Rangel, one that was strongly based on geographical determinism, evolutionism, and social Darwinism (Andrade, 2010). According to Rômulo de Paula Andrade, the “rhetoric of abandonment” was methodically manipulated by Vargas’ ideologues to converge with his policy of interventions and lead the Amazon to fulfill its “historical destiny.” According to this narrative, the Amazon as a whole, appeared to be a practically uninhabited vastness, except by a few indigenous communities, rich in natural resources but abandoned by previous imperial and republican governments (Andrade, 2010). According to Vargas, in his “Amazon River Speech,” the limitations imposed by the long distances, climate, and inhospitable environment could be overcome with the presence of a strong central power. In the words of the President of the Republic, an “empirical project” of “agriculture or extractive industry” transformed into “rational exploitation” could show that the Amazon is not unsuitable for civilization (Vargas, 1940). The condition for this was the occupation of the “immense and unpopulated” space, not just by nomadic and economically unstable immigrants from the northeast and the riverside. Vargas said that it would be a case of bringing the “national settler” to the Amazon to occupy agrarian culture centers where “receiving free land that has been cleared, provided with sanitation, and allotted, families can settle in health and comfort” (Vargas, 1940). Vargas’ speech was in contrast with his actions of allocating workers to temporary projects, such as those that took workers to rubber plantations in Acre, Rondônia, and Pará in the past, to permanently place settlers from all over the country to develop local agriculture and industry. Because of the agreements made during this trip, Vargas created, by means of Decree-Law no. 5,812 of September 13, 1943, the Federal Territories of Guaporé (which became the state of Rondônia in 1981), Rio Branco, and



Amapá, which were converted into the federal states of Roraima and Amapá after adoption of the 1988 Constitution.

However, Vargas' expectations failed. In 1946, after the end of the Vargas administration, and before any mass colonization project had begun, the extractivist economy, dependent on foreign markets and a distant central government, was replaced by the Plan for the Economic Valorization of Amazonia. This was based on planned economic interventionism intended to reduce regional inequalities and support self-sustaining economic activities (Théry, 1976). However, these initiatives collapse because of a lack of understanding of local dynamics, political will, and scientific knowledge (Oliveira, Trindade, Fernandes, 2014).

In 1966, the Castelo Branco administration created the Superintendency for the Development of the Amazon (SUDAM) and launched "Operation Amazonia" to transform the regional economy and integrate the Amazon into the national territory. Under the military government, new initiatives were implemented, including the expansion of the agricultural frontier from Mato Grosso to Rondônia through the 1970 National Integration Plan, which aimed to finance infrastructure in the Superintendence for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE) and SUDAM regions (Teixeira; Fonseca, 2002). To achieve this goal, in 1970, the federal government created the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) to explore and colonize public lands along federal highways (IBGE, 1979). Between 1970 and 1976, in Rondônia, INCRA implemented several Integrated Colonization and Directed Settlement Projects (Coy, 1986).

Once again, however, these colonization projects failed due to lack of infrastructure, difficulties in transporting produce, lack of technical support, and legal uncertainties in the contracts between the state and settlers/landowners (Alston, Libecap, Mueller, 1999). Many families illegally sold their holdings and returned to their regions of origin, leaving behind a serious problem of land ownership regularization that was unique to Rondônia and the south of Pará (Coy, 1986). The lack of infrastructure for agricultural production led to deforestation, illegal timber sales, and cattle ranching in protected areas (Jacarandá; Matzenbacher, 2017; Nascimento, 2010). To address the lack of infrastructure, between 1980 and 1985, the World Bank financed the paving of the BR-364 federal highway, which connects the southwest of the Amazon to the south of the country—the POLONOROESTE Project (Wade, 2016), which enabled the development of Rondônia and accelerated environmental degradation caused



by uncontrolled migration and disorderly growth (Schwartzman, 1986). The consequences of this movement forced the Sarney administration to create the “Nossa Natureza Program” in 1988 (Decree No. 96.944 of October 12, 1988, namely, the Program for the Defense of the Ecosystem Complex of the Amazon Region), which intended to reduce the environmental devastation that was already consuming the forests of Rondônia and Acre - a true *buffer zone* between the accessible part and the deepest parts of the Amazon territory, since much of the Amazonas territory is cut off from the rest of the country.

Unlike other projects that were implemented on the northern borders of the Amazon territory (the far north of Amazonas, Roraima, and Pará), such as the Calha Norte Project (Miyamoto, 1989; Brasil, 1986), that focused on territorial defense and protection against the threat of foreign invasion, in the southwestern Amazon (northwestern Brazil), the objective of exploiting natural resources to supply the economy of the south of the country was never hidden (Becker, 1982; Becker, 1998; Nascimento, Silva, Santos, 2014). But the repercussions of the environmental crimes and crimes against indigenous peoples that took place during the colonization of Rondônia in the international press prevented the World Bank from financing similar projects in Acre even though a substantial amount had already been invested in a plan called PLANACRE at the time, with the natural resources and ecological potential all mapped out (Souza, 2008). However, before the federal government’s new “Our Nature Program” and the international outrage provoked by the images of the destruction of the forest began to have practical effects, Chico Mendes was assassinated in the backyard of his home at the end of 1988.

Chico Mendes’ murder in Xapuri, Acre, marked the beginning of a new phase in the occupation and exploitation of the Amazonian territory, characterized by intense violence. Since then, socio-environmental conflicts became more frequent and territorial disputes became mixed with environmental causes and the struggle of indigenous and traditional peoples. However, there was also greater international public scrutiny, showing the entire world that the problem of development in the Amazon was much more complex than had been thought over the previous decades. The murder of the English journalist Dom Philips and the indigenous peoples specialist Bruno Pereira in the Javari Valley, in Amazonas, in June 2022, is a tragedy that bears witness to a long history¹.

¹ These facts do not mean that violence and its role in the occupation and exploitation of the Amazon will be reckoned with in a few decades. The anthropologist Moreira Neto estimates that between 1750 and 1850, the indigenous population of the Amazon ceased to be a majority and became a minority, in the face of the immigrant



The next stage in this history of tragedies would be characterized by collective deaths. During the 1990s, agrarian conflicts exploded in the states of the region. In the events known as the Corumbiara Massacre in the south of Rondônia in August 1995 and the Eldorado do Carajás Massacre in 1996 in Pará, dozens of landless workers were killed in truculent and abusive police operations. These conflicts gave rise to a new federal agrarian reform policy whose ineffectiveness resulted in Rondônia and Pará becoming the leaders in the national ranking of deaths in the countryside (Mesquita, 2003).

Therefore, since the end of the 1980s, the growing tension over land conflicts has kept Amazonian authorities on alert. But nobody could have imagined that at the beginning of the 2000s, prisons would also become permanent hotbeds of extreme violence. In the beginning of the aughts, the massacre at the Urso Branco prison in Porto Velho, Rondônia, in January 2002, which left 27 people dead, revealed a new side to the conflicts in the Amazon. Between 2002 and 2004, more than 100 murders were recorded in this prison, giving rise to one of the biggest cases in the Inter-American Human Rights System (Case 12.568 before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) (Carvalho, Garcia, Melo, 2007). Monitoring reports have revealed alarming levels of violence, including torture, burning, mutilation, and decapitation. The 2022 massacre shocked the public and marked the beginning of routine prison violence in the Amazonian states that is unparalleled anywhere else in the world (Jacarandá *et al.*, 2020). The images of decapitations and dismemberment of prisoners' bodies on a water tower were seen around the world and reinforced the image of a territory where barbarism and lack of legal protection reigned supreme (Jacarandá, 2024a).

These massacres and slaughters seem to be in line with the deepening of a tragic regional logical identity between Rondônia, Acre, Amazonas, and Roraima, which together make up the Western Amazon (as defined by Decree-Law no. 291 of February 28, 1967). The four states have almost 10,000 kilometers of borders with Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and Guyana and comprise 42.97% of the Amazon's land area. Together, these four states are at the top of the national rankings for femicides, homicides in municipalities, cocaine seizures, fires, deforestation, lack of basic sanitation, school dropouts, and threats

populations that flocked to the region at the behest of the imperial government (Moreira Neto, 1988; Heck, Loebens, Carvalho, 2005). Indigenous peoples became the object of forced religious interventions, were enslaved, and became the target of organized extermination activities by explorers and conquerors. During the first rubber cycle, in the second half of the 19th century, with the immigration of workers from the northeast, clashes between landowners and owners of rubber plantations and indigenous communities continued the devastation.



against defenders of human rights. This correlation between poor economic development indicators and violent crime may explain why the Amazonian states have remained at the top of the country's violent crime list throughout the historical series of homicides. However, to explain the rise of the phenomena that have become recurrent in the last five years, it is necessary to broaden the analysis to include other local, regional, and global factors.

2 Misunderstandings about the politics of the new Amazon conflicts

The conflicts that have erupted in cities, prisons, rural areas, and forests are part of the Amazon's identity in recent decades. However, the complexity of this problem is often overlooked in the literature because of an old idea that I will generically call the *discourse of absence*. The discourse of absence states that the main cause of violence in the Amazon is the lack, absence, or natural fragility of social, political, and economic structures, especially those that are the responsibility of public authorities.

This thesis is quite simple—to explain the complexity of Amazonian conflicts, it is enough to demonstrate the precariousness of the infrastructure of public institutions, common in the most distant parts of the country's major decision-making centers, and then state that there is a decisive absence of state power, which is the cause of systemic violence (FBSP, 2017, 2019 and 2021; Dias Balieiro, Nascimento, 2015). However, this discourse, when used without epistemological prudence, produces at least two kinds of errors (a) ignoring the reality of the Amazonian context and, therefore, (b) failing to correctly identify the essential elements of the problem; causing even greater harm when (c) presenting new interventionist policies as a solution that disregard local complexities and the participation of the affected communities.

Regarding (a) *the reality of violence in the Amazon context*, let us look at the most recent case of the problem of the intersection between drug trafficking and other illegal activities common in the Amazon, such as illegal mining, deforestation, or the threat to native peoples. Many public security experts have stated that the explosion of violence on the streets and in the prisons of Amazonia in recent years (especially from 2015 onwards) caused by the migration of criminal factions from the Southeast to the North (especially the Comando Vermelho (CV) from Rio de Janeiro and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC)



from São Paulo) (FSP, 2015; Ferreira, Frumento, 2019; Couto, 2019) has radically altered the panorama of violence in the Amazon². For them, the Amazonian states are less capable to defending themselves against these criminal groups. Therefore, these factions grew faster and their control over local illegal networks became even more hegemonic.

Indeed, it is undeniable that the presence of PCC and CV is changing the balance of power in the major metropolises and inland cities in the Amazon (FBSP, 2018). It may even be correct to say that the intensity of violence, especially homicide rates and deaths in prisons, has increased more because of this. The members of these factions have been identified in practically all the prisons in the Amazon states and participate in activities, such as illegal mining in Roraima and Amazonas (Chagas, 2024). Moreover, CV and PCC are fighting to extend their business network to new markets and take over the cocaine transportation routes from the producing countries in the Andes, through Brazil, and reach the largest shipping points, such as ports and airports in the Northeast and Southeast (Dias, 2024; Jacarandá, 2024b). We do not know how much attention these factions give to retail v/s wholesale and, hence, how much they focus on control over the street market v/s control of drug transportation routes. But we do know that their power is growing dramatically and that with the expansion of their control, they attract other successful criminal enterprises, such as the well-organized militias created by public security actors³.

However, the point here is not to get distracted by recognizing the presence of these factions in the Amazonian illegal economy but to correctly estimate their impact and importance in the origin of these conflicts. There are not many good empirical studies on the wider scope of these illegal activities, such as logging, land grabbing, or illegal mining, in the Amazon as a whole.

² This thesis was embraced by the press and was echoed in the analyses of several seminal studies on public security and defense, such as IPEA's Atlas of Violence (2019, 2020) and the Brazilian Public Security Forum's Yearbook (2018, 2019, 2020). The main point of my argument is not to deny that the advance of CV and PCC groups; it is to debate the extent of their interference in local illegal activities. I posit that public opinion has embraced the theme of "isolated Amazon, a land of enchantment, yet wild and unprotected," which is under attack by dangerous criminals, and it is unable to defend itself. The dangers of this approach will be demonstrated in the following sections of this paper. See an article that translates what I intend to refute: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/carlos-madeiro/2022/06/17/faccoes-se-aliam-ao-crime-ambiental-por-brechas-na-fiscalizacao-da-amazonia.htm>

³ IPEA recently published a volume (June 2024) on the subject, with various researchers from universities in northern Brazil. The texts in this collection provide a clearer picture of the effects of the expansion of the criminal factions in the Amazon. The volume can be found at this link: <https://www.ipea.gov.br/atlasviolencia/arquivos/artigos/4598-bapi36book-1.pdf>



Even in the case of the traditional operating environments for these factions, such as prisons, it is important to remember that Rondônia and Acre already had the highest incarceration rates in Brazil in the early 2000s, when inmates of different criminal groups carried out the first prisoners' massacres in Porto Velho. Similarly, drug trafficking has always been common in the region's border states, and data from the Federal Police shows how the Amazonas (Rota do Solimões) and Rondônia (Rota Guaporé-364) have recorded very high seizure rates in the last few decades, especially cocaine (Jacarandá, 2024b). Without even comparing decadal data, we can say, without hesitation, that illegal mining has not yet undergone substantial changes because of CV or PCC. In short, there may be an intersection of illegal activities and changes in the scenario of violence due to disputes over control among PCC, CV, and local criminal groups. But the question of a radical transformation of the local scenario remains open.

The reasons for this are very simple and evoke the second point of my argument (b) *most characteristic elements of the Amazonian problem of violence*. In this case, I refer to the normalization of high-intensity systemic violence as a legitimately Amazonian way of life. As I pointed out in Section 1, a brief flashback of a few decades is enough to find historical facts to place the Amazon at the center of global attention regarding violence against peoples and the environment. In the Amazon, for many years, integration and development have been carried out through systemic violence and environmental destruction. In other words, neither the apparent novelty of this alleged *factional invasion* nor the numbers of extreme violence are the distinctive element for understanding the problem. It is probable that PCC and CV are merely new actors exploiting conditions that have always been present.

In the 19th century, at the height of the golden age of the first rubber cycle, regional metropolises, such as Manaus and Belém, grew and experienced a prosperity that was never shared with the producing regions in the interior of these provinces. Half a century later, the workers summoned by the federal government to return to the rubber plantations, especially in Rondônia, Acre, and Pará on the eve of the Second World War, were soon abandoned and their rights to exploit the land were ignored. Something very similar happened in Rondônia, northern Mato Grosso, and southern Pará with the mobilization promoted by the military dictatorship of the 1960s to bring settlers to the fertile lands of their supposedly unpopulated corners. With no real economic incentives or guarantee of rights, entire communities and populations were left to survive on their own, using whatever means were at their disposal.



This scenario of politically enforced abandonment provides the ideal context for the growth of systemic banditry and the use of physical force to occupy, exploit, and enrich, which fostered colonization from the south of Rondônia to the north of Roraima.

What I am pointing out is that the illegal economy that has sustained the Amazonian way of life for many years does not only have internal agents (or possibly exogenous ones, as in the case of PCC or CV) as the driving cause. This economy functions on the basis of networks of relationships, which have long-standing modes of operation, but are not self-created. These networks of relationships do not find their way of existence in a kind of natural and necessary self-reproduction due to local difficulties. On the contrary, this systemic self-reproduction is an imposition, politically and legally controlled, by political and economic actors who have invented a very effective formula for governing the Brazilian Amazon. The distinctive element of the Amazonian illegal economy, as in almost everything that concerns the Amazonian reality, (c) *the lack of local legal and political autonomy* to control banditry and crime. PCC and CV are just new pawns on this immense colonial chessboard and it is unsurprising that these two organizations are truly global *players* working with cocaine, one of the most valuable economic assets in the international market (UNODC, 2023; CDE, 2022; UNODC, 2022).

3 Who controls what is in the Amazon?

When we think about public land grabbing, illegal extraction of timber and minerals, and cattle raising in preservation areas, we are forced to think about the local conditions favoring the emergence of organized crime that survives through this exploitation. But how do these conditions arise and perpetuate themselves?

A good way to investigate the issue is to look at the allocation of public lands in the Amazon. Throughout Amazonia, there are more than 50 million hectares of undesignated federal or state public forest land, i.e., areas that do not fall under any specific category of land use or preservation⁴. This enormous, unregulated territory, larger than Spain, is a good example of the kind of land insecurity that attracts criminals, drives away small farmers who cannot obtain investment to produce, and threatens both the biome and the traditional

⁴ See the IPAM website: <https://ipam.org.br/como-atuamos/biomas/amazonia/>



communities living off the natural resources. A very common form of criminal activity is to invade public land, deforest it, report ownership of the area in the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR), created under the Forest Management Law of 2006, and then exploit or trade it as an economic asset (Moutinho, Azevedo, 2023). The uncertainty over land ownership generated and maintained by the creation of an instrument, such as the CAR, created avenues for real estate speculation because the lengthy bureaucratic regularization process allows illegal occupation to continue. This continuity begins with deforestation, with the illegal extraction of timber, continues with farming, and ends with the sale or lease of the area, usually for monocultures, such as corn and soybeans (Fearnside, 2017). “Public land” in this case does not mean ownerless property or nobody’s land. These lands are areas belonging to the federal government or federal states, and while there is a lack of definition as to their destination, various political and economic agents can appropriate these areas and dispute their ownership by manipulating and controlling the public decision-making authorities involved.

The lack of supervisory and monitoring structures in these areas is not the effect of abandonment or neglect; it is part of the colonization project. The apparent contradiction arises when we reflect on the high costs of the colonization model, especially, for example, the damage caused by environmental destruction or violence in the countryside. But the contradiction breaks down as the model is described in detail.

If the provisions of a democratic constitution updated for the defense of human rights, in accordance with the Brazilian constitution of 1988 were followed, it would be possible to think about a broad and unrestricted demarcation of indigenous lands and *quilombos* and the rapid creation of impregnable integral protection areas to preserve and defend the collective heritage. It would then be the government’s duty to organize and carry out a definitive agrarian reform, distributing land titles to small and medium-sized producers, with the support of policies to support sustainable production. Studies unanimously show that the creation of indigenous lands and *quilombos* is an excellent way to protect the environment and that the distribution of portions of land to small and medium farmers can work well for the consolidation of sustainable agriculture in the Amazon (Fearnside, 2020)⁵.

⁵ Fearnside’s series on the subject is very explanatory for a scientifically relevant introduction to the subject. The texts can be found here: https://philip.inpa.gov.br/publ_livres/2020/Sustentabilidade_da_agricultura_na_Amazônia-Serie_completa.pdf



Therefore, the solutions to the problem of “absence” and “abandonment” do not seem so difficult.

Even a relatively weakened, under-resourced, and understaffed state, pressured by budget deficits and high indebtedness, could defend public assets by relying on the power of local communities that are strengthened and protected in their rights. But that is not the case. The Amazon’s case is not one of the absence of public power; it is a case of the colonization of public power by private interests to prevent the exercise of popular sovereignty over the region. Given that local communities, native peoples, and certain social forces insist on resisting this process of appropriation and destruction, the continuation of violence helps to generate insecurity and weaken the social conditions for the exercise of citizen-based political autonomy.

The effects of extreme violence can cause embarrassment and lead to tough government reactions for a while, as seen in the cases of the murders of Chico Mendes, Dorothy Stang, Dom Philips, and Bruno Pereira or the Corumbiara Massacre. However, they are an effective way of preventing the Amazonian communities from reacting to the indiscriminate and illegal exploitation of public goods and values. Violence has the same effect on affected communities in the best-organized cities as low development and constant exposure to risks prevents civil society and political leaders from taking a stand against the advance of this predatory project at an incipient level. However, the difference between the acceptable average intensity of violence defines the Amazon: colonial governance demands much higher levels of violence to organize itself and maintain its legitimacy.

4 Is there really a new dynamic of violence in the Amazon?

The main epistemological error when analyzing the high rates of violence in the Amazon has nothing to do with misrepresenting the aggressive potential of local power relations. The most serious mistake is to assume that the failure of government intervention policies is the other side of normative action aimed at solving problems and creating solutions for development, security, and social peace. These policies have failed for such a long time and

On deforestation and the advance of agribusiness frontiers in the Amazon, I recommend reading Fearnside, "Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon," published in Oxford Research Encyclopedias (2017).



with such regularity that the illusions produced by the sheer volume of their negative results tend to mislead analysts from all areas, absorbed by the traps of the normative epistemological circuit.

At this point, Michel Foucault's relational analysis of power helps reach a better understanding of the phenomenon⁶; all normative societies instrumentalize the use of violence in their governmental calculations to produce political and social equilibrium (Foucault, 2015). Complex environments and heterogeneous populations are more difficult to govern. With so many non-submissive conflicting interests, arbitrating violence requires a refined calculation to settle the accounts of the illegal activities at stake. In all cases, the result must be a social fabric formed by power relations that perpetuate, with all their possible imbalances, the existing capacity to govern (Foucault, 2004). The arrangement depends on each region and community and their history. In the case of the Brazilian Amazon, the historically verifiable conformation is that of a colony under control. High rates of violence are a death knell for the peoples and communities as it prevents them building their own political and normative independence because they are permanently subjected to other agents of power. These local groups become precarious participants in power relations that they are never able to change, and they depend on what they can get via cycles of government interventions that arrive as material resources or political concessions that occasionally allow the creation of preservation areas, settlement projects, or states and municipalities. All this, of course, without an actual transfer of control, to the local people and communities, of the territory or production of the legal norm to regulate goods and rights.

If the discourse of absence were realistic, regular instances of lack of submission would have taken public spheres of power and decision by storm, even episodically, and caused momentary ruptures, as seen in the case of the popular revolts throughout Brazilian history. The closest we got to this point in the Amazon was with the *Cabanagem* in the province of Grão-Pará, between 1835 and 1840, when for the only time in Brazil's pre-republican history a popular leader, the peasant Eduardo Angelim, won military battles

⁶ Foucault's relational analysis of power is well defined in all of his works after 1971. However, I will use the 1972 course "The Punitive Society" as a reference, since this work provides an excellent resource for a better understanding and application of Foucauldian methodology. "The Punitive Society" precedes "Surveillance and Punishment" and describes in greater detail Foucault's epistemological reasoning when investigating power relations in modern normative societies, especially focusing on the productive nature of the functioning of illegal activities and their relationship with the legal norm.



against imperial troops and assumed office, albeit briefly, as one of the Caban presidents in the province.

However, the identifying element in contemporary Amazonian conflicts, is the extreme violence that affects the civilian population and appears as the origin of the discourse of absence. In other words, violence is the effect of popular illegal activities and those coming from a state of common banditry. There are so many illegal activities and so many threats that there are no other options left but to declare a certain Hobbesian state of nature.

However, this savagery and environmental destruction is not the negative side of a civilization project that has gone wrong. We should see it as one of the effects of what Foucault called the *positive functioning of illegal activities* and try to understand its function for the socio-institutional arrangement that uses extreme violence to govern power relations in the Amazon (2015, p. 134).

When the regular use of the discourse of absence meets the figures of extreme violence, interventionist practices justify a very traditional state reason that sustains Amazonian colonialism⁷. These practices are not just those that come from large-scale exploitation or colonization projects. They are also the intricate set of rules regulating economic, social, and cultural goods and activities that hold communities and people hostage to decisions in which they do not participate. The judicial decision on the time frame (“marco temporal” in Portuguese) for the definition of indigenous lands is only the most recent chapter in the immense catalog of the legal–political framework that sustains the general state of uncertainty in the Amazon (ISA, 2024). In Amazonia, what Agambem called the “state of exception” can be better understood through a correct reading of Foucault’s thinking on governance. The exception is the general state of indeterminacy in which a society is maintained and governed by means of its permanent weakening. That is why I come back to violence in the Amazon; the excess of it is the necessary condition for its heterogeneity to remain governable through the constant and unrestricted precariousness of the conditions for the exercise of full constitutional citizenship, given the context.

The tragedies in the prison system of states, such as Rondônia, Amazonas and Roraima, are an excellent reference point for a better understanding how this mechanism

⁷ I use the concept of state reason here as Foucault did in “Security, Territory and Population,” and it can be found in Jacarandá, 2016.



works. In these events, the discourse of absence is used very frequently. In a previous study, I compared the opinions of foreign experts on the relationship between prisoners in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and the Amazonian states (Jacarandá, 2024a). Unlike the emergence of the CV in Rio de Janeiro, for the self-protection of prisoners against corrupt and abusive prison authorities (self-governance) and the PCC in São Paulo, created to negotiate protection for prisoners and open up space for criminal entrepreneurship (co-governance), Amazonian prisoners are would-be barbarians fighting viciously among themselves, in a senseless dispute that ends in widespread killing, without public authorities being able to act (Skarbek, 2016; Darke, 2018). However, once again, this narrative overlooks various elements intrinsic to the problem. It ignores the fact that Amazonian states, such as Rondônia, Acre, and Roraima, are national leaders in incarceration rates that are up to two and a half times higher than the national average and have a prison structure that is at least on a par with most other Brazilian states, rather than inferior. In the case of the State of Amazonas, the prison complex that was the site of the biggest massacres was privatized and its maintenance costs were among the highest in the country among state prisons. The prisoners in these institutions, the vast majority of whom are detained for crimes against property or drug offenses, are there not because of an increase in crime on the streets but because of the type of relationship established between the Judiciary, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and local public security structures. And mass incarceration has never helped to reduce crime in any of these states. On the contrary, it most likely had the opposite effect, contributing to the generalization of the organization of prisoners into factions that is now found in all prisons. From the symbiotic and suspicious behavior of the institutions of criminal justice and public security system to the widespread corruption of the institutional prison apparatus, it is impossible to claim the absence of public force in this context.

5 Functional governance of illegal activities in the Amazon: Is effective self-government possible?

By looking at the problem from its internal logic, is it possible to overcome the inferiority that holds the Amazonian peoples hostage to the violence dominating the region? I think the answer to that question is negative, and there is no reasonable historical sign that any change



is on the horizon. Foucault's reflections on the management of illegal activities can help us understand the reasons for the success of government strategies in the Amazon.

In the lecture of February 21, 1973, during the course "The Punitive Society," Michel Foucault presents a scheme for interpreting the transformation of the French pre-revolutionary legal system of 1789 into the post-revolutionary liberal and bourgeois normative society. Foucault argues that the French bourgeoisie was adept at appropriating the legal and political system to convert the illegal activities that supported their way of life into a new legal order that was favorable to them (Foucault, 2018, p. 135). Foucault states that the creation of the prison system met the need to regulate the illegal activities in dispute by incarcerating the main agents of those activities that were unacceptable to the new capitalist economic system and maintaining the behavior of other social agents outside the prison walls under constant threat. Bourgeois illegal activities overcame feudal nobility-based illegal activities and invented prisons to keep popular illegal activities in check, which the bourgeoisie itself had used to achieve its goals with the revolutionary rupture.

In the Amazon, we can clearly see a vast array of popular illegal activities in the form of illegal environmental activities. Given the overly complex regulatory mechanism and the lack of decision-making ability in the hands of local agents, practically no one is able to comply with the environmental laws and other regulations (Jacarandá, Matzembacher, 2018). In rural areas, peasants, fishermen, prospectors, riverside dwellers, indigenous people, *quilombolas*, small and medium-sized rural producers, all live on the margins of full compliance with the legislation in force. *Quilombolas* living in integral environmentally protected areas are unable to fish or plant, indigenous people in border areas suffer from the influence of the military on their territory, and so on. However, these people are not in the same position as the privileged perpetrators of illegal environmental activities, large rural producers and *players* in the global agribusiness who operate beyond the agricultural frontiers of the Center-West in the deep Amazon through Rondônia, northern Mato Grosso, and southern Pará. The economic and political capacity to interfere in the regulation of Amazonian conflicts promoted by the privileged agents of these illegal practices is much greater and their advance into protected areas is only rivalled by that of drug traffickers.

The latter are part of the wide range of traditional criminal gangs. Faced with convicts who behead their peers, illegal environmental activities appear to be a minor, more manageable problem, while privileged illegal economic activities remain almost untouched.



The discourse of the barbarian prisoner acts in favor of moderation in the way popular illegal environmental activities are governed in illegal economic activities. Prisoners who kill each other occasionally function in the general discourse of violence as a kind of relief from the media and normative pressure on other forms of local and regional illegal activities. Perhaps this is why traditional criminal violence is so important in the Amazon; high homicide rates and frequent prison slaughters rearrange the scales of interventionist urgency. The expansion of organized drug trafficking also contributes toward shifting public attention away from environmental devastation.

It is interesting to see how the discourse of the organized invasion of the Amazon by CV and PCC has taken over politicians' and some Amazonian intellectuals' agenda. It is not hard to understand why specialists from the southeast have taken up the almost unconditional defense of this movement, even with a certain enthusiasm. After all, the narrative of large and well-structured criminal factions advancing from the South to conquer the North has tremendous allure and selling power. It is also not difficult to conclude that the cocaine traffickers who went to the Amazon in search of drug transportation routes discovered that it would be a good investment to control disparate businesses, such as gold mining, illegal logging, and land grabbing. As I have already shown, I do not ignore the fact that agents of these criminal organizations are diversifying their enterprises in the Amazon. The question here is how big is the impact of the attention from media and governments. Given the size of the Amazon, how much can a few hundred or even a few thousand men who claim to belong to PCC or CV really affect or change land grabbing or deforestation in areas that make up almost 60% of the national territory?

The major political and economic consequence of this movement shifting the discourse away from absence and towards institutions and areas of public security seems to be quite obvious. When classic criminal activities become the focus of government intervention, there is an easing of pressure on privileged illegal environmental activities. In addition, there is a conversion of the functions of these illegal activities in the political economy. Faced with the failure of local conditions to deal with violence, certain actors are no longer seen as part of the problem but as part of the solution. This is where the discourse of absence meets the discourse of development. And at this point, habitual practitioners of deforestation, such as meat producers and large soy traders, gain legitimacy to expand into



environmentally protected areas. After all, unlike cocaine traffickers, they promise to help the country's economy in exchange for environmental devastation.

Conclusion: Political autonomy and illegality in Amazonia

Indeed, changing the general framework of normatively oriented violence requires profound changes. Foucault argues in the same lecture on February 21, 1973 that a fourth illegal activity played a central role in the formation of the new French constitutional order, the activity of public power and its agents. In the Amazon, the lawlessness of public authorities is easily identifiable. In prisons, the corruption of public servants at all levels governs daily life. In the countryside, countless police officers are responsible for private security in huge areas, many of which are the result of public land grabbing. Illegal political activities are an essential component of Amazonian social struggles and the nexus between politicians, invasion of public lands, and drug trafficking has also always been common.

However, there is one characteristic role reserved for the judiciary. After all, with such high levels of legal insecurity, the judiciary's involvement in resolving major social conflicts is extremely high. The judiciary has an obvious role in the formation of the prison population and in monitoring and judging the excesses of political power. But it is in controlling environmental crimes and the illegal appropriation of public lands that it takes on a more prominent role within the Amazonian normative architecture⁸. I believe that the discourse of absence creates greater pressure on the judiciary to act as a regulator of illegal activities, rather than as a body that enforces existing laws. In this way, the judiciary ends up becoming vulnerable to the illegal activities of privilege and its ability to offer economic and political sustainability in the face of the threat of chaos emphasized by the discourse of absence. A common problem in all the Amazonian states is the dispute over competencies between the state and federal judiciary to settle conflicts and decide on the occupation of public lands, deforestation in environmentally protected areas, mining authorizations, and construction of hydroelectric plants and roads.

⁸ On this subject, see the studies of Raphael Bevilacqua and Matheus Bueno on the irregular appropriation of public lands in the Amazon via the judiciary (2023).



Without self-government, traditional Amazonian communities and populations are kept away from the decision-making over their lives, their goods, and their customs. Under the pressure of extreme violence, they resort to an authoritarian discourse that calls for intervention, reduction of rights, and the use of force to control the chaos. This scenario will only change with the realization that the absence of power manifesting itself in Amazonian conflicts is nothing more than a political–normative strategy for governing social relations based on the subjection of Amazonian citizens and making their existence as fully acting political agents precarious.

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