

# On Place and Politics in the Global Environment

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Back from the very successful Third World Congress of Environmental History, convened in July 2019 in Florianopolis, Brazil, by Eunice Nodari and her excellent team, and contemplating the future of ICEHO, my mind was full of the place we had been, the gist of two conference keynote sessions, and various musings about the nature of historical practice. In particular, I recalled some of the arguments advanced by Ged Martin, an important scholar of the British Empire and Commonwealth, in his provocative and wide-ranging book, *Past Futures: The Impossible Necessity of History* (University of Toronto Press, 2004). This is no place to review that work, but in it Martin advances several contentions, among them: that complete and final historical *explanations* are ultimately impossible, both because evidence of how things were is invariably imperfect and sometimes misleading, and because our inability to replicate the complex past places causal proof (A caused B) beyond reach; that history turns on the intersection of big decisions made by a few powerful people with the innumerable little decisions made by the many; and that history will only take its rightful place 'at the centre of all studies of the world around us' if it pays careful attention to the relations between past and present. History is a braided stream, not a canal. As such, it surely includes channels sufficient to reveal and draw meaning (some might say moral lessons) from the wounds and injustices of the past, and to provide fellow citizens with historical perspective on poorly-understood current affairs, the significance of which is too often shrouded in biased reporting and shallow perceptions. Here the conference keynote sessions sprang to mind.

The first featured three impressive papers on 'Biomes, Frontiers and [Brazilian] History'. Rogério Ribeiro de Oliveira's scene-setting account traced the impact of five major 'shocks' on the environment of Brazil. This story began much earlier than many anticipated with the evidence of human occupation at the Santa Elina rock shelter more than 23,000 years ago, considered the cascading consequences of European engagement with the Atlantic forest biome from ca 1500, and ended with the transcending shock of the new, the Anthropocene.

Sandro Dutra e Silva then turned attention to the *Cerrado*, a vast inland area (with over 10,000 plant species probably the most biodiverse savanna in the world). Long occupied by indigenous hunter-gatherers and slash-and burn agriculturalists, the region's infertile soils were of little interest to others (except extensive cattle grazers) through the mid-twentieth century. Then a demographic revolution, urbanisation, growing global demand for foodstuffs and the discovery that *Cerrado* soils could be remediated by the application of phosphorus and lime changed almost everything. The region's population more than doubled (to 76 million) between 1970 and 2010. Early in the twenty-first century, five tons of lime were being applied to each hectare of old and new-made fields (for a total of 25 million tons in 2004). Expanding agriculture turned trees into charcoal to feed the steel industry of Minas Gerais. Hastened by tax incentives and low interest loans, some eighty percent of the original savanna has been converted to industrial farming, cattle raising, charcoal production and eucalyptus plantations. The speed and magnitude of this transformation have been breath-taking – and listeners had their breath taken away by pictures showing soybean monoculture on a scale few could have imagined. Officials see no value in conservation of the *Cerrado*, and barely 1.5 per cent of its original area is in Federal Reserves.

Discussing the Amazon forest, José-Augusto Pádua detailed a similar story of recent and rapid human assault on this biome. As late as 1970, some 99 per cent of Brazil's Amazon forest (over 4 million square kilometres) remained more or less intact. But the dictatorship established by military coup in 1964 was moved – by geopolitical concern about the region's 'emptiness' rather than by economic necessity – to promote development. Subsidies, tax exemptions and new highways that improved access all worked their effects; clearing for cattle grazing proceeded at a rate of about 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> a year between the late 1970s and the 1990s. Early in the new millennium, nearly seventy per cent of the 700,000 km<sup>2</sup> deforested since 1970 was used for cattle pasture. Livestock did not yield great economic benefits but were effective instruments of land occupation. In those areas that were more suitable for agriculture, extensive, highly-mechanised soy production for export, biodiesel and feed made further inroads on the forest; in 2004 fully a fifth of the forest in the state of Mato Grosso was converted to cropland.

But this was not a simple declensionist narrative. From the outset, deforestation drew protest from local and global environmental movements. By 1989, the 'fate of the forest', (to borrow the title of the widely influential book by Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn) was described as 'the most pressing ecological issue of our time'. The assassination of the union leader and environmental activist Chico Mendes, in 1988, and government plans to link the Brazilian Amazon to Lima by road roused opposition from local communities, global celebrities and Latin American intellectuals, who characterised government policies as instruments of 'ecocide and ethnocide'. Deforestation slowed, but only temporarily. By 2002 it exceeded levels characteristic of the 1970s.

In the first decade of the new century, however, positive changes began to oc-

cur as decades of debate and proposal building by scientists, activists, and political leaders shaped public policy. Between 2004 and 2014, annual deforestation in the Amazon fell by 82 per cent. Strong growth in the establishment of different types of protected areas, including the demarcation of indigenous lands, put about 45 per cent of the forest under legal protection, and formed major barriers that made it difficult to advance deforestation. Continuing campaigns, increasingly focused on the role of the Amazon forests in carbon sequestration, led several commodity traders to declare a moratorium, in 2006, on the purchase of Brazilian soybeans grown on newly-deforested land. In 2012 the annual rate of deforestation in the Amazon (4,500 km<sup>2</sup>) was lower than at any time since 1970. Three years later, President Dilma Rousseff committed to eliminate illegal deforestation, restore and reforest 120,000 km<sup>2</sup> and recover 150,000 km<sup>2</sup> of degraded pastures by 2030.

According to an increasingly impassioned Padua, the hope generated by these advances made recent setbacks even more painful. Since 2014 the powerful agricultural lobby has chipped away at the protections put in place through the preceding decade. The election of right-wing extremist and anti-environmentalist Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil in 2018 was a particularly hard blow. It produced radical changes in both attitudes toward and policies protecting the Amazon.

While delegates attended WCEH3, the Brazilian forest was being destroyed more quickly than at any time in recent memory; more than 2,250km<sup>2</sup> fell in July alone. Illegal incursions have quickened and violence has escalated. The conference ended with reports that fifty heavily-armed garimpeiros (illegal gold miners) had killed a tribal leader and taken over an indigenous reserve in the state of Amapá. In the end they retreated. But signs of chaotic and violent deforestation are appearing everywhere. As I write, the world is agape at the fires burning across the Amazon, and *Cerrado*. By some accounts, more than 72,000 fires broke out in Brazil in the first eight months of 2019; this was an 84 per cent increase on the same period in 2018. Less noticed has been the recent surge in soybean exports from Brazil to China, and the incentive for Brazil to further expand production as China spurns North American soybeans in retaliation against US tariffs on Chinese imports.

These are arresting stories and sobering developments. They reflect complex convergences. Their implications were expanded upon in the second round table. One of its central points was well made by Regina Duarte who stressed the complex dynamics surrounding knowledges and conservation in Brazilian environmental history. Reprising Brazil's long historical tradition of conservationist practices, both implemented by indigenous peoples and developed and supported by scientists, she noted that 'knowledge has been declared a dangerous, subversive thing' in Brazil of late. 'That is why', she concluded 'it has become so important, so urgent to tell, to remember and to build the entangled history of knowledge and conservation in Brazil'.

These are words worth remembering. They struck with particular force in Brazil in the moment of their delivery, just days after President Bolsonaro told a reporter from the *Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/19/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-amazon-rainforest-deforestation>) that the latest satellite data on deforestation 'is a lie', that only Brazilians have 'the moral right to talk about the Amazon', and that recent policies were 'terrible for everyone'. The words of informed, concerned and committed colleagues detailing the problems of time, place and politics that confront them create an obligation to do more than listen, even as they provide perspective on current circumstances.

We should all recognise the importance of our colleagues' *cris de couer*. Brazilian environments (and with them the sustainability of the global ecosystem) are under severe threat. But these are not the only parts of the global environment of which this is true. Boreal forests are also being laid waste, to detrimental effect. Five years or so ago, thirteen million hectares of forest were being cleared, annually, across the planet, contributing some twenty per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Today, the rate of destruction is twice as high. Beyond this, we should acknowledge that our Brazilian colleagues are not alone in the challenges they face. That is why it is so important, so important and so urgent, to tell, to remember and to build on and from our shared traditions. If ICEHO is to meet its mandate, it surely must encourage various ways of recounting and interpreting the past, help to create space for properly reflexive scholarship, and recognise the value of environmental historians supporting one another, as generously as possible, across the full breadth of our international community