

# The Nature of the Brazilian Flag: An Environmental Turn under Military Rule (1964-1985)

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## Abstract

*Nature in Brazil has been the subject of debates, competing representations and historical ruptures. This article argues that the period of the military regime (1964-1985) was that of a shift in the delimitation between culture and nature, which became clear by means of media, artistic, intellectual and political representations. During the 1970s, in particular, the “nature” envisaged by the military regime, a hostile nature which the nation must conquer in order to exploit resources, gave way to a fragile nature. In diverse sectors of society, environmental protection came to be seen as necessary to preserve national identity and sovereignty. The debate about the future of the Amazon proved crucial in this transformation. This article analyzes the reasons for this change and gives some illustrations of it. It begins with a perspective of the different visions of nature that existed prior to the arrival of the military in power. Then, it explains how the developmentalist ideology of the military regime, based on an anthropocentric idea of nature, was challenged in the context of the rise of environmentalist discourse in the 1970s. Subsequently, it analyzes the transversal character that ecological thought managed to adopt in Brazilian society during these years. And finally, it explores the diversification of the environmental movement in the context of the transition towards democracy and its aftermaths.*

**Keywords:** political ecology, Brazil, military regime, environmental history, patriotism, nature/culture, Amazon (Amazonia), environmentalism, socio-environmentalism



Although this is not written in any official text, it is a common belief among Brazilians that their national flag symbolizes the country's allegedly grandiose natural conditions: the central blue sphere for the star-spangled, cloudless sky and the balmy tropical climate, nested in a yellow rhombus evoking gold and, more generally, wealthy natural resources, against a background as green as the country's endless forests. In

the above picture, threatening white factory chimneys stain the blue sky with dark smoke. The bulk of the gold making up the yellow rhombus has been taken away by an excavator that stocked the nuggets into the wagons of a merchandise train. The green of the forest has almost entirely given place to a bare landscape, punctuated by trunks of chopped trees. On the square's left margin, some cactuses and animal skeletons evoke a landscape dried out by deforestation, while on the lower right corner a bulldozer is felling the last remaining parcel of woods. A little Uncle Sam is wrapping the outlined edge of the rhombus as he would do to pack up an old carpet, symbolizing the liquidation of Brazil's natural heritage for the benefit of foreign markets and imperialist interests.

This picture is a famous cartoon drawn in the 1970s, the core decade of Brazil's military regime (1964-1985), by Henfil (1944-1988), one of the country's most renowned and talented cartoonists, and through his work also a genuine resister of the dictatorship's infamous

political order. In caricatures that were mainly published in the alternative, liberal and satirical press, he criticized censorship, torture, social repression and the environmental destruction provoked by the regime's industrial and farming policies. There was nothing exceptional in this constellation: the ecological dimension was an integral part of the critique of authoritarian rule in many opposition circles. But the above cartoon is particularly interesting for the deep symbolic meaning it carries. In amalgamating tropical nature with Brazil's flag, Henfil underlines the function of the former as a source of nationhood and suggests that the destruction of this nature would mean the end of Brazil as a self-standing nation. This centrality of the natural heritage is, indeed, deeply carved in Brazil's patriotic imaginary, as appears in the national hymn, written by Joaquim Osório Duque Estrada. Officially adopted in 1922, the latter bristles with eulogies to the country's "splendid cradle", "deep sky light", illuminating sun or "showiest land". Significantly, the hymn not only claims the beauty but also the superiority of these environmental conditions, suggesting that nature is what makes Brazil unique ("Than the showiest land / Thy smiling, pretty prairies have more flowers / Our groves have more life / Our life in thy bosom more loves").



This theme has its origin in the so-called "Edenic motif", the colonial vision of Brazil as a terra farta, a "lavish land" (Pádua 73). Since virtually the arrival of the Portuguese, the positioning of humans towards nature or the sertão, in its most general sense, that is to say, a word roughly equivalent to the English "wilderness", the wild or uncivilized space, has played a driving role in the

formation of Brazilian society [1]. It first served the hierarchy of colonial relations, when in the sixteenth century the whites used the physical proximity between the natives' habitat and the forest as an argument for their inhumanity, thus justifying their reduction into slavery. The culture/nature relation also expressed itself later in the attempts to define modern Brazilian identity, as it appeared ambiguously in the work of Euclides da Cunha *Os Sertões* (1902), who saw in the natural conditions of the sertão's inhabitants both a degrading yoke and a source of national authenticity. The sertão was central in long-term projects of state centralization, in particular through the plan of establishing the capital of the country in the middle of its central plains, which unfolded from the 19th century until the construction of Brasilia in 1956. [2]

While the relation to nature can be read as a marker of identity in Brazilian history, it is important to stress that this marker is not static. Nature in Brazil has been the subject of debates, competing representations and historical ruptures. As I argue in this text, the period of the military regime was precisely that of a shift in the delimitation between culture and nature, and this shift became clear by means of media, artistic, intellectual and political representations. During the 1970s, in particular, the "nature" envisaged by the military regime, a hostile nature which the nation must conquer in order to exploit resources, gave way to a fragile nature. In diverse sectors of society, environmental protection came to be seen as necessary to preserve national identity and sovereignty. The debate about the future of the Amazon proved crucial in this transformation.

In the following sections, I analyze the reasons for this change and give some illustrations of it. I begin with a perspective of the different visions of nature that existed prior to the arrival of the military in power. Then, I explain how the developmentalist ideology of the military regime, based on an anthropocentric idea of nature, was challenged in the context of the rise of environmentalist discourse in the 1970s. Subsequently, I analyze the transversal character that ecological thought managed to adopt in Brazilian society during these years. And finally, I explore the diversification of the environmental movement in the context of the

transition towards democracy and its aftermaths.

### I – The “possible natures” in Brazilian culture (Ostos)

Nature has been a fundamental element in the history of (elite-driven) Brazilian nation building, but its place in the collective imaginary was not at any time consensual, be it in political discourses or in literary and artistic production. There have been two major competing interpretations of the relationship between humanity and nature: on the one side, a “civilizationist”, expansionist interpretation, and on the other side a conservationist interpretation. The civilizationist viewpoint, largely inspired by a colonial spirit, has defined the construction of the Brazilian nation as a process of overcoming wild and “backward” elements: Brazil must therefore liberate itself from environmental obstacles, civilize the populations subjected to nature’s dominion, and transform the forest into agrarian lands to ensure national prosperity. In terms of geographical dynamism, this view tends to equate the construction of Brazil with a process of shifting the population from the coastline inwards, and durably colonizing wild territories. This idea of a Brazil built in opposition to natural forces has inspired the cult of the *Bandeirantes*, colonists from São Paulo who, in the seventeenth century, opened routes northwards through the interior forests, capturing Indians on their way. Constructed a posteriori into pioneers of the nation by various twentieth-century intellectuals and political leaders, the *Bandeirantes* are still the object of vivid memorial tributes, notably through street names and monuments in São Paulo and other important cities. [3] The colonial and expansionist take on nature was also decisive in massive state-supported operations of hinterland conquest. A notable example of these was the “*Marcha para o Oeste*” (March to the West), a campaign encouraging agricultural colonization in the central states of Goiás and Mato Grosso, under the rule of the dictator Getúlio Vargas in the 1940s. [4]

In opposition to this anthropocentric version, there exists a conservationist, or romantic, interpretation of nature’s place in Brazilian society. According to this historical tradition, the

distinctiveness of tropical nature is foundational for Brazilian identity and unites the different races that make up the nation. Protecting this natural heritage is therefore a national imperative, while environmental destruction is an absurd process that must be overcome to build an independent and prosperous Brazil. This idea finds its rational basis in physiocratic writings of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, which fused conservationist discourses with the economic benefits of a more autonomous or even independent Brazil. Thus did “founding father” José Bonifácio, the main architect of Brazil’s independence in 1822, relentlessly warn against the disappearance of “our precious forests victims of fire and the destructive axe”, which could reduce “our beautiful land of Brazil (...) to the condition of empty plains and the arid deserts of Libya” (qtd. in Pádua, “Tropical Forests” 162). He believed in the organic links between tropical vegetation, rains and the soil stability indispensable to Brazilian agriculture, and wrote in particular:

se a agricultura se fizer com os braços livres dos pequenos proprietários, ... se conservarão, como herança sagrada para a nossa posteridade, as antigas matas virgens que pela sua vastidão e frondosidade caracterizam o nosso belo país (qtd. in Pádua, “A Profecia Dos Desertos Da Líbia” 133).

The link between free, small-scale farming and environmental conservation was also a major theme among nineteenth-century abolitionists, who denounced slavery as a system favoring forest devastation and soil depletion. The mulatto writer André Rebouças called in 1876 for the creation of national parks, while six years earlier the politician Joaquim Nabuco wrote in his influential book and abolitionist plea *A escravidão*:

Quem nasceu neste belo país do Brasil não pode ser insensível à ação salutar da natureza. Só as almas endurecidas pelo cálculo podem nunca ter vibrado sob a impressão de tão grandes realces (Nabuco 66)

This conservationist Brazil was also that of the politician Alberto Torres, considered a precursor of modern Brazilian democracy. One of the fundamental principles of the constitution project, which he made public in 1891, was “the defense of the soil and natural resources of the country” (qtd. in Dean 244). In parallel to these initiatives, romantic novelists and poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Gonçalves Dias, Bernardo Guimarães, and José de Alencar propagated an idealized vision of nature, often presented as the essence of Brazil’s identity. [5]

Obviously the two rival conceptions of nature described above have not been the only forms of relating to the non-human environment in Brazilian history, although they have been the dominant ones. Anthropologists such as Philippe Descola (2005) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015) have shown that many of the indigenous peoples living on Brazilian territory do not conceive the universe according to a binary division between humans and non-humans. Afro-Brazilian syncretic cults such as Candomblé also believe in a mystic connection to water, fire, air and earth, which radically differs from the vision of nature developed by Brazilian writers and politicians who were mostly white members of the socio-economic elites (Santos & Gonçalves). In contrast, although the civilizationist and conservationist points of view described above imply a different attitude towards the right of humans to exploit nature, they both belong to a Christian conception of the world as divided between nature and culture. They even came to be synthesized in the ambiguous logic of Afonso Celso. In 1900, this influential writer invented a peculiarly Brazilian form of patriotism, which he christened “Ufanism”, a term derived from a Castilian adjective designating self-satisfaction (1900). While Ufanismo, in Celso’s vision, related to the exultation of national sentiments and the celebration of the fatherland, it is interesting to note that he presented tropical nature as one of the main sources of national pride. For him, the first three reasons for this pride were the country’s territorial size, the beauty of its landscapes and the wealth of its natural resources. The logic of Celso can thus give rise to two interpretations, two “possible natures”, both anchored in the

thinking of the Brazilian elites. [6] The idea of an abundant tropical nature as the foundation of national wealth can encourage the intensive exploitation of environmental resources as well as a reflex of preservation.

The paradox generated by Ufanist thought reached its climax during the so-called “developmentalist” period of consolidation of the state’s productive structures, which began in the 1930s with Getúlio Vargas and continued until the time of the military regime. The natural scientists of organizations such as the Museu Nacional, the Jardim Botânico and the Sociedade Geográfica in Rio de Janeiro, and later those of the Fundação Brasileira para Conservação da Natureza (FBCN), managed to interfere in the affairs of the developmentalist state (Franco and Drummond 2009). They advocated the protection of nature as a national value. The “Forest Code” of 1934 was born in this context, which saw conservation legislation emerging in fields as diverse as irrigation, protection of flora and fauna, and hunting and fishing regulation (Drummond 135). Between 1934 and 1965, sixteen national parks were created. At the same time, the industrial and colonizing logic took precedence in government policies and presidential speeches, despite a few exceptions such as that of President Eurico Dutra who, in 1948, warned against the desertification of Brazil through deforestation (Dutra). In particular, the presidential mandate of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) marked the victory of a predatory and civilizationist vision, with the occupation of Brazil’s central plateau, the construction of Brasilia and the launching of major highway programs in the Amazon, which the president portrayed as victories over nature. In his memoirs, Kubitschek shared his pride at having accomplished the “conquest of the Hinterland” and of having been able to “introduce progress into regions never explored by the civilized man” (Kubitschek 80, 157).

## **II- Faced with ecological crisis, the developmentalist ideology became ridiculed**

Far from breaking with the tradition perpetuated by democratic presidents such as Kubitschek, the vision of nature conveyed by political

authorities after the military putsch of 1964 was in line with the expansionist logic of conquest, especially of forested areas. From 1966, this logic gave shape to Operação Amazônia, a set of legislative measures, major infrastructure projects and propaganda campaigns aimed at organizing the colonization of the Amazon. The officers who headed the Superintendencia de Desenvolvimento da Amazônia (SUDAM), an all-powerful administrative agency responsible for overseeing the region's modernization, spoke of a "great developmentalist crusade" (SUDAM 69-70, 134). Press broadcasts used warlike metaphors to call for deforestation. Publishing a double-page photograph of a chainsaw felling trees in a plentiful forest landscape, the popular magazine *Manchete* proclaimed on November 30, 1968: "Amazônia. Aqui o homem vence a natureza".

This aggressive approach to the relationship with nature was coupled with an unbounded belief in the profusion and potential of its resources. The military's anthropocentric ufanism blossomed through propaganda articulated in the early 1970s along with the construction of the Transamazonian, a highway of nearly five thousand kilometers crossing the Amazon region from east to west (Acker and de Oliveira 306). According to the military President Emílio Médici, this highway must lead the "men without land" from the drought-ridden and impoverished northeast of Brazil to the "land without men" of the northwest (the Amazon) (qtd. in Acker and de Oliveira 307). In this occasion the governor of the State of Amazonas, Artur Reis, one of the inspirers of Operação Amazônia, wrote:

A Amazônia é hoje a preocupação maior do Brasil, empenhados, seu povo e seu governo, na conquista definitiva e na integração da região ao complexo de civilização com que contribuimos para a grande Aventura do homem nos seus objetivos de triunfo sobre a natureza e sua potencialidade terrena (Reis 9).

The naive view of the abundance of land and environmental reserves that appears in Reis' words went hand in hand with the firm belief of the regime's leaders in unrestricted economic

growth. Delfim Netto, finance minister and main designer of the regime's economic policy, had an almost mystical relation to the growth of GDP, as shown by these words pronounced in 1972:

O desenvolvimento econômico e social é definitivo, e não um acidente. E chegou para ficar. Não se identifica nenhum fator impeditivo do desenvolvimento da economia brasileira. Nada poderá retardar o crescimento econômico do Brasil, a não ser os próprios brasileiros (qtd. in Macarini 33–34).

This excessive optimism soon had to face the growing awareness of the depletion of natural resources, which became visible at the global level with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. The Brazilian military regime was internationally criticized for its obstructionist attitude during the summit (da Costa Ferreira and Tavolaro 2008). In the following years, its policy of colonization of the Amazon would fall into disgrace, especially within the scientific community, which saw tropical deforestation as a major threat to the world's biodiversity. It must be said that the illusion of an endlessly available Amazonian forest with unlimited resources also sank at the national and local levels. The idea that the Amazon was a land without men for men without land lost its credibility in the face multiplying land conflicts. In addition, the first figures concerning deforestation and the first surveys of soil depletion due to colonization policies, led in particular by Brazilian scientific organizations such as Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia (INPA) and the Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisas Agropecuárias (EMBRAPA), were published in the 1970s, causing alarmed reactions in the country (Falesi; Acker, Volkswagen in the Amazon 118)

It is in this context that the so-called "alternative" press began to mock the regime's blind ufanism. The satirical political weekly *Pasquim* shocked the Catholic bourgeoisie with a drawing by its cartoonist Nani, who, to criticize the pollution caused by the Transamazonian highway, represented Adam and Eve urinating in the Amazon river (Torres). Movimento

ironically associated the region's large-scale agricultural development projects with obsolete feudalism from colonial times, and Opinião devoted an article to the problems of pollution and deforestation in almost all of its weekly issues. The magazine was particularly alarmed at the risk of the rainforest disappearing. These publications had a significant audience, equaling or largely overtaking major pro-regime magazines such as *Veja* or *Manchete*. Opinião reached sometimes more than 30,000 copies in a single day, while Movimento usually sold around 50,000 for one issue and Pasquim had an impressive average diffusion of 250,000 (Rodrigues da Silva and Souza Brito 7; Gaspari 223; Oficina Informa). This dramatic tone also underpinned the militant newspaper *Varadouro* in Rio Branco, a city in the extreme West of the Amazon. *Varadouro*, which alerted Brazilians every week to the destruction of the tropical forest, earned a nationwide reputation in the late 1970s (*Resistir é preciso*).

But it is cinema, especially, that ridiculed the regime's propaganda of Amazon conquest through cruel parodies. Road-movies shot on the Transamazonian highway displayed polluted landscapes or deforestation and depicted characters deceived by the regime's promises of abundance. These movies implicitly pointed to a community of destiny between nature and the poor populations of the interior, both simultaneously suffering from the violence provoked by industrialization and farming modernization policies. *Iracema*, shot in 1973 by Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna, depicts the plunge into social misery of a young prostitute from a rural village in the Amazon amid the decline of the forest. Along her travels on the highway, *Iracema* is a victim of contempt and the attempts of those in the deforestation economy to exploit and abuse her, such as the central figure of Tião Grão Brasil, a truck driver from Rio Grande do Sul. Tião, who first seeks to make a fortune in the timber trade, then in cattle ranching, seems to be the voice of the military regime in the movie. Obsessed by the goal of getting rich quickly, he likens the Amazon to the Eldorado of Brazil and *Iracema* to an "Indian". All along, he peddles a grotesque nationalist discourse that finds its source in the myth of unlimited nature and calls

for intensive environmental exploitation.

The same mixture of ridicule and tragedy can be found in the comedy *Bye Bye Brasil* by Carlos Diegues, released in 1979. It depicts a group of marginalized figures in a small traveling circus who turn away from the drought-ridden Nordeste (Brazil's Northeastern region) to reach the Amazonian "green paradise" so much praised by the military regime's propaganda. Their visit to a polluted beach, inserted in a cityscape bordered by smoking factories, convinces the small troupe to take the Transamazonian highway in search of the authentic Brazil, which they believe they will meet in the "pristine" forest. However, all they cross in their journey are bulldozers, burning landscapes, forest ashes, dying animals and disoriented indigenous populations. The movie mocks the regime's propaganda, which portrayed the exploitation of the Amazon as a promise of better days for the Brazilian nation. What *Bye Bye Brasil* - which bears its title well - shows the spectators is rather the dereliction of the nation, and especially of its natural interior, implicitly assimilated by the movie's protagonists to Brazil's soul.

Behind the irony of *Iracema* and *Bye Bye Brasil* lay the emergence of a concern spreading among different sectors of Brazilian society in the face of dwindling resources. This concern readily adopted a catastrophic tone, as in the twenty-seventh congress of the Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência (SBPC), which took place in Belo Horizonte in 1975 and was widely reported in the national press (Acker, *Volkswagen in the Amazon* 117). During this rally, which brought together thousands of Brazilian and foreign scholars, dozens of speakers from the academic world attacked the destructive policies regarding fauna and flora associated with *Operação Amazônia*. The title of the congress, *Por quê?* ("Why?"), expressed the dismay of the scientific community in the face of the ecological crisis, and the congress poster, illustrated with a dying bird, was an implicit reference to *Silent Spring*, an internationally successful book by the marine biologist Rachel Carson, published in 1962. Considered a founding manifesto of international ecological thought, the book denounced the slaughter of birds through the widespread use of pesticides

in agriculture.

Scientists' concern about environmental degradation reflected a shift in the perception of nature, especially (but not only) among the Brazilian middle class. The "nature-storehouse" to be conquered and exploited gave way to a fear that, in the name of progress, the country's natural heritage and, through it, the essence of Brazilian collective identity, could disappear. A reader's letter published on September 28, 1977, by the *Jornal do Brasil*, a major newspaper in Rio de Janeiro, testified to this growing trend:

É com grande tristeza e pesar que me dirijo ao *Jornal do Brasil* para juntar minha voz a milhares de outras, tão brasileiras como a minha preocupação em relação aos problemas nacionais ... na conservação do nosso patrimônio ... . Sinto-me mal cada vez que ouço conselhos no sentido de transformar a Amazônia num imenso pasto natural ... Meu Deus, quando será que o uso do bom senso e da razão voltará a imperar? E infelizmente o que os tem e os usa, a despeito de quaisquer pressões, é logo acusado de querer deter essa febre de progresso que tanto nos atormenta' (Fagerlande)

As we see in this text, the convergence between nature and nation became a major discursive theme in the criticism of environmental destruction and deforestation. It is therefore not surprising that this criticism focused on projects conducted in partnership between the authoritarian State and large multinational companies, such as the giant fazenda of the Volkswagen Group (VW), which practiced cattle breeding in the eastern Amazon state of Para. [6] The US shipping magnate Daniel K. Ludwig, who reigned over an empire of 1.6 million hectares by the Amazon river where he aimed to produce cellulose, was also regularly the object of environmental criticism. Another of these big groups provoking the wrath of nationalists and environmentalists was the Italian company Liquigas, which owned a ranch of 786,000 hectares (the size of a country like Holland) in the Southern Amazonian state of Mato Grosso, the 'Liquifarm'. All of these projects benefitted

from public credits amounting to tens of millions of dollars.

A photograph by a NASA satellite of a 10,000-hectare fire supposedly caused by VW in the Amazon generated an immense media scandal that gave rise in 1976 to thundering statements in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies and Senate. The parliamentarians who intervened then understood the fight against the destruction of nature as a patriotic struggle. Paulo Brossard, leader of the opposition in the Senate, was clear on this issue during a parliamentary speech:

Parece-me, Senhor Presidente, um crime contra a nacionalidade o que esta sendo cometido, e não podemos assistir indiferentes a que tais coisas aconteçam, que tais atos sejam praticados com prejuízos incalculáveis para a comunhão nacional (Brossard 211-22).

The Brossard quotation is just one example of many similar statements by Brazilian parliamentarians who, around 1975-1976, regularly attacked slash-and-burn farming by big firms. One of the peculiarities of these parliamentary interventions in favor of the forest was that they came from across the political spectrum. The politicians who spoke in defense of the "meio ambiente" often came from the left wing of the only authorized opposition party, the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB). The self-claimed social-ecologist senator Evandro Carreira, and the senator Benjamin Farah, a supporter of the left-wing former president João Goulart overthrown by the 1964 coup, were the spearheads of parliamentary environmentalism. But it was also possible to find environmentally inclined politicians in the parliamentary groups of the Aliança Renovadora Nacional (ARENA), the party basis of the military government. A congressman of this party, the carioca Emílio Nino Ribeiro shook the Chamber of Deputies on August 10, 1976, by directly questioning the CEO of VW in these terms: "Afim Sr. Wolfgang Sauer, o que veio o senhor fazer no Brasil? Produzir automóveis ou tocar fogo no mato?" (*Diário do Congresso Nacional*). Environmentalist thought penetrated the political domain but did not hug

traditional political lines, not even the lines resulting from the coup of 1964. Although it can certainly not be described as a mass movement, this thought quickly managed to become transversal.

### **III- A new cultural paradigm? The successful emergence of transversal environmental thinking**

The idea of nature as something to be protected was a transversal paradigm shift permeating many diverse sectors of Brazilian politics and culture. The ecological concern found echoes in associative activism and parliamentary politics, as well as in cinema, the visual arts and the media. The popular figure of Roberto Burle Marx, great defender of biodiversity, was emblematic of this expressive plurality. Landscape architect and painter, he promoted in his art the idea of a fusion between nature and the nation, especially through the systematic use of native plants in the gardens and parks he designed for most of the main Brazilian metropolises. By generalizing the transposition of tropical vegetation in the city, Burle Marx wanted to bring his compatriots closer to “their” natural environment. He aimed to create an authentically Brazilian urban landscape. [8] In the 1970s, his passion for environmental themes brought him closer to scientists involved in the fight against pollution, such as the chemist Jose Lutzenberger, who published in 1976 *Fim do Futuro*, the first explicitly ecologist manifesto in Brazil. While denouncing the deforestation operations carried out by large industrial groups in the Amazon, Burle Marx also allied with activist environmentalist organizations, such as the *Ação Democrática Feminina Gaúcha (ADFG)* in Rio Grande do Sul. Finally, Burle Marx took a position in parliamentary debates thanks to politicians of the MDB who invited him, in 1976, to speak against deforestation in the Senate (Acker, Volkswagen in the Amazon 139–47).

The transversal dimension symbolized by Burle Marx also existed at the social level, since the movement for a balanced relationship with nature mainly expanded through micro-initiatives which, depending on the local context, could mobilize different social classes. Pioneering activism emerged in 1971 in the

Southern metropole of Porto Alegre with the creation of the *Associação Gaúcha de Proteção ao Ambiente Natural (AGAPAN)*, built by educated young people from the upper middle class. One of its members, the student Carlos Dayrell, made it into the headlines on February 25, 1975, by climbing a hundred-year-old tree to protest against its removal, planned as part of a construction project. This image, which went around Brazil, became a national symbol of the fight for environmental preservation (Pereira 117). In other big cities, the militants of this cause were often part of bohemian milieus that intertwined with the art and culture sectors. The *Movimento Arte and Pensamento Ecológico (MAPE)*, founded in 1973 by the painter Walter Garcia, embodied such a trend. Based in São Paulo, the group made itself famous through regular happenings and exhibitions seeking to merge art and political ecology together (Viola 9-11).

Unlike perhaps the ecology movements that emerged at the same time in Europe, Brazilian environmental thinking also took root in some working-class areas. By 1976, the Amazonian rubber-taper leader Chico Mendes, alongside his fellow trade unionists of the state of Acre, developed the technique of the *empates*, which consisted of forming a human chain around trees or forest plots to prevent bulldozers clearing them (Martins 24). These actions were motivated by both a fear of dwindling natural resources and a fight for their just distribution. Beyond their political significance, the *empates* also illustrated the creativity of the Brazilian movement against deforestation, committed to developing an aesthetic of proximity between human beings and natural heritage. This proximity was also central to the actions of Carlos Dayrell in Porto Alegre, as well as in the artistic expressions of Burle Marx and the MAPE.

While the *seringueiros* were rural workers, ecological concerns also intermingled with social activism in urban contexts, in particular in Cubatão. This city on the outskirts of São Paulo was located in the heart of one of the world’s most polluted regions, nicknamed at the time the “valley of death”. The exceptionally high rate of toxic contamination in Cubatão’s air and water, due to two decades of uncontrolled

industrialization, gravely affected the health of its inhabitants, especially in terms of infant mortality, birth malformation and cancer. From the end of the 1970s, the working families who populated the city organized themselves into a commission to fight against pollution and its consequences. On this occasion, they formed alliances with environmentalists and scientists of the SBPC (Hochstetler and Keck 189–204).

Besides transcending social classes depending on local circumstances and activist opportunities, Brazilian environmental thought also penetrated different kinds of political cultures. As in Europe, it of course achieved a certain breakthrough in Marxist circles, not only in rubber-tapper unionism but also among personalities from the Communist Party, such as Augusto Carneiro (Carneiro 2003). However, environmentalism also attracted more unexpected groups, like the ADFG. This association of housewives from the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of Porto Alegre was founded in 1964 in the context of an anti-communist mobilization wave that served as a social base for the coup d'état. Its founding members claimed to have distanced themselves ideologically from the military regime on the occasion of their rapprochement with AGAPAN and their adherence to José Lutzenberger's theses against industrial pollution. In the early 1970s, the ADFG started to define itself as an "ecologist", and then even an "ecofeminist" group, to the point of organizing in 1975 the first national congress for the protection of nature, gathering more than five hundred participants from all over Brazil. By 1983, the ADFG formed the Brazilian section of the international environmental NGO Friends of the Earth (Acker, Volkswagen in the Amazon 137–41).

Finally, the wave of sympathy for the protection of nature was transversal because it not only flourished in society but also gained ground within the state apparatus and even the entrepreneurial world. In 1973, to respond to critics who accused him of dishonoring Brazil by opposing the adoption of international standards for pollution control during the Stockholm Conference, Médici conceded the creation of the Secretaria do Meio Ambiente (SEMA), one of the first governmental posts for environmental

protection in the world (Hochstetler and Keck 27). At its head, he named a historic figure of Brazilian conservationism, the natural scientist Paulo Nogueira Neto, who had been one of the founders of the FBCN in 1958. At the same time, the Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento Florestal (IBDF), a body in charge of developing economic activity in forest regions, became more and more sympathetic to the fight against deforestation. Its executives began to push for a moratorium on agrarian colonization and the construction of highways in the Amazon (Berutti 6). Against their own government's opinion, they defended the implementation of economic sanctions (as Brazilian conservation law foresaw) against large companies practicing illegal deforestation. Even SUDAM, responsible for driving the colonization of the Amazon, felt compelled to integrate environmental protection measures into the development programs it supported (Acker, Volkswagen in the Amazon 149).

Alongside the state, even large companies had to adapt, in their communication, the codes of the new language of nature protection. VW began to actively communicate about the reforestation programs it had started in its Amazonian ranch. Some brands even attempted to appropriate the discourse of activist environmentalism to sell their products on television, as evidenced by this critical analysis published in November 1975 in the monthly magazine *Movimento*:

Se você gosta de árvores, cuidado. Tenha cautela, a defesa do meio ambiente está-se tornando coisa escorregadia. É preciso reconhecer que ela ganhou tanto em popularidade que já faz parte sistemática da vida do telespectador brasileiro. A ponto de um detergente bio-degradável fazer sua propaganda na televisão com imagens de rios cristalinos, cascatas espumantes, e com a frase: 'Defenda o meio-ambiente, mesmo que para isso você tenha que subir em árvores', numa referência ao episódio ocorrido em Porto Alegre (De Souza 11).

This example corresponds to an early form of what is now called "Green Washing", which demonstrates how the idea of nature as something to be protected, a nature that is the

common good of Brazil, had taken root even among consumers. It also raises a question: How could this conservationist representation of nature settle in the Brazilian cultural landscape in only a few years, in spite of the anthropocentric and expansionist vision actively propagated by the ruling military regime?

Of course, Brazil was porous to an international context mobilizing around concerns with a global ecological crisis. The report of the Club of Rome pointing to the “limits of growth” in 1972, the Stockholm Conference, the Earth Day event mobilizing twenty million people in the United States in 1970, the literary success of many books alerting the public to environmental catastrophes, the creation of institutions, parties and associations of environmental protection around the world testify to an ecological “turn” that took place in the 1970s. At the same time, there was already a historically rooted intellectual tradition in Brazil, which saw the protection of nature as a national value, corresponding to the conservationist or romantic vision mentioned earlier. In the 1970s, this tradition was revitalized, modernized and amplified, despite government propaganda relayed by the conservative media, which called for environmental destruction, particularly in the framework of *Operação Amazônia*. The crucial reason for this revitalization was that, paradoxically, the period of the military regime constituted a favorable political opportunity for environmentalism.

In a context of authoritarian rule and political repression, materialized through censorship and the torture of “subversive” opponents, environmental criticism had the advantage of constituting a quite implicit form of subversion. It was an ambiguous and relatively “safe” perspective from which to criticize the regime’s policies because the military saw environmentalist thought as harmless. In effect, environmental thinking in Brazil throughout the 1970s was highly subversive because it implied deep criticism that challenged the entire political and economic model of military rule. Activist struggles against the chemical industry in Porto Alegre or campaigns against the concessions made to multinationals companies in the Amazon questioned the

model of “dependent development”, which had already been denounced since the late 1960s by Marxist academic literature. Critics of highway construction and mining projects attacked the authoritarian and bureaucratic decision-making process that accompanied this economic model. Alerts against deforestation were systematically coupled with the condemnation of land concentration, the proletarianization of rural workers and the persecution of indigenous people.

However, the military had great difficulty in identifying the ins and outs of this ecological thought because its intellectual foundations were totally absent from their theoretical training. A report written by the military police about the association AGAPAN in 1975 testifies to this ignorance. Worried about the activist agitation of this Southern Brazilian NGO but unable to grasp the reason for their protest, the text described them as a “group of Jewish disrupters”, probably because the AGAPAN office was located in the Jewish quarter of Bomfim in Porto Alegre (Niebauer 35). Most of the time, the military regime saw environmentalists as nothing more than ingenuous nature lovers and did not care much about their activities and even less about the political messages they conveyed. Because it remained widely untouched by censorship and repression, environmental thinking could spread throughout society, especially in the context of a globally recognized ecological crisis, as an alternative model of national identification to that of the regime.

It should be added that the “moment” of the *distensão*, initiated in 1974 by President Ernesto Geisel to promote a partial and progressive liberalization of institutions and an easing of political control, constituted an opportunity to turn this environmental criticism into political thought. The period of *distensão* opened a possible return to a plural political landscape. Therefore, the time was favorable for a general repositioning of the country’s politicians as well as for maneuvers from part of the opposition to accelerate the democratic transition. This created a context of large political alliances (often circumstantial and around specific causes) and a great ideological porosity within the big “democratic opposition” camp, including between the political and

associative spheres. The poor ideological platform of the MDB, a party sheltering virtually all kinds of political traditions from Marxism to moderate conservatism, left room for emerging ideas such as political ecology. Many MDB (and sometimes also ARENA) members were actually in search of new political ideas with which to identify themselves so as to find a future political space after the polarization between authoritarianism and democracy ended. Such a political framework produced opportunities even for marginal ideas to gain surprisingly wide support, including among high-ranking politicians.

At the same time, *distensão* inspired both hope and uncertainty, due to the pressure from the military regime's hardliners and the occasional signs of authoritarianism still sent by those in power. For example, the municipal elections of 1976 raised the fear of a setback in the process of *distensão* as the regime made sure to limit the opposition's freedom of speech with the help of the intelligence service (Alves 230–31). Political ecology was not a bad concept to struggle with in this threatening context, given the inoffensive image of environmentalists in the eyes of the military leadership.

In the mid- to late 1970s, many influential politicians joined campaigns against the building of an airport in São Paulo, the extension of the Brazilian nuclear park, and the distribution of timber concessions to private groups in the Amazon (Hochstetler and Keck 75-83, 157-60). These environmentalist struggles were weaker in militant intensity than, for example, antinuclear mobilization occurring in certain Western European countries in the same period. But they often earned similar media and political success, precisely because of the support of well-known personalities coming from all corners of the political landscape.

#### **IV- The transition to democracy, from patriotic environmentalism to “socio-environmentalism”**

The historical distance should lead to a paradoxical ecological appraisal of the era of the military regime. Although many ecologists see it as a dark period for nature, the years from 1964 to

1984 produced quite progressive environmental legislation in international comparison. It is possible to mention the creation of new regulations for air and water pollution under the leadership of SEMA, the environmental conversion of the IBDF, which has since been combined into a powerful environmental protection agency - the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (IBAMA) - or the consolidation of a forest code with strict standards, which environmental associations fought fiercely to preserve between 2012 and 2013, and again in 2016 (Acker, “Nature, nation et histoire”). The era of the military regime was also a period of intense mobilization, which made it possible to defeat large industrial projects or to launch extensive operations of environmental sanitation, such as happened during the 1980s in Cubatão (Hochstetler and Keck 199-203). All this was possible not thanks to the military but despite them, one could say in echo of a famous samba by Chico Buarque, written against the dictatorship (*Apesar de você*). The ruling regime embraced a colonizing discourse vis-à-vis the natural environment and never took the initiative in terms of environmental policy; it rather responded to the emerging demands of Brazilian society and international pressures. Yet environmentalist thinking took advantage of a particular political context, as well as of a “Brazilianization” of the discourse about the ecological crisis. Instead of echoing European and North American environmental slogans, especially about climate change, environmental criticism in Brazil focused mainly on the protection of the Amazon, which symbolized the defense of national heritage and the country's tropical identity.

This centrality of the Amazon in environmental discourse is directly connected with the context of the military regime. On the one hand, the regime itself chose to make the region the focus of its policies and development propaganda. *Operação Amazônia* and its programs of forced modernization unwillingly gave the Amazon priority in the environmental agenda by provoking previously unseen waves of deforestation and land conflicts in the region. On the other hand, the (even among environmentalists) deeply anchored perception of the rainforest as the

home of uncountable natural treasures made this policy the symbol of the regime's perceived "entreguismo", that is, its propensity to sell off the nation's wealth to foreign interests. Calls for environmental protection could reach the widest public by dressing themselves in nationalist clothes, especially since the decline of the regime's popularity coincided with brutal falls in GDP, revealing Brazil's high vulnerability towards global market variations. In comparison to its federal government predecessors, the dictatorship had a foreign-friendly economic policy, which favored multinational companies with fiscal incentives, the easing of profit remittances and a lax distribution of mining concessions. These "presents" to international capitalism became perceived as responsible for Brazil's weak resistance to the global oil shock of 1973 and to the major debt crisis that hit the country by the late 1970s, followed by socially painful restructuring programs (Acker, Volkswagen in the Amazon 188-9).

When a vast movement for the return to democracy started to challenge the military regime in the 1980s, Henfil published a new drawing of the Brazilian flag (fig. 2), inspired by the previous one (fig. 2), in support of the election of a constitutional assembly (Henfil 87). In the picture, the flag's green background is being refilled by women and men acting together to replant forest trees. This time it is human beings rather than a bulldozer carrying gold nuggets in wheelbarrows, bringing this gold back where it belongs: to the nation's common heritage, symbolized by the flag's rhombus becoming yellow again. People are also encrusting the stars back in the "deep sky light" (the flag's blue, central circle) and carefully redrawing the rhombus' outline. While the previous drawing equaled nature's destruction with the decline of Brazil as a nation, the new drawing represents the nation's reconstruction as a collective task tightly intertwined with the recovering of biodiversity, landscapes and environmental wealth. It conveys an idea of Brazil as a "splendid" but fragile "cradle", whose destiny is deeply linked to the survival of nature. After the fall of the military regime, this idea made its way into the foundations of the new republic, when the Brazilian constitution of 1988

became one of the first in the world to include a chapter dedicated to the preservation of the environment.

Just two months after the day the constitution was adopted, the Amazonian rubber-taper Chico Mendes was assassinated by rural landlords. A symbol of the conjunction between environmental protection and the fight for social justice, Mendes became thereafter the first global ecological martyr, and for the Brazilian left a national hero (Keck). His political beatification marks an important change in Brazilian political ecology. The narrative of green patriotism and defense of the national heritage moved from the center to the margins of environmental discourse which, after the process of democratization, became increasingly obsessed with the problem of social inequalities. The military regime's politics of "conservative modernization" of the agrarian sector, combining technological progress with land concentration to build up a monoculture export economy, had strongly aggravated inequalities in the country (Minc 66; Harnecker 24). It produced systemic misery by rarifying land and diminishing the demand for a rural workforce, pushing millions of landless rural workers to migrate to urban areas, where they gathered in peripheral districts lacking basic infrastructure, widely known as favelas. Against the background of this social emergency, the political landscape of the new-born Brazilian democracy was characterized by a powerful return of the left and the rise of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), a party which had emerged out of workers' strikes in the late 1970s and was highly porous to social movements. The PT also gained a new political ally, the Partido Verde (PV), founded in 1986 by figures of the far-left armed resistance to the military regime, to be the electoral expression of socially concerned environmentalism. The PV rapidly achieved decent polling performances, comparable in some Brazilian states to the electoral results of Western European Green Parties, and reached a 20% peak at national level in the 2010 presidential election. [9] But its growth within governing institutions went along with a slow (and by now fully completed) drift towards political opportunism, away from its ideological substance, and ultimately into oblivion.

The social turn of the environmental movement by the time of democratization is convincingly depicted by Hochstetler and Keck in Greening Brazil, which also see it as the result of a dense collaboration between environmental organizations and other kinds of social activism (109-115). Such collaboration could ferment and grow in particular during the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which, besides being a major event in global environmental diplomacy, constituted a previously unseen forum for civil society and NGOs. Rio 92 revealed to the world not only the vitality of Brazil's associative environmentalism, but also its large repertoire of mobilization, which, besides rain forest protection, increasingly included other concerns such as air quality, soil sustainability, rivers and especially the fight against large-scale dams, as well as marine and coastal pollution. Rio 92 also brought attention to socially vulnerable populations that were highly exposed to environmental risk, and to the importance of environmental justice for building more inclusive forms of citizenship. Over the 1990s and 2000s, two major grassroots networks that had themselves emerged towards the end of the military regime would play a pivotal role in the articulation of the environmental justice discourse in Brazil: the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB), representing rural communities affected by the building of large dams, and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), fruit of the occupations of unproductive land estates by landless farmers (Wright and Wolford; Vainer).

The MST became Brazil's biggest rural mass-movement, performing not only protest and squatting actions all over the country but also creating schools, popular universities, farming cooperatives and agrarian research programs. Initially defending family agriculture without carrying a conscious environmental discourse, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has increasingly reinvented itself as a major promoter of sustainable and organic farming (Barcellos). This communication strategy grounded in environmentally sound everyday practices recalls the discourse of Brazilian indigenous organizations, which, like many other native American groups, gained international support for their cause in the 1990s

thanks to their successful self-representation as guardians of global natural heritage (Acker et al. 8). Since early 2019, both the MST and indigenous leaders have stood at the frontline of the socio-environmentalist resistance to the federal government of Jair Bolsonaro. The mandate of this president, who openly supports violations against (constitutionally protected) conservationist legislation as well as criminal attacks against indigenous land, environmental activists and civil servants, is the biggest political challenge posed to Brazilian environmentalism since the end of the military dictatorship (Acker, "Où va le Brésil?").

### Endnotes

- [1] Lima 1999, Franco and Drummond 2008, Murari 2009.
- [2] See Vidal 2002.
- [3] See for example the use of the « Bandeirante » memory in the political propaganda of President Juscelino Kubitschek (Vidal 2002, 296).
- [4] See Garfield 2001.
- [5] See Cândido 1981, and Murari 2009.
- [6] See Ostos
- [7] For this and the following, see Acker 2017)
- [8] See Fraser 2000 and Gonçalves 1997.
- [9] By then the party had distanced itself from the left and was no longer competing in coalitions with the PT.

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