

The Dark Heart of Amazonia

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Brazil has always been an inward-looking country. The national consciousness is transfixed on the mystery of Amazonia, the nation's own dark heart. And it has been the abiding dream of generations to conquer the country, to open that heart. In the past the lust for adventure and sudden wealth, the lure of the wilderness, drew some over the water highways to the outposts of the gem seekers. But no great number of Brazilians ever penetrated the Amazon region. It was always too difficult, the forest too resistant.

The sun comes suddenly each day over the Amazon: It warms the gliding brown rivers, the veins of the living forest that feed the giant trees. It gives the jungle back its voice, muted by the night.

The howler monkey, the toucan, an infinite variety of parrots, macaws, blue and green parakeets in huge clouds—all contribute to the babble through the day. The light of the sun penetrates only into the top of the dense mata as it pierces the upper currents of the sea. Below it is always dark. There the tapir and armadillo root along old trails and follow the swift, hornless deer to the light at the banks of the rivers which drain the huge Amazonian Basin that eons ago was an inland sea.

Amazonia—by which we mean the basin, the forest (oldest on the planet), and the rivers that drain it—is rich in animal and plant life. But man is only sparsely represented. Like the animals, he seeks the rivers, where there is light and space. He proclaims his presence with color. The pastels of the Portuguese colonial period, pale blues and bright pinks, color the houses and public buildings in Marabá along the Tocantins River, in Itaituba along the Tapajós, and as far west as Porto Velho on the Madeira. The rivers are the highways through the jun-

gle. Generations of Brazilian pioneers, the rough and ruthless Indian slavers known as the bandeirantes, the diamond and gold hunters, the rubber gatherers, made their way west and north into the farthest reaches of the forest right up to the frontiers of Peru and Bolivia.

The dream of conquering the interior edged closer to reality during the five years General Emilio Garrastazu Médici was in power in Brazil. During the Médici years and the years immediately preceding them, Brazil experienced an immense expansion of its highway system. The number of paved miles tripled between 1964 and 1972. Brazil's highway network became the best, the most extensive, in Latin America.

But it was the so-called "pioneer roads"—Cuiabá-Santarem, Belem-Brasília, and the Transamazonic—which really fueled the imagination of Brazilians. The Transamazonic in particular provided the impulse for a new drive westward. It would be difficult to understate the psychological impact the Transamazonic had on the Brazilian mind. Brazil's highway director, Eliseu Resende, described it as "a vigorous compulsion idea, arousing and multiplying energies, intentions, enthusiasms and encouraging confidence in Brazil's future."

The Transamazonic, completed in December, 1973, runs 3,355 miles, from the Atlantic Ocean to the frontier with Peru, through the heart of the world's largest and densest forest. To Brazilians it was not just another road, but the instrument for the conquest of Amazonia. The Transamazonic is best appreciated from the air, as is the Amazonian forest itself, which runs dark green, unchanging, in every direction. The *selva* is like the sea, and yet the Brazilians have plowed the sea with the Transamazonic, a long slash of red earth that runs straight and unwavering to the horizon.

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The Transamazonic was not built merely to satisfy the national vainglory, or even to lay bare the mystery of Amazonia. There was a practical, a virtual life-and-death, imperative behind it. Amazonia was viewed as the promised land for millions of Brazilians, the wretched inhabitants of the arid and unyielding Northeast.

Over thirty million Brazilians live in the Northeast, the overwhelming majority in grinding poverty. They are subjected to frequent drought and subsequent famine. They are victimized by an almost medieval array of diseases, including bubonic plague, Chagas disease, tuberculosis, and schistosomiasis. In relation to the world food crisis, the Northeast has been designated the only major crisis area in Latin America.

In June, 1970, after a visit to the Northeast, then suffering through one of the worst droughts of its blighted history, President Medici said: "I came here to see with my own eyes the drought of this year, and now I've seen the drama of the Northeast. I've seen suffering and I've seen misery that never ends. I cannot accept this. I cannot allow it. I can only say that all this must begin to change."

Few doubted General Medici's sincerity at that time, or his will to act. The Transamazonic was built over the next three years, and the National Integration Plan was conceived. The National Colonization and Agrarian Reform Institute (INCRA) was given control over 2.3 million square kilometers. It was given the task of moving 100,000 families, most from the Northeast, over the Transamazonic into the interior by 1975. Among the encouragements were land, seed, fertilizers, and counsel from INCRA agronomists. And the settlers came (though not in the great numbers anticipated), stimulated by an unprecedented barrage of propaganda and endless newspaper stories about the hard but satisfying life on the frontier.

Through the Medici years the idea of the individual pioneer flourished in Brazil, possibly as it never had before. The new pioneer—no longer the diamond hunter or tin prospector or the itinerant rubber gatherer—was the small farmer, the settler. He was to tame the Amazon region and integrate that vast territory into the rest of the country. Over the next decade hundreds of thousands of resolute men and women would clear the land, raise crops and families, and people the wilderness. It was a romantic notion; it exalted an heroic figure in Brazil.

Then, on March 15, 1974, President Medici left office, and the bubble burst. Stories about the Transamazonic and the new Northern Perimeter Road, which arcs from east to west beneath the Venezuelan frontier north of the Amazon River, disappeared from the newspapers and from the glossy picture magazines that are so popular in Brazil. The silence on the settlement program was

profound. It was evident that General Ernesto Geisel, Brazil's new president, was thinking different thoughts about the interior and about the Medici government's efforts in encouraging the populating of the region. General Geisel is a quiet, undemonstrative man. He took the glory out of the conquest and emphasized the seamy side of life on the frontier.

In a report published last spring the Geisel government noted that the main effect of the Transamazonic highway and the immigration it encouraged was to turn the old towns of the interior into "foci of delinquency." Altamira, Itaituba, Humaitá—originally established by diamond hunters and tin miners—were swollen to ten times their normal size. They are crime-ridden, disorderly places, without sanitary facilities adequate to the size of their populations.

The settlement program was criticized as disorganized and inefficient. Many settlers, the report said, were placed on land too far from the road, in deep isolation from the towns and their fellow settlers. Others complained that they received rotten seed from INCRA just before planting time. Many have gone deeply into debt, would like to leave but cannot.

Thousands of settlers from southern Brazil who migrated to Altamira and other towns along the road have already returned home, disillusioned. Nor was the Medici government's propaganda really effective. According to a confidential government report, in the four years since intensive settlement activity was begun, only five thousand families were settled along the entire extension of the Transamazonic. Thus, though it was never stated publicly, the Medici administration's efforts were regarded as a failure, and the Geisel people indicated they had no intention of compounding them.

A new policy was devised by the new interior minister, Mauricio Rangel Reis, and the agriculture minister, Allysson Paulinelli. The land in the interior was to be given to those who could make it produce the most. In a published interview Mr. Paulinelli said: "Our hope is that the settlers or companies be given land according to their capacity to make it productive in such a way that it will provide sufficient profit for the establishment and maintenance of a stable economy. We want to avoid the nomadic type of colonization. . . ."

The new emphasis, then, was an agrobusiness and away from individual settlers or farmers of the sort encouraged into the backlands by nearly all previous governments, and most emotionally by the Medici government. Mr. Paulinelli's advisor, Bento Porto, was quoted by a local economic journal in Rio as follows: "If a colonizer from the south arrives with fifty thousand cruzeiros [at the time about \$7,500], he will get a piece of land, a better one and more easily than a colonist from the Northeast who has, let us say, only ten thousand cruzeiros." It seemed

that Billie Holiday's dictum, "Them that gots, gets," would be literally fulfilled.

Mr. Porto has been the bluntest explicator of government policy: "Where the settler is, there is social intransquillity. [Suddenly, the pioneer was less than noble.] We will continue only with the farmer who produces the most, who permits profit." The government has been turning over vast tracts of land to large agroindustries, most of them with headquarters in Sao Paulo, Brazil's financial capital, as it squeezes the little farmer by enforcing laws that raise taxes on low-yielding properties. Predictably, implementation of the new policy has produced conflicts and a number of violent clashes. This is because the federal police and army have helped the large companies expel settlers from their lands. Most of these incidents have occurred in Goiás, Mato Grosso, Acre, Minas Gerais, and Para, where an estimated 750,000 settlers, subsistence farmers for the most part, are in danger of losing their land. Many have already been run off, and this has moved certain members of the Catholic Church closer to an open confrontation with the government.

In August, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) reprinted an article published in the far west state of Acre entitled "Orientation on the Problem of the Land." It was signed by the Bishop of Acre and Purus, Dom Moacyr Grechi, and twelve priests of the prelacy. It stated quite clearly the Acre church's position toward the struggle over the lands. The church, the article said, "denounces . . . INCRA, the Federal Police, the Military Police, the Secretary of Security, for the arbitrary acts committed against workers." Dom Moacyr described the situation as "grave," warned that those people expelled from their holdings were left "without perspective for survival." He referred to the violence with which the settlers were being evicted, the lack of respect by the authorities for "the dignity of the person, or existing law."

The church in Acre is arguing against the government's policy, not only from a moral position, but from a legal one as well. It has called upon INCRA to fulfill its "principal mission," which is "to protect those working the land (colonists, settlers, seringueiros [rubber workers], etc.). . . . The principal interest of this organ is to put the man on the land." The article referred to a federal law, signed in 1964 by General Humberto Castello Branco and later amended by General Medici. The law, the article states, "guarantees the right to a unit land to whomsoever resides on it habitually for a year and a day, dedicating himself to the effective cultivation of the land."

Though the CNBB gave Dom Moacyr's article a boost by circulating part of it nationally through its

weekly bulletin, it has done little more. This is not surprising. The current policy of the Church hierarchy in Brazil is toward reconciliation with the military government. But many clergymen, especially those in the harsher and more remote regions of the country, where the government's arbitrariness is most evident, are not in accord with this policy. They regard it as a compromise, in the pejorative sense.

The Brazilian Church has for most of its history been a conservative institution, tending at the higher levels to collaborate with conservative governments and movements. Yet it has always suffered a coterie of reformists and a few revolutionaries. These people have rarely been found near the levers of power, and often they were foreigners. Brazilian priests, Emanuel de Kadt wrote, "cultivate an exalted priestly ideal, of angelic spirituality." They also tend to be inured to the basic injustices of the Brazilian social system in the rural areas. Foreign priests, whose numbers have been increasing as vocations have diminished in Brazil in recent years, come, see, and are usually appalled. They are regarded as potential troublemakers by the Brazilian government. (The most celebrated case was that of Father François Jacques Jentel, a French priest who sided with settlers in his parish in Mato Grosso against the incursions of CODEARA, a large cattle and timber company. For his efforts he was sentenced by a military court to ten years in prison in 1973. He was released after spending several months in jail, and deported. In 1971 CODEARA was charged with holding over a thousand peons in virtual slavery.)

Certainly the public position of the Church toward the conflicts developing in the Brazilian backlands is, from a moral or ethical standpoint, ambivalent. The hierarchy can be criticized for this and for refusing to confront the government on its continuing refusal to concede to Brazilians their basic human rights. Political repression, censorship, and torture continue to be practiced by agents of the military government, though admittedly to a lesser extent than in previous years. If blame is to be placed for the current situation in the interior, however, it would more rightly be placed on the government. The Church sins by omission. It is not really so powerful a force in Brazil as many within it would like to believe. And, unlike the government, it tolerates the dissidents in its ranks and refuses to censure them.

It was the new government of General Ernesto Geisel that changed the policy of years. If the Medici regime can be faulted as bumbling and ineffectual, at least it sought to effect a definite social good: to grant relief to the Northeast by depopulating it. Mr. Bento's promise to cleave to the rich southerner at the expense of the desperate land-hungry northeasterner represents a decision made by the new government that goes against the moral imperative to assist the people of the Northeast.