Resistance beyond the Frontier: Concepts and Policies for the Protection of Isolated Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon

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Isolated indigenous peoples, also referred to as "uncontacted" or people living in "voluntary isolation," evoke a curious mixture of fascination, perplexity, and anxiety on behalf of the different agents and actors that seek to understand, represent, and defend them. For national governments, isolated peoples are unwitting—and often unwilling—citizens who live beyond the reach and control of the state, whose territories often hold precious natural resources, and yet who are particularly vulnerable to the epidemic diseases, social ills, and economic depredations that so-called civilization brings. For social scientists, such groups are "people against the state," government subjects who refuse to be governed, unconquered collectives who refused to be colonized, ethnographic subjects who cannot be ethnographized. For the neighbouring "contacted" indigenous communities who share territory and sometimes linguistic intelligibility or kinship ties with them, "isolated" peoples are wary and evasive brethren who sometimes prove to be fatal enemies. For the broader public and the sensational news media that exploits the latest sightings, conflict, or "contact," they are noble savages who invoke romantic notions about an idealized human past or conjure colonial myths about "first contact" (Milanez and Shepard 2017).

As Amazonian countries have expanded road networks, extractive economies, and agricultural activities to the far reaches of their frontiers in the twenty-first century, conflicts and contacts with such formerly autonomous and elusive peoples have become increasingly common and complex problems for government agencies, local communities, and the various researchers and organizations who work in these regions. At the same time, sensational photos and videos of these "contact" situations have spread quickly on the internet, generating widespread popular concern and vehement, albeit varied, opinions.

The tense moments of "first contact" between government indigenous agents and a small group of men from an isolated population on the Xinane River in Brazil in 2014 were captured on amateur video and soon went viral. An agent of the *Fundação Nacional do Índio* (National Indian Foundation—acronym Funai), Brazil's indigenous protection bureau, attempted to communicate with two young, naked men who made an unexpected appearance in the settled community of Simpatia: "*Shara! Shara! Katawe! Katawe!*" "Good / Beautiful! Go away!," the Funai agent repeated, using a few words in the Yaminawa language (see Giancarlo Rolando's article in this issue). This somewhat incoherent non sequitur, which the Xinane men received with understandable confusion and consternation, encapsulates the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in current knowledge, attitudes, and policies about and toward these enigmatic yet somehow paradigmatic indigenous peoples, dwelling just beyond the reach of a globalized, interconnected world.

This special issue of *Tipití* brings together the contributions of a diverse group of indigenous protection agents, indigenous representatives, anthropologists, lawyers, journalists, and scholars who gathered in Lima, Peru, in July 2017 for a special three-day debate on the rights, evolving threats, and protection policies for isolated indigenous peoples of the Amazon. The event, held during the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA)'s 2017 conference, was funded in part by support from the Kone Foundation of Finland, and led to the drafting, by multiple participants, of *Resolutions of the Special Debate on the Rights and Protection of Isolated Indigenous Peoples*, which is included as the first contribution to this special issue.

In addition to this introduction, and the *Resolutions*, the issue includes thirteen articles divided in two sections: peer-reviewed scholarly papers and additional contributions bringing

diverse voices and unique perspectives that both complement and challenge this scholarship. The authors include six current or former government indigenous protection agents from Brazil and Peru, three anthropologists, three indigenous-rights advocates and two indigenous representatives. The idea animating this special issue is to bring together, in a single venue, diverse voices, experiences, and opinions shaping current policies toward the protection of isolated indigenous peoples while shining light on emerging concerns, contradictions, and challenges in the hope of developing better informed and more effective policies for the growing threats that present themselves.

The issues affecting isolated indigenous peoples and the implementation of strategies for their protection encompass a wide array of disciplines, arenas of activity, national and international law, theoretical insights, scientific data, and cultural perspectives. Here, we highlight some of the most salient issues raised by different authors, including territoriality, the invisibility and vulnerability of isolated peoples, processes of civilization/colonization, terminology, law, collaboration across disciplines, neighbouring indigenous peoples' views, and the phenomenon of "contact."

Many of the contributions address the topic of territoriality. Guaranteeing their territory is the main condition for allowing isolated peoples to maintain their health, social integrity, autonomy, sovereignty and self-determination. Territoriality is also how their presence is often first announced, and how their vulnerability first presents itself. Isolated indigenous peoples have lived in regions remote from urban centers and transportation routes, often along national boundaries or in regions inaccessible to settlers, for decades, perhaps centuries, existing mostly off the radar of nation-states. However, as road networks and extractive projects expand into the remotest parts of the Amazon, these peoples are increasingly threatened by a wide range of both legal and illegal economic activities. Protection policies must focus first and foremost on identifying, delimiting, and defending these territories. Although technologies, techniques, and policies have evolved in this regard, pioneered especially by Funai's Department of Isolated Indians in Brazil, Amazonian countries are still a long way from having the adequate funding, manpower, and political will needed to defend these territories against growing threats (see the contributions by Antenor Vaz, Fabricio Amorim and Carlos Soria). The current pro-ranching, pro-mining, unabashedly racist and authoritarian administration in Brazil, led by president Jair Bolsonaro, represents an extraordinary threat to constitutional protections of Brazilian Indians, as well as other democratic institutions and the rule of law itself, protections that have been historically achieved through the political struggle of indigenous movements.

Another aspect several contributions touch on is the invisibility of isolated peoples. Because isolated peoples, by definition, are not amenable to dialogue or direct study, the only way to, in the first place, identify their presence, and later, gather information, is by observing their location, movements, vestiges, and whatever sparse details emerge from their rare interactions with other settled local populations. The contributions by José Carlos Meirelles and Roberto Narvaez detail different methods and strategies for gathering the most necessary and crucial information from a distance, without disturbing their way of life or subjecting them to the dangers of disease contagion. Narvaez, in particular, highlights the use of geographical information to track the movements of isolated peoples in Ecuador across their territory in relation to various endogenous resources and exogenous influences.

The question of vulnerability is also important, both in terms of susceptibility to contagious diseases (see Meirelles's contribution) and to exploitation and territorial invasion. But George Mentore shows how the invisibility, indeed the fundamental unknowability, of isolated peoples leads to approaches that are infantilizing and paternalistic. Are those agents who claim to act in the name of isolated peoples really protecting them, or defending their own positions of political and epistemological power? Peter Gow likewise turns the lens around on paternalizing attitudes to isolated peoples' supposed lack of agency, showing how their actions, decisions, and ultimate choice to engage in or retreat from contact result from a set of conscious strategies that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949) once referred to as "foreign policy."

Related to the question of power relations are the concepts of "civilization," colonization and conquest, and how these are understood by different actors. Both local nonindigenous and indigenous populations who live in close proximity to isolated peoples often look at them with pity, viewing them as living alone in the forest, hungry, afraid, without access to Western tools and clothes. In keeping with these views, their neighbors frequently express the hope

that they may be brought into the fold of civilization (and, often, Christian evangelicalism) so they can gain the comforts and benefits of modern life. However, Rolando observes that such civilizing discourses, typically associated with colonialism and conquest, are also found among neighboring Mastanahua populations who are interested in bringing the Xinane people to live with them in their villages and create kinship bonds with this linguistically and culturally related people. And yet notions of "civilization" also run in the opposite direction. For example, in the same article, Rolando, in collaboration with Mastanahua translators, carries out a detailed analysis of the videos that emerged from the Xinane "first contact," revealing the contradictory, confusing, and deeply asocial behaviour of Funai agents as perceived and commented on by the Xinane people. Felipe Milanez offers a decolonizing critique of the concept of "isolation" and state policies of "no-contact," drawing on the perspective of political ecology and, in particular, the concepts of sovereignty and necropolitics from Achille Mbembe. In this light, the "isolation" of remote indigenous peoples can be seen as belonging to a broader, global continuum of territorial resistance being led by diverse environmental justice movements. Political ecology, in this sense, contradicts the notion of "isolation" by highlighting these peoples' insertion in and resistance to the capitalist/colonial world system.

Such attempts to understand isolated peoples' responses, reactions, and choices raise deeper epistemological questions about how the very terminology used to describe these people tends to build and solidify categories that may not always aid in designing better policies. Many of the categories in use today carry a colonial inheritance and have paternalizing and infantilizing implications. Fabricio Amorim highlights the variety of situations in the field today, trying to understand different forms of indirect communication between isolated peoples and various outside actors, while pointing out the sometimes negative consequences of applying rigid bureaucratic categories to the diversity of pressing situations concerning isolated peoples. In a similar vein, Luis Felipe Torres demonstrates the difficulties of applying idealized state policies in concrete situations of inter-ethnic contact, analyzing the history of interactions between the settled Yine and their isolated Mascho Piro "brothers" in Madre de Dios, Perú. Torres emphasizes the importance of taking indigenous interpretations of contact, protection, and isolation into account in developing protection strategies on the ground.

Another main concern of the papers presented here is the patchwork of national and international laws and principles that governmental protection agencies in Brazil, Peru, and elsewhere have brought to bear on the legal context of isolated peoples, and the justification of their actions of defence. According to Carlos Soria, the principle of "no contact" is a fundamental pillar of isolated peoples' right to autonomy. However, the no-contact policy does not imply a passive or negligent attitude of "leave them alone." Rather, the state prohibits private individuals and private organizations from engaging in "contact" activities that may prove dangerous to all parties. At the same time, the state reserves the prerogative to engage in proactive measures to secure isolated peoples' territories and, in the case of emergencies (especially when epidemic diseases are involved), to take preventative medical actions.

Though various authors reinforce the central role of state actors, working within a national and international legal framework, in protecting the territorial and human rights of isolated peoples, the contributions as a whole emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration among official protection agencies, legal specialists, anthropological and scientific communities, and local populations, especially neighbouring indigenous communities. A clear example of the benefits and risks of such collaboration is provided by Opas and Trigoso in their contribution regarding the Mashco Piro people of Peru. The objectives and approaches of these different actors, as well as nongovernmental organizations, extractive industries, and religious missionaries, toward isolated peoples rest on radically different ways of conceiving "otherness," making cohesive local responses extremely difficult, fraught, and inherently conflictive. In this sense, and again inverting the typical direction of the "civilizing" discourse, Rolando observes Xinane men during "first contact" footage rubbing their armpits and blowing in the direction of the strange white interlocutors, a practice used when encountering other dangerous beings, thus activating cultural understandings about the body and the senses in relations with cultural "others."

Lucas Manchineri, Pirjo Virtanen, and Maria Luiza Ochoa, in discussing Manchineri people's advocacy on behalf of their isolated Mashco Piro brethren, show how these different approaches can nonetheless be taken as a starting point for creating a space of negotiation from which politics and practices toward isolated peoples can be developed, specific for each

situation in dialogue with neighbouring indigenous peoples. Make Turu, a Matis leader who was critical of Funai's actions regarding conflicts between his people and the isolated Korubo, likewise emphasizes the role of local indigenous peoples' experience, historical knowledge, and cultural insights in the development and implementation of protection policies toward isolated peoples. He also highlights the crimes committed by the Brazilian state during the military dictatorship of 1964–1988 against his people, the enduring trauma they produced, and the need for reparations.

Although we lack direct ethnographic knowledge and standard anthropological tools for studying isolated peoples, there is much that can be surmised about these peoples' lifeways by drawing on ethnographic studies of other lowland South American peoples, as well as from the accounts of neighbouring indigenous peoples concerning their isolated "brethren." Both Gow and Rolando deconstruct the categories of "contact" and "isolation" as apparently diametrically opposed outcomes, leading to high-profile polemics between those advocating for "controlled contact" and those defending "no contact" as the ultimate goal. As Luis Felipe Torres notes, the polarization between "isolation" and "contact" found in Western approaches breaks down when indigenous perspectives on alterity are considered. Several authors in this issue turn toward indigenous models of social relations, such as trade and warfare, to develop more anthropologically appropriate and practically realistic models of interactions among diverse peoples. For example, Gow describes the indigenous concept of "emergence from the forest" as both an ecological and cultural category that helps bridge the gap between isolation and contact.

Voluntary isolation can be seen as an aspect of indigenous Amazonian warfare, a topic that has been of perennial importance to the ethnography of the region. Violence among neighbouring indigenous peoples, as well as the violence exacted on them by the state and other outside actors, all fit into what Gow, borrowing from Lévi-Strauss, refers to as "foreign policy." In this sense, the harsh dichotomy of isolation/contact can be seen instead as a shift in foreign policy from warfare to trade or back again, depending on changing political contexts. Rolando further points out how the outside world is "obsessed with ethnonyms and the fixation of boundaries," while, on the other hand, the young Xinane men are "interested in their expansion, by trying to figure out if the people they have found will be 'really human.'"

Isolated indigenous peoples, of course, have their own reasons for avoiding or seeking out contact, and their own views of how to engage in productive relations with their neighbours and the encompassing society. These reasons may include economic (acquiring metal tools) and health concerns (contagion from exotic diseases) but also certainly involve social and cultural motivations that may be less apparent to outside agents than to their indigenous neighbours. Contrary to paternalistic notions about preserving isolated peoples as specimens of a lost human past, and challenging colonial myths about "first contact" (Milanez and Shepard 2017), isolated indigenous peoples themselves should ultimately be able to choose the degree and pace of their interactions with outsiders, another reason why guaranteeing territorial autonomy is crucial. This principle is the very epitome of self-determination, as enshrined in international declarations of indigenous peoples' rights, and should be the foundation of developing novel models for understanding and protecting isolated indigenous peoples in coming decades.

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