

Ensayos de Reseña/Review Essays

Disentangling Eden: Getting Development Right in the Amazon

Anthony Hall

- *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon*, by Candace Slater. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2002.
- *Balance is Beautiful: Assessing Sustainable Development in the Rain Forests of the Bolivian Amazon*, by Alan Jorge Bojanic Helbingen. University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, 2001.
- *Tranquilidad and Hardship in the Forest: Livelihoods and Perceptions of Camba Forest Dwellers in the Northern Bolivian Amazon*, by Arienne Bernadette Henkemans. University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, 2001.

Ever since Europeans first set foot in Amazonia during the sixteenth century, the region has been exploited by domestic and foreign outsiders for their own ends. Valuable timber species and minerals have been extracted for national and overseas consumption and widespread cattle ranching has been encouraged through generous government subsidies in the pursuit of 'modernization'. The Amazon frontier has also been used as a supposed 'safety-valve' to absorb poor and pressured farmers from other areas, populating border regions to consolidate territorial security for geo-political purposes of national integration and defence against foreign invasion. In this process of internal colonization and settlement, indigenous peoples and mixed-race traditional groups have borne the costs. Amerindians in the Amazon Basin have, until relatively recently, either been ravaged by induced conflict and disease or, along with other more recently arrived local populations, been largely ignored by policy-makers. Land ownership on the frontier has become increasingly concentrated while common property terrestrial and aquatic resources once governed by local populations are being gradually enclosed and appropriated by commercial interests. Deforestation has advanced rapidly in some places, reaching over 30 per cent in parts of southern Pará and Rondônia in Brazil, for example.

Other sections of the Amazon, however, including most of the Brazilian portion as well as the northern Bolivian Amazon examined in the volumes by Bojanic and Henkemans, have experienced much lower levels of destruction. Here, there are few roads, only small-scale logging activities and limited settler populations. In such areas, the local livelihoods of indigenous groups and mixed-race *cambas* (known as *caboclos* in Brazil) are sustained not by destructive logging or extensive slash-and-burn farming and cattle ranching. Rather, they are supported by a combination of extractivism (rubber, Brazil nuts, fruits, fish, etc.), subsistence agriculture and non-farm rural and urban activities. Developed originally by indigenous peoples and adapted by *cambas/caboclos*, these forms of land-use are considered

by many to represent a more sustainable alternative for Amazonia. In fact, they form the basis for most recent, innovative projects and programmes in the field of conservation-and-development aimed at small producers.

In her stimulating *Entangled Edens*, Candace Slater examines the myths, stories and oral histories of Amazonia to show how images of the region have always been used to serve the interests of outsiders bent on taking advantage of its wealth one way or another. Most adventurers have portrayed Amazonia as a hostile wilderness that had to be subdued. Conquistadors set the tone through accounts such as those of Carvajal in 1542 of aggressive warrior women, named 'Amazons' after the Greek legend, and of the frustrating search for El Dorado. Such a stereotyped view of Amazonia as a brutal 'green hell' in need of taming was perpetuated by later explorers, including Theodore Roosevelt, as he described his journey through the Amazon with Colonel Rondón. This view contrasted with that of naturalists such as Alexander von Humboldt and the awe-struck Henry Walter Bates, who saw Amazonia as a bountiful 'Second Eden' to be tapped for the benefit of modern, necessarily white civilization. Subsequently, Claude Lévi-Strauss sought redemption for modern, 'corrupt' and 'tarnished' civilization through the experience of Amazonian indigenous (but not other) groups that had learned to establish an equilibrium between land and people – a theme reflected in more recent debates on the nature of 'sustainable development'.

Development planners have seized upon these contrasting visions (or myths) to justify their own actions and priorities. During the 1960s, strategists such as General Golbery do Couto e Silva, architect of the Brazilian economic 'miracle', depicted the Amazon as a giant potential resource, a wilderness to be harnessed for modernization and national integration as part of a civilizing mission. With the limitations and huge social, economic and ecological costs of this blueprint model having been exposed during the 1980s and 90s, environmentalists have reverted to what Slater sees as an equally dangerous and potentially misleading image. This conceives of Amazonia essentially as 'a fragile rain forest on the brink of annihilation...(with) a long-standing focus on nature and a select cast of natural people (that) has shut the bulk of the population out of relevant dialogues and political processes that directly affect their lives' (p. 16). By focusing attention on the idealized, exotic minority of tribal indians, she suggests, the overwhelming majority of *cambas/caboclos* has been largely ignored by the outside world, while small settlers have been demonized as the main force driving deforestation in the Amazon.

There is much continued validity in Slater's eloquent analysis of the primacy of Amazonian nature in official discourse and of the limited acknowledgement given to the potentially constructive role of its local populations. However, her case is perhaps overstated in the present rapidly evolving context. Ten years ago it would have been valid to claim that *cambas/caboclos* and newer settlers were widely considered an archaic, frequently destructive remnant of a primitive past and thus irrelevant to the future of the region. But perceptions have become more sophisticated, as many academic studies, including the other two volumes considered in this review, clearly demonstrate. It is true that preserving the 'virginity' of the rainforest by keeping out human occupants continues to underpin a conception of environmental policy geared towards the setting up of protected areas such as national parks and biological reserves. Yet although protectionism is still an important and

necessary policy device, it is by no means the only approach put forward nowadays. 'Fences-and-fines' measures are expensive and difficult to enforce. Furthermore, they tend to ignore the need to support local livelihoods and provide positive incentives for the adoption of environmentally friendly activities. Increasingly, therefore, it is recognised that all categories of forest-dwellers and small farmers must eventually be incorporated into the environmental policy process through strategies that attempt to reconcile resource conservation with economic development and livelihood strengthening. To do otherwise would be to fly in the face of reality.

While Candace Slater reminds us of the continued potential dangers of adopting narrow and unilinear views of Amazonia based on persistent myths, the volumes by Henkemans and Bojanic are concerned with the practical implications of these conclusions. Both are PhD theses from the University of Utrecht, sponsored through the Programa Manejo de Bosques de la Amazonía Boliviana (PROMAB). Based on extensive field studies of local production systems in the northern Bolivian Amazon, they put forward cases for strengthening forest-based livelihoods as the central pivot for sustainable development strategies in the region. With a relatively small population of just 160,000 people (comprising 95 per cent mixed blood *camba* and only five per cent indigenous), the area has not been subjected to farmer settlement and is in the fortunate position of retaining 94 per cent of its rainforest intact.

Tranquilidad and hardship in the forest by Arienne Henkemans compares the production systems of *camba* populations working on forest concessions or *barracas* under a *patrón* and those living in independent peasant communities. She asks whether future development will be based on timber extraction and wage labour in concessions as the logging frontier expands. Alternatively, she considers whether more sustainable systems currently practiced at community level should be spread to act as a barrier against the advance of commercial forest interests and conserve natural resources while supporting the population. Applying the holistic 'sustainable livelihoods framework' developed in the UK, Henkemans focuses on the people's quest for *tranquilidad* (peace or harmony) as a livelihood objective. This encompasses the satisfaction of basic material needs as well as attainment of other less tangible goals such as security, welfare, autonomy and self-respect.

She concludes that agro-extractive systems producing rubber, Brazil nuts and other forest goods have the potential to build sustainable livelihoods more widely but that such measures must be carefully tailored to fit local circumstances, including socio-cultural norms, values and self-defined needs. However, progress could be frustrated by a vicious circle. Inadequate government support for health, education, training and marketing, as well as lack of financial capital and ill-defined property rights, drive young people to seek jobs in the city, thus depriving communities of the human capital necessary to make community-rooted sustainable development a viable option in the long term. This in turn leads to a lack of social cohesion and social identity, further frustrating development efforts. What is perhaps absent from the equation, however, is political capital, a dimension missing from the original sustainable livelihood framework 'capitals hexagon'. As the Brazilian rubber tappers showed during the 1990s, concerted grassroots action and campaigning with the assistance of non-governmental organizations and interna-

tional agencies can lead to the institutionalization of alternative sustainable development models, in their case through the setting up of 'extractive reserves'.

The study by Alan Bojanic, *Balance is Beautiful*, analyses the potential for reconciling the frequently conflicting aims of conservation, poverty alleviation and economic growth. The author uses an extended environmental social accounting matrix (ESAM) and cost-benefit analysis to examine the profitability of various forest-use options, namely, timber extraction, Brazil nut harvesting and cattle-ranching. The aim is to assess their sustainability by measuring increases in the output value of these activities, their impact on household incomes and on levels of environmental damage. According to Bojanic, there is no simple linear relationship between conservation, growth and poverty alleviation. A degree of 'balance' amongst these objectives can still be struck given the low population density and level of deforestation in this part of Amazonia. Realistically, however, it is recognised that there will be trade-offs in the form of some environmental costs if poverty alleviation is the prime development objective.

To the probable dismay of many environmentalists, the study finds that timber extraction offers the most potential for balancing the three aims mentioned above, as long as sustainable forest management practices are introduced and improved social welfare services provided by the government. 'Non-concentrating' economic growth could help minimise environmental degradation by encouraging income diversification, agroforestry and sustainable agriculture, although their potential is seen as limited at present given poorly developed markets and support structures. Furthermore, the author suggests, international transfer payments through the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) of the Kyoto Protocol could help support sustainable economic activities. However, it is by no means clear to what extent such mechanisms will be politically or financially viable.

The three volumes reviewed here are very welcome additions to the literature on Amazonia as it faces the twenty-first century. The world's largest remaining area of tropical rainforest with over 85 per cent still relatively undisturbed is, in many respects, a veritable Eden compared with its ravaged counterparts in South East Asia and West Africa. Yet commercial, social, economic and geo-political pressures on the region's ecosystems and local populations are certainly not diminishing. Ambitious, multi-billion dollar infrastructure development programmes such as *Avança Brasil* will undoubtedly accelerate the pace of change and environmental destruction, even if Nature proves to be more resilient than some doommerchants would have us believe. With this background in mind, the three volumes under review, considered together, provide a serious message to which politicians and policy-makers at both domestic and international levels should listen carefully:

Do not stereotype Amazonia for your own political ends, but acknowledge its inherent ecological and social diversity. Encourage the development of alternative resource-use models that promote regional economic development but also conserve the rainforest and support the livelihoods of its local peoples.

As the books reviewed here show, there is an urgent need to go beyond stereotypes and to consolidate alternative, more sustainable development models. These must respond to the multi-faceted needs of Amazonia's local populations in terms of income, employment and conservation while at the same time addressing regional

and national development priorities. This will require continued funding, domestic as well as international, backed up by political commitment. As a cautious optimist, this reviewer believes that the situation certainly is improving, albeit very slowly. There have been some notable individual projects and programmes that are beginning to successfully integrate local populations into non-destructive, forest-based economic activities, such as extractivism, agroforestry and ecotourism, for example. Yet these initiatives must be scaled up if they are to have a significant regional impact. At the same time, steps must be taken to ensure that such increased financial resources do not disappear into the black hole of burgeoning bureaucracies. What has been lacking, to some extent across all sectors (state, civil society, private and international) dealing with the Amazon, is the technical and organizational capacity to implement innovative solutions in an efficient, effective and consistent fashion. Perhaps this is the greatest challenge facing Amazonia today.

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Anthony Hall is Reader in Social Planning in Developing Countries in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. <a.l.hall@lse.ac.uk>

Contribuyentes / Contributors

Eugenia Scarzanella
Dipartimento di Politica, Istituzioni, Storia
Strada Maggiore 45
40125 Bologna
ITALIA

Miriam Alfie Cohen
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana –
Azcapotzalco, Departamento de Sociología
Retorno Valle Real 1B casa 2
Col. Hacienda de las Palmas
Naucalpan
MÉXICO, D.F. 53762

Jan Knippers Black
School of International Policy Studies
Monterey Institute of International Studies
425 Van Buren Street
Monterey, CA 93940
USA

Antoni Kapcia
School of Humanities, Languages, Soc. Sci.
University of Wolverhampton,
Stafford Street,
Wolverhampton, WV1 1SB
UNITED KINGDOM

Nicolaas T. M. Vink
Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen
Postbus 95 001
1090 HA Amsterdam
NEDERLAND

Victor Bretón Solo de Zaldivar
Universidad de Lleida
Plaza Victor Siurana 1
25003 Lleida
ESPAÑA

Peter Clegg
Faculty of Economics and Social Science
University of the West of England
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol BS16 1QY
UNITED KINGDOM

Jon Jonakin
Tennessee Technological University
Dept of Economics, Finance and Marketing
Box 5083
Cookeville, TN 38505
USA

Anthony Hall
Department of Social Policy
London School of Economics
Houghton Street,
London WC2A 2AE
UNITED KINGDOM

Lomarsh Roopnarine
Social Sciences Division
University of the Virgin Islands RR2
10,000 Kingshill
VIRGIN ISLANDS 00850