

THE FLAG of Spain that Columbus planted on a guileless San Salvador has long cast its shadow on primitive peoples in every corner of the globe. World history since 1492 is a black record of simple communities everywhere being deprived of their lands and their livelihoods by ruthless invaders from other continents.

It might have been thought that, by the twentieth century, with little of the planet remaining to be "discovered", the years of the predator and the landgrabber would be over, but recent events in Brazil and its neighbouring states show that this was a forlorn hope. Now, apparently, it is the turn of the semi-nomadic Indians of the Amazon rainforest to be trampled under the jack-boot as government industrialisation and "colonisation" projects swallow up their natural habitat.

Such is the pace and extent of the destruction that tribes such as the Yanomami, the Waorani, the Kayapo and the Tukano are facing virtual extinction. Indeed, the very future of the rainforest now seems to be under serious threat.

One man roused to action by the devastation and repression now apparently in full spate in Brazil is George Monbiot. In 1989 he made an extensive tour of the country, seeing at first hand the extent of the human and ecological tragedy being played out in its sub-tropical hinterland and attempting, as he put it, "to find the real villains" responsible.

He found that the picture obtained on the spot was more revealing than that gained at long distance from the newspapers and television. Although cattle-ranching, government-sponsored settlement and dam-building were, indeed, gobbling up significant areas of the rainforest, these factors were paling in significance against others whose appetite for land were potentially much greater. Armies of private settlers, for example, were flooding into the basin from other parts of Brazil, carving out tens of thousands of homesteads from the virgin forest; gigantic swathes of destruction were being caused by large-scale road-building, with scant regard for the environment, by the armed forces; and an exploding timber industry was threatening to outdo everything else in the devastation it

TRAGEDY IN THE AMAZON

Amazon Watershed,
By George Monbiot,
Michael Joseph, London.

was leaving in its wake.

Investigating the first of these factors and probing the underlying reasons why hundreds of thousands of peasant colonists should move from their traditional homes and make the long and weary trek into the Amazon, Monbiot found that they are not doing so through choice. Most of them are leaving more fertile land than they are finding in the Amazon, where only 7% of the soils are suitable for peasant agriculture.

THE REASON for this seemingly paradoxical behaviour, Monbiot found, is that the peasants are not so much migrants as refugees. They are being forced off their family smallholdings by landlords more concerned with maximizing profits than with the well-being of their tenants.

Monbiot sees land and power in Brazil as indivisible. The political control of the countryside has long been exercised by the landowners, from whose ranks come the politicians and the military chiefs who run the country. In recent times, thousands of peasants have seen their tiny holdings declared by the authorities to be the property of the large landowners. In consequence, 1% of the landowners now own 43% of the land, an area the size of India is used for nothing but financial speculation and 35 million rural peasants have no land of their own.

The peasants have been fighting back, and Workers' Party candidates have been contesting elections, but the landlords have responded by expelling the peasants from their land and using "death squad" tactics to induce them to leave. Between 1980 and 1990 over one thousand peasants, as well as many of the priests, lawyers and union leaders aiding them, have been murdered. With no help from the authorities - for practical purposes the tool of the landowners - the persecuted peasants have

had no alternative but to accept they are the victims of a twentieth century "enclosure movement" - and take to the road. Some move to the shanty-towns of the big cities, but the overwhelming majority make the trek to the Amazon.

MONBIOT looked especially at the state of Maranhao, in the north-east, where more peasants are murdered or dispossessed than in any other state. His experiences at the hands of a brutal police force and of the hired thugs of some of the big landbarons, leave no doubt about the repression and lawlessness that stalk large areas of Brazil to-day.

Monbiot also spent much time in areas of the Amazon being devastated by gangs of goldminers. Here, more and more migrants join a modern-day goldrush that rarely benefits the participants but inevitably destroys the land of the Indian tribes. To produce a few ounces of gold, the rivers are polluted, the game gets driven away, the areas cultivated for food-supply are laid to waste and diseases brought by the outsiders increase the suffering of true natives to breaking point.

So the Amazon is the cockpit of a double tragedy: of dispossessed peasants from developed parts of Brazil being forced to quit their tiny landholdings and, in turn, to threaten the destruction of the rainforest and, with it, the existence of the primitive tribes who have their homes there.

Having investigated the problem, Monbiot puts forward a solution. He suggests that the first measure required is "agrarian reform" under which the peasants would be granted secure titles to their land, this being followed by changes in the planning laws and restrictions on timber-cutting and other forest-destroying activities. Such measures would, no doubt, provide some relief but, even in their total effect, they would do little to correct the grotesque concentration of land ownership which he rightly sees as the major underlying factor in the grim condition of the Brazilian peasant. But no effective improvement can be expected until the vast near-feudal estates are broken up.

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