

Opening words –5th Agrocultures colloquium – Oxford, 31 Jan 2020

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Good morning (or I could say *bore da*, in the indigenous language of Wales, where I live). My name is Antonio Ioris, coordinator of the Agrocultures Network, together with my good colleague Vitale, and on behalf of the organisers, I would like to welcome you to Oxford and to this colloquium.

It is not possible for me to salute each one of you individually, therefore if you allow me I would like to pay my respects to His Excellency, Chief Raoni Metuktire, the moral head of state of Brazil and a key intellectual and political reference for the rest of us gathered here. It is a great honour to have you here, sir, as well as Ms Joênia Wapichana, member of the Brazilian Parliament, chief Megaron Txucurramãea, chief Davi Kopenawa and all the other indigenous and non-indigenous authorities.

My friends, this 3-day event brings together peasant and indigenous representatives, activists, artists, civil society members, writers, students and academics with interest and work in the Amazon Region. Its main goal is to discuss and celebrate the wonderful diversity of life, socio-ecological experiences and interdependencies between humans and the rest of nature in the Amazon. Another important objective is to allow us to reaffirm our indignation and our deep anger with the trend of injustices and devastation caused by a perverse alliance of spurious economic interests, political manipulation and bad, irresponsible academic work. I am going to say more about those issues in a minute.

First, I would like to thank the large group of colleagues involved in the preparation of this colloquium, especially Laura Rival of Oxford University and Marcos Colon of Amazônia Latitute. Together we acknowledge the wonderful contribution of so many partners from various other universities, research centres, civil society organisations, and numerous independent scholars and activists. Thank you so much, this even is the result of your firm commitment and collective, intelligent effort. Well done.

This is the fifth workshop of the Agrocultures International Network, which started in 2018 as a mechanism to foster an improved, horizontal dialogue between academics and non-academics concerned with socio-spatial changes, subjectivities, identities and interpersonal relations that shape agricultural and other economic frontiers in the Amazon. Previous events took place in Cardiff (my university), Cuiabá, Tabatinga-Leticia and Porto Velho. More than 400 individuals from 12 countries attended those earlier meetings, which have so far resulted in four books, a collection of papers, non-technical reports, podcasts, interviews, artistic works, pictures, documentaries and many other contributions. Our approach has been critical, innovative, multidisciplinary, engaged and collaborative. I invite you to visit our webpage, where the content of this meeting will also be posted.

[Images of the website, events & publications]

Today, the 31st of January, is definitely a historical date. First, because the United Kingdom will have its membership of the European Union terminated and the nation is now charting on unknown waters and it is very likely that old and new tensions will arise. However, and

more significantly, this is also a very important day because we will have the chance and the responsibility to interrogate the crucial dilemmas faced by the Amazon and suggest more inclusive, long-term alternatives to those questions.

This meeting in Oxford was planned three years ago, when we applied for financial support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Moreover, at that point we could hardly imagine how relevant and opportune this day was going to be, academically and politically. We all know that the present moment is one of great risks, major challenges and almost incomprehensible hostility. The nine countries that share the Amazon certainly have many problems and serious obligations towards the region, but their governments prefer to invest energy and resources on the perpetuation of troubles, instead of trying to understand and address the fundamental causes and the major consequences of impacts and growing inequalities.

After two years of intense debate and rich conversations stimulated by the Agrocultures initiative, something is very clear for us: this is the moment to say 'no!', 'enough', 'stop!', things have to change significantly because the Amazon is much bigger, more complex, more beautiful and more important than our political and economic rulers seem to believe.

In many ways, the Amazon is the most crucial experiment of global capitalism today, where irrational, anti-people, anti-nature and anti-intelligence measures are being adopted, regardless of the will and the needs of most of its population. In the last decades, the old and perverse mechanisms of conquest and colonisation were revitalised in the name of economic growth and national integration. That has resulted in a trail of violence, stupidity and systemic abuses associated with new roads, dam construction, mining, garimpo, timber extraction and, more than anything else, agribusiness. In more recent years, a new round of projects and market-friendly conservation initiatives under the hegemony of global financial capital is threatening even the small concessions secured through a difficult struggle since the 1980s, including the establishment of a few national parks and the recognition of some indigenous lands and peasant areas.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me briefly mention another embarrassing and thorny question. Today we find ourselves in the oldest English-speaking university in the world, considered the best academic centre in the planet, a place that has produced many Noble prize-winners and for more than a thousand years has offered a monumental contribution in fields such as philosophy, anthropology, biology, geography, history, etc. However, these walls and these colleges are also very guilty of the continuous misrepresentation and mismanagement of the Amazon. Our treasured Oxford University, as well as all the other universities represented here, encapsulate the failures of Western science and the incompetence of Western academics when they insist in maintaining an arrogant position of superiority and decide to ignore the political core of the problems we are going to discuss during this event.

The Amazon has always been the product of political interaction, for many centuries, but that has been amplified enormously and against the majority of the population, which means in practice that we are running out of time in the search for fair, inclusive and comprehensive responses.

That is exactly why we are here: to go beyond the conventional, money-driven type of research and teaching that prevails in our universities. To identify the hidden connections between the past and present of frontier making, the links between attacks on local communities in the Amazon and global climatic catastrophe, the synergies between reactionary ideologies, political dishonesty, the reproduction of poverty and the neglect of the Amazon peoples.

We have a lot to say and a lot to learn, together, in friendship. Our departure point is the recognition of the inequalities produced by mainstream development and the associated asymmetry of gains and losses, but it is also crucial for us to appreciate the creativity, inventiveness and courage of marginalised groups. We know that the Amazon only exists today and has its current configuration because of its people – 34 million in the nine countries, including 385 indigenous nations – and they should have the first and most important say on any matter that affects them.

In this workshop we will especially reflect on the suffering and the wrong which has been inflicted on the poor, exploited Amazon worker, on women and children, peasant, riparian and indigenous communities, on their ecosystems and livelihoods, as well as appreciate their knowledge, skills, practices and ability to resist and to dream. Despite their apparent poverty, these groups have a lot to offer and are ready to take on any challenge.

There are many relevant and valuable precedents to inspire and inform our discussion.

In December 1988, Chico Mendes was murdered (one of the many martyrs who have shed their blood in defence of the Amazon, including indigenous and community leaders, religious and church people, environmentalists, and the list goes on), but earlier that year the National Conference of CUT (Brazilian Trade Union Confederation) approved a thesis Chico had presented on the Defence of Nature and the Forest People, demanding the expropriation of *seringaes* in conflict [rubber-tree estates] and the transfer of these areas to peasant communities and “in this way nature and the culture of the rainforest peoples will not be aggressed and a sustainable use of natural resources will be possible thanks to technologies developed by the people who live in the Amazon forest.” These are incredibly wise and encouraging words, which will certainly illuminate our minds.

More than two decades later, in 2009, at the World Social Forum in Belém, the indigenous delegates approved a declaration, the appeal from the Indigenous Peoples Facing the Capitalist Crisis of Western Civilisation, an attempt to break the dominant developmental responses that serve to validate the repressive role of the state and market-based solutions (such as carbon markets and the infamous payment for ecosystem services that only perpetuate the same language of money and the arrogance of Western universities).

In 2014, at COP20, the Lima Ecosocialist Declaration proposed to stop climate change and the ecological crisis through the much more powerful logic of solidarity. Those involved in that meeting denounced the projects of the Brazilian government that threaten a large part of the Amazon with horrible destruction. The Lima declaration ended with that call: “Change the system, not the climate!”

In October last year there was the Amazon Synod, under the leadership of the Pope, which ascertained that religion is a collective project radically and truthfully in favour of life, love, tolerance and openness to the other. Just a few days ago, the indigenous peoples of Brazil met in Mato Grosso, in Piraçu (Indigenous Land Capoto Jarina), under the guidance of Chief Raoni, to reiterate their readiness to fight and demonstrated that they are on the right side of history, morality, decency and justice.

We could go on and on to show that there are many people concerned about the Amazon and prepared to oppose the current trend of human and ecological degradation. As already noticed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour, “the presumed vanishing cultures are very much present, they are active, vibrant, inventive, proliferating in all directions, reinventing their past, subverting their own exoticism and removing the monotonous homogeneity of a global market and deterritorialized capitalism.”

Taking all the above into account, our task here this week is basically twofold. First, to share our experiences, ideas and feelings about the Amazon, its people and ecosystems, reflect on how reality is lived, perceived and contested. Second, to identify what politicians, academics, scientists and non-academics can and should do, the type of research and policies that will help to improve the situation, value collective life and promote the so anticipated justice.

We are the visible invisible, today we are the voices of the silent majority and the oppressed minorities, we are what is colourful, valuable and alive in the Amazon, we are the living proof that the Amazon had a long, miserable past, has a turbulent present but, because of its people, it can also nourish a much better future.

[The Programme]

Later today we will discuss and hopefully approve the Oxford Letter for the Amazon.