

A LIFE HISTORIES APPROACH TO GOLD PROSPECTING AND FRONTIER FARMING IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON

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Abstract

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In contrast to the usual faceless macro-economic and sociological treatment of development cycles in the Amazon, which at best offer generalities about 'social actors' labelled 'peasants', 'ranchers' and 'trans-national corporations', who represent the abstract categories of labour and globalised capital, a human face to frontier processes is offered here. The social and economic sustainability of the shifting back and forth from gold prospecting to family farming on the frontier is evaluated through the eyes of those who experienced it so producing an unromanticised portrait of prospecting in western Pará during the gold rush of 1961-1990 as well as of frontier farming today. The economic origin and past quality of life of those who left local farms or came from the distant rural zones of impoverished Maranhão are compared and contrasted with that of their passage through the degrading living conditions of gold prospecting and finally with their current situation as struggling but independent frontier farmers in Itaituba and Santarém municipalities.

Key words

Amazon, frontier farming, gold prospecting, quality of life

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1. Theoretical Approach, Scale of Analysis and Research Method

Classic Marxist and Economic Neo-Darwinist approaches to development usually work at regional and global scales of analysis focusing on economic cycles powered by faceless technical innovation, capital flows, world-city networks and demographic surges, a good example being the work of Peter Taylor over the last thirty years (1985, 1989, 2007) as well as the current work of the contributors to the Globalization and World Cities Network, a rather reified example being Devriendt *et.al.* (2009). This is not to say that such a global approach is wrong but rather it is insufficient by itself, which is probably the principal lesson learned from the scales debate which took place in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* from 2005 to 2007 (see Escobar 2007, Hoefle 2006, Jonas 2006, Jones *et.al.* 2007, Leitner and Miller 2007, Mariston *et.al.* 2005).

An opposite approach is used here, namely one that focuses on the life histories/paths of the individuals who animated the cycles. Often times the same person was involved in successive economic cycles in different places or in the same place at different moments of his or her life (see Thissen 2004 for a discussion of the life path literature in Human Geography). Macro-approaches often make questionable assumptions about technical efficiency and economic rationality to the point of treating capital or information networks as *deus ex machina* while the micro-approach used here tries to see the cycle through the eyes of its participants and their motivations. We will see, as Eriksen (2001) shows in different parts of the world, that the compounded sum of countless little places can result in extraordinarily large regional and global problems, in this case, the relationship between the reproduction of peasant poverty and deforestation in the Amazon, the latter easily observed from satellites but not always explained satisfactorily in terms of the people involved.

The research method used is based on the suggestion of Marcus (1995) to follow the people in their spatial movement through a process, in this case, from being desperately poor farmers on the past and now consolidated frontier of western Maranhão state to decades of gold prospecting in western Pará state and finally back to frontier farming in the same area after 1990. The life histories of 64 farmers were researched in interviews undertaken in 2008 on the expanding frontier in Itaituba and Santarém municipalities. The farmers interviewed were first selected to represent different economic activities present in the study area today in a project related to Taylor's World City Network but it was quickly perceived in the field that almost all of those interviewed had a common background of having migrated from Maranhão and having spent part of their life as gold prospectors. The idea for constructing the present work around the life paths of what would seem to be the most humble social actors of the Brazilian frontier occurred to me in the field after listening to repeated stories of the misery of their origins and the squalor of gold prospecting, which make their present situation as poor frontier farmers seem a vast improvement in life style.

2. The Failure of the Maranhão Project: Reproducing Misery

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the regional development agency of the impoverished North-east region of Brazil, SUDENE (Superintendência do Desenvolvimento do Nordeste) began yet another programme of shifting poor farmers out of the densely populated impoverished Agreste zone and the

environmentally problematic Sertão to settle frontier areas of western Maranhão, located in the zone of transition to the Amazon. Once again the immediate cause was a severe drought as had been the case in other population movements to the Amazon during the rubber boom in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century (Andrade 1964, MINTER 1973).

Judging by the social results, the programme only succeeded in reproducing the grinding poverty of the Agreste and Sertão in western Maranhão. In one or two generations, inheritance fragmented farms at the same time that ranchers expropriated peasants forcing them off the land into the poor parts of small and large cities, where they became under- and un-employed ghetto dwellers, inadequately served by public services, living in dilapidated disease-infested housing, so closing a circle of grinding poverty. Maranhão has the lowest per capita income in Brazil, the lowest index of human development and the highest percentage of families on child support programmes (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Income and quality of life indices according to state and region in Brazil.

State/Region	Per Capita Annual Income (US\$2004)	Families on Child Support (%)	Index of Human Development 2002
Maranhão	999	59	647
Other North-eastern States	1,895	53	682
Pará	1,815	41	720
Amazonas	4,158	39	717
Other Northern States	1,936	43	730
Central-West	3,780	17	774
South-east	4,560	20	787
South	4,309	15	800

Source: FIBGE, IPEA.

To these push factors, a number of pull factors exist attracting maranhenses to the Amazon. As many Amazonian states hold out the promise of free land and today have higher income and social statistics it is no wonder that landless peasants have been attracted to the region since the late 1960s. Then add the gold rushes of the 1970s and 1980s and one can understand how a large number of maranhenses undertook leap-frog migration directly to the prospector camps.

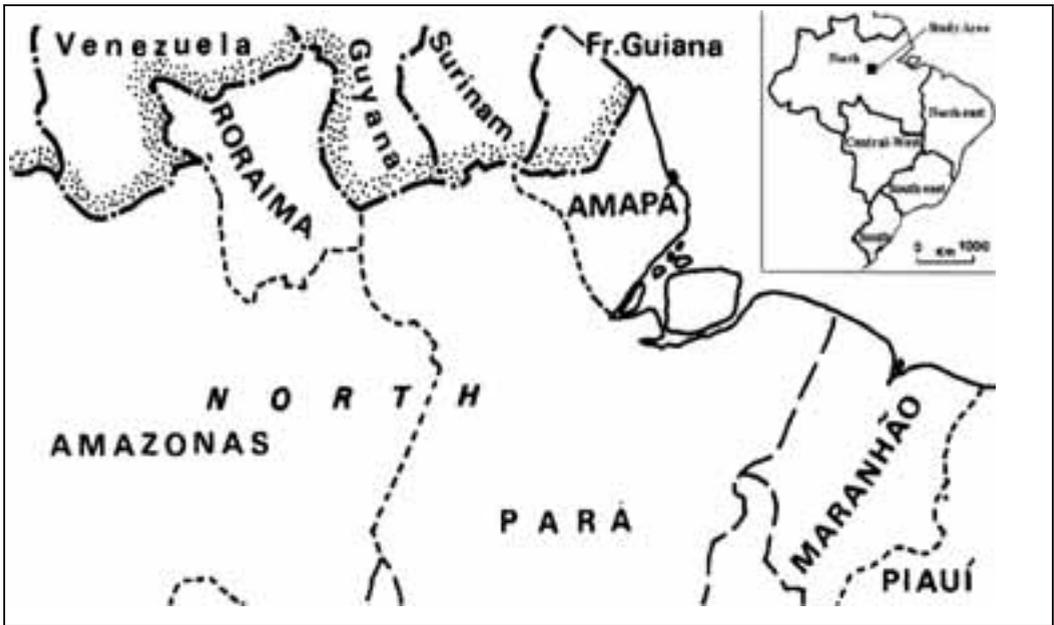
3. Amazonian Gold Rushes: From Misery to Squalor

In the second half of the 20th Century there were three major gold rushes in the Brazilian Amazon: 1) Itaituba (Pará), 2) Serra Pelada (Pará) and 3) Yanomamö Amerindian Territory (Roraima). The Itaituba gold rush was older and lasted longer (late 1960s to 1990), followed by Serra Pelada in the 1980s and Roraima in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which probably explains why first-hand study of Serra Pelada was made by Cleary (1990) and of Roraima by MacMillan (1995) while only a memoir of a prospector (Rabello, 2006) has been produced for the Itaituba gold rush. The intent here is not to provide a detailed historical study of this gold rush but rather to focus on stories concerning the squalor of the camps as opposed to the current situation of frontier farmers.

Gold was first discovered on the tributaries of the Tapajós river in the early 1960s and over the next two decades prospectors swarmed to the area establishing more than 300 camps and 200 dirt air strips to access remote creeks where gold was to be found blasting the river bank with water pressure equipment. The environmental impacts were degradation of river banks, silting of creeks and mercury pollution in

the rivers. The immediate impact on population movements besides attracting outsiders directly to the camps was to empty the planned colonization projects being established along the Transamazonian (BR-230) and the Cuiabá-Santarém (BR-163) highways slowing down the process of settling western Pará by decades.

Fig. 1: Leap-frog migration from Maranhão to the Itaituba gold rush and then the frontier.



Source: Field research (1997-2008).

Three actors were involved in the gold rush: 1) gold buyers, 2) site operators and 3) prospector peons. The gold buyers were Santarém- and Itaituba-based merchants who seized the opportunity to make large sums of money selling provisions and equipment to operators on credit and buying nuggets and powder at windfall prices. The operators came from all over Brazil and arrived with enough capital to guarantee credit arrangements from the buyers. They lived in the camps and suffered the same squalor as the peons who did the hard manual labour. As the activity was an informal one in which no one declared income for taxation and gold was often smuggled out of Brazil to avoid paying taxes, it is impossible to ascertain income and profit margins. An approximate idea can be obtained by differences in living conditions and in conspicuous consumption when prospectors went to town.

In the camps located long the tributaries of the Tapajós River, peons and operators alike lived in even worse conditions than those in Maranhão. Both slept in hammocks strung under flimsy plastic tarps which leaked or blew away during rain storms, eating irregularly and poorly and suffering from malaria which infested the camps. The greatest difference between operator and peons was working conditions. Workers passed long hours in the water and muck and were exposed to dangerous chemicals such as mercury used to separate gold. They were also compelled to work day in and day out, even when ill with malaria, when they were not sacked outright if they fell ill.

When peon and operator went to town to make up for months of monotony spent out in the wilderness far from urban social interaction (a highly valued part of life for Brazilians), they threw themselves into acts of conspicuous consumption undertaken for all to see, which assumed similar but qualitatively different forms. Interviewed workers thought it was easier to earn money in prospecting but they ended up squandering their hard-earned cash in drinking, gambling and whoring. Most operators also did the same but in more prestigious establishments in addition to buying expensive pick-ups to parade along main street Itaituba and Santarém. Some bought houses in town but only a few had the wisdom to invest in productive land, usually ranches around Itaituba. Almost all operators squandered everything. Even the man who first discovered gold and who was once elected representative to the Pará State Assembly ended his days in poverty.

The gold rush collapsed in 1990 when the federal government adopted a highly unconventional economic programme meant to tame hyper-inflation. The most polemical measure was to freeze all money in banks for six months and to not correct it for inflation, which was not tamed, so that savings lost most of their value. Over night the buyers lost access to the capital used to finance the operators who in turn paid the peons. Buyers also did not have access to the new currency, which was pegged at the rate of one-on-one with the US dollar (the currency used to calculate the price of materials and equipment) so increasing the cost of prospecting immensely. Even when buyers still had capital and tried to continue financing prospecting in 1990 the increased costs reduced profits to the point that operators did not make money, reneged on their advances from the buyer and fled to the gold rush of Roraima. Some peons did the same but many stayed on in western Pará where they settled farms located on feeder routes opened along the advancing frontier. MacMillian reports the same when the Roraima gold rush collapsed in the 1990s, which was also confirmed in interviews with maranhese settlers in my own field research undertaken there in 1998. Indeed, this is a common pattern along historical frontiers, such as those of western North America in the latter 19th Century, in which many prospectors went from gold rush to gold rush but some always stayed on in each place where they would become miners or farmers (Hine and Faragher 2000).

4. On the Expanding Frontier: From Squalor to Basic Necessities

The ex-prospectors who became frontier peasants in western Pará suffer the typical limitations to commercial farming along roads in the Amazon (see Bicalho and Hoefle 2008, 2009, Caldas *et. al.* 2007 for greater details). Most crops are harvested during the rainy season when the terrible unpaved feeder routes to main roads are mired in mud and traffic becomes impassable. Some try to raise cattle which are prime for sale at the end of the rainy season but a 100-hectare lot, of which legally only 20 hectares can be cleared for use, does not furnish enough pasture to support a herd large enough to generate a decent living. Consequently, farmers crop beans, maize, manioc and fruit trees for subsistence and rice for the market as well as pigs and poultry for self-provisioning. However, the main cash activity, rice production, is being curtailed due to the appearance of a fungus which destroys the crop, a reoccurring problem when commercial-scale cropping is attempted in the Amazon. Consequently, little monetary income is earned, usually from selling hardwood and animal skins, which obviously is not a sustainable practice.

This notwithstanding, in interviews farmers considered themselves to be well off in comparison to their former life in Maranhão and fortunate to have survived the squalid conditions of life in the prospector camps. Of the 78% of the farmers who considered their life to be better today than when they were prospectors, paramount were considerations concerning owning land, working with family members, housing conditions and quality of diet. In the words of one elderly woman whose son brought her to live with him after he settled down, "to those who stayed behind in Maranhão today I am rich". A 40-year old man stated, "today I have a family, no one is going to sack me because I am sick and I have food to eat", a sentiment also expressed by a 52-year old man who said, "When I was a prospector I spent a long time away from my family and now I am with them constantly and we work together". Housing, health and diet are interrelated in the comment made by a 48-year old man, "I now work for myself and not others, no one forces me to work when I am sick and I eat better today" as in another statement made by another middle-aged man, demonstrating the problems of life and work in an equatorial climate, "Today I live in a house. When I was a prospector I lived under a plastic sheet and would get drenched when a rain storm occurred in the middle of the night". Finally, the camps could be quite violent, especially as the only recreation after work was drinking cane spirits. There were some woman prospectors and one commented about her present life, "This place is peaceful, I live on my own land and nobody comes around bothering me".

So we can see that farmers now live in a proper house even if it is a modest one and eat regularly even if the food is from the crops grown and animals raised for self-provisioning. They are married and do not squander their hard-earned cash in drinking and whoring, subject to all kinds of infirmities. Finally, and most important of all, is the fact that as frontier farmers they are their own bosses, who work when and how long they want to and do not have to get out of a sick bed to go to work.

Some ex-prospectors considered themselves worse off today. This is usually due to low monetary income today. One lamented that, "as a prospector I earned money faster but prospecting ended and nothing better appeared", referring to the collapse of 1990. Also negative opinions can be held by farmers living out in the countryside and not in legally constituted communities in which public educational, health and utility services are available.

5. Conclusion

The flexibility of the concept of sustainable rural livelihoods allows us to accept the fact that what we would think of as poor frontier farmers consider themselves to be prosperous when contrasted with the abject misery in Maranhão and the squalor of the gold camps. However, the reproduction of frontier peasant farming, together with ranching and recently soybean farming undertaken by medium and large farmers, is devastating the whole eastern Amazon. In addition to this, one has to question the grinding poverty of Maranhão, which propels landless peasants into the Amazon. Indeed, Maranhão has little to show for the fact that its politicians have occupied some of the highest posts in Brazil, such as the Presidency, the Leadership of the National Senate and Federal Ministries, though the politicians themselves have profited enormously in the form of well-paid federal jobs and widespread corruption and graft.

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Summary

Many present-day frontier farmers of western Pará come from the impoverished North-east and passed a part of their life as gold prospectors in the hope of becoming rich. Given the exploitive work relations and chaotic economic situation during the Itaituba gold rush very few were successful. They did manage to escape the extreme poverty of their former life in Maranhão, the poorest state in Brazil. On the consolidated frontier of western Maranhão they had little land and work, most being migrant labourers, who earned little, had a poor diet and lived in poor housing in town and in the countryside, where they were poorly served by public health and educational services. However, their passage through gold prospecting can only be characterised as squalor. They arrived with no capital, continued being migrant labourers, who moved from camp to camp and worked too much to earn a low to medium income. Their diet consisted of salted beef and manioc meal and they basically camped for months on end. Out in the bush they had no health or educational services and many died of malaria. As frontier farmers in comparison they have land, work when and how they choose, usually with family members. Income is low but self-provisioning furnishes a reasonably good diet and they live in simple but sound housing. Living in communities they muster political clout in order to be better served by basic public services.