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Survival Strategies and Community Building in Post-Capitalism

In the spring of 2006, I spent an extended time in the Brazilian state of Acre, a remote area of Amazonia known for radical social practices and policies. Six months later, the São Paulo Biennial organised a seminar about Acre in São Paulo. The talks revolved around the social policies the Acre state government had developed in co-ordination with local communities, most famously the creation of “extraction reserves” – territories managed and controlled by the communities who live in the forest. Over past fifteen years, approximately half of the state’s land has been distributed to these communities, resulting in a fragmentation, or territorialisation, of state territory. The logic for creating these self-managed territories was simple: *If people can survive in the forest, then the forest will also survive*. In Acre, the period of profit-driven capitalistic over-exploitation of the forest is seen as an era that has come to an end.

During the seminar, some people wondered why we should even be talking about Acre in a major metropolis like São Paulo. What does a sophisticated urban society have to learn from a remote, sparsely populated region in Amazonia? Surely, it should be the other way around. Then the geographer José Carlos Meirelles made a surprising statement: the communities in the forest want to maintain their distance from the outside world. “They have their rights to the land as well as the right to remain isolated, carrying on with their culture independently of any contact with ours.”¹ The forest communities view their relative isolation as something positive – they want to develop their societies, but at their own pace; they want to connect with others, but on their own terms. But first they want to preserve and protect not only their land, but their cultural identity as well.

This statement from a man who is extremely familiar with life in the rainforest described the Acreans’ self-segregation from the larger, globalised society as a positive choice. A key difference between this decision and the model of the gated community, in which people voluntarily segregate themselves in order to live with “people like us”, is the Acreans’ bottom-up community building. In the kind of gated community found in North America and Europe, individuals often have little chance to participate in the building of community. An extreme case are the “stand-alone cities” near Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States, which outsource their security needs to contractors; the moment a community is unable to pay for their services, the contractor stops providing security.² The Acrean community, by contrast, relies on socially conscious individuals and participatory democracy. Theirs is a different understanding of subjectivity. In Acre, the socially conscious individual views existence as, essentially, co-existence. “Being” means “being with”, and “I” does not

¹ José Carlos Meirelles, “Isolated Indians and the Right to Land”, talk delivered 11 November 2006 at the seminar “Acre”, organised by José Roca at the 27th São Paulo Biennial. Meirelles, an expert on the indigenous peoples of Amazonia, works with the Fundo Nacional do Índio (the National Foundation for the Indian, or Funai). Since 1988, he has resided in Acre, near the headwaters of the Rio Envira.

² Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2007); see especially the chapter “Disaster Apartheid: A World of Green Zones and Red Zones”, pp. 406–422.

take precedence over “we”.³ An example of this understanding can be seen in the forest communities’ communal cultivation of land. The Acreans are quick to point out that this practice is not the result of political ideology: “It is not about communism or capitalism; it is simply how things work best locally.”⁴

Sustainability in the twenty-first century is based on local solutions—which usually embrace some pre-modern method—and local practices. Even in the European Union, localisation has become an important recent trend: as the EU expands, it is reconfiguring itself in terms of regions and localities. Examples of empowered localities close to home can be seen in recent programmes in the city of Lille, in France,⁵ and in the growing Transition Towns movement in Ireland and the United Kingdom.⁶ Such endeavours focus on building small-scale resilient communities (Lille envisions a neighbourhood as sustainable territory) that practice a sustainable way of life as they tackle such critical challenges as high oil prices and global warming (the impetus behind the Transition Towns movement). Culture is one of the essential pillars of durable sustainability (others are the environment, economy and society). Culture and small-scale “sustainable territories”—not unlike the Acrean experience—provide the foundation for living on the edge of catastrophe: communities are disillusioned with the globalised profit-driven capitalism and face serious questions about how to survive in the unsettling era that is approaching. Are we looking at a new kind of geopolitical sustainability? Most important in this radical reinvention of communities is a “change of culture”, i.e. changes in the way we do things. Sustainability is political, if we understand politics as the process by which groups of people make decisions. A forest community in Acre, the close-knit village-like community of a Lille neighbourhood, and the Transition Town of Totnes in Devon, England, are all examples of a democracy built from below, in which sustainability is understood as a form of social cohesion. As Catherine Cullen, Lille’s deputy mayor for culture, told me: “Rebuilding a city is to rebuild how we live together.”⁷

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³ See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁴ This statement was made by Marcos Vinicius Neves, a historian and the chairman of the Garibaldi Brasil Foundation in Rio Branco, Acre, in my video *Florestania: A New Citizenship* (2006).

⁵ Lille has, for example, adopted the programme Agenda 21 for Culture (http://www.agenda21culture.net/index_en.htm).

⁶ See the movement’s website, <http://www.transitiontowns.org>.

⁷ From an interview in September 2008.