

The State and the Awajún

FRONTIER EXPANSION IN THE UPPER AMAZON,
1541–1990

First Edition

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For Luz Angélica Gómez Mendoza de Dean

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“Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.”

~ Marcel Proust

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(United Nations. 2011. Map no. 3838, rev.4. Department of Field Support Cartographic Section. <https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/peru.pdf>)

MAP 1



MAP 2

INTRODUCTION

The Civilizing Project, Economic Extraction, and the Expansion of the Upper Amazonian Frontier

OVER THE PAST 450 years, the indigenous peoples¹ of Peru's tropical forests² have been subjected to a series of regional, national, and international socio-economic and political processes that have shaped their lives. This work is a historical portrayal of the processes of *frontier* expansion in the Peruvian Upper Amazon. I argue that the Upper Amazonian *frontier* has been driven by two inter-related, though distinct, historical configurations. The first is what Stefano Varese (1982) has aptly deemed the *Civilizing Project*, while the second is what I call the region's *extractive* export-oriented economies. A primary concern of this monographic essay is to explore how a series of extractive economies in Amazonia have provided fleeting periods of elite prosperity but ultimately at the expense of the region's incredible bio-cultural diversity.

The link between social domination (the *Civilizing Project*) and economies “based on [the] extraction of value from nature rather than on the creation of value by labor” (Bunker, 1988, p. 12; See also 1994; 2003) is assessed in light of the emergence of Peru's liberal nation-state. Following David Maybury-Lewis, the state is singled out for special attention because it “has such a hold on modern thought and modern institutions that it tends to be the enemy of ethnicity and ethnic autonomy, however relative or subordinate” (1982, p. 2). I am

1 Throughout this monograph I refer to the indigenous inhabitants of the *Ceja de la Montana* (“Eyebrow of the Forest”) or *selva alta* (forested Andean foothills above 500 meters) and the *selva baja* (tropical Amazonian lowlands) as indigenous peoples. Where applicable I try and use indigenous ethnonyms. The term indigenous is broadly defined to include riverain Christianized and assimilated peoples (*riberños*) as well as the relatively less acculturated, more isolated non-Christianized indigenous peoples of the *selva baja*. No distinction is made between *indigenous peoples*, *Native Peoples*, and *Indians*, terms which are used interchangeably in this essay. On the complex politics of indigenous identity and strategic essentialism, see Dean and Levi (2003).

2 Numerous terms have been used to refer to the tropical forested area of the Upper Amazon. This poorly understood region was designated *Antisuyu* by the Inca Empire and is commonly referred to as the *montaña*, the *selva*, and *Amazonia*. These terms are used interchangeably in this monographic essay.

indebted to Stefano Varese's (1982) concept of the *Civilizing Project*, who in turn has been influenced by the work of Darcy Ribeiro (1970; 1992). The *Civilizing Process* refers to global styles of great temporal duration, which in the words of Varese, "are expressed in and through a determined ethnos which are exclusivist in relation to others, cohesive, and coherent with the passage of time and the commonality of language and culture." In essence, "that which is civilizing refers to the radically collective character and the great historical length of a determined ethnic style" (Varese, 1982, p. 33; See also Varese and Chirif, 2006). The historical circumstances that permit the rise of an all-encompassing, self-conscious *national culture* out of a diverse array of relatively discrete cultures varies widely throughout the world. At a rudimentary level, "the forging of a shared body of symbols allowing for various, even rival interpretations seems to be a precondition for the development of a national identity" (Hirsch, 1990, p.20). Historically, the ruling classes' Civilizing Project has provided the Peruvian *Nation* (or homeland, *la Patria*) with its shared body of symbols and collective rites of civic participation. A comprehensive study of the creation of Peru's national identity is well beyond the analytical ken of this work. However, the implications that the Civilizing Project have had for Peru's indigenous peoples in general, and for the Aguaruna (or Awajún) in particular, are outlined in this monograph. Many approaches to understanding *underdevelopment*, especially those influenced by dependency theory,³ emphasize the importance of external linkages, such as the export of raw materials and the role of foreign capital in shaping local and national level socio-economic conditions (Frank, 1969; Wallerstein, 1974; Bunker, 2003). This monographic essay is informed by a critical, externalist or dependency perspective (Nugent, 2012). It also attempts to clarify the internal dynamics of the process of socio-economic *underdevelopment*. As Bunker has argued in his classic study of inappropriate *modernity* in the Brazilian Amazon, "theory must articulate the interaction between internal and external processes" (1988, p. 16).

In addition to elucidating external connections to the process of underdevelopment pace Bunker, this study outlines the distinctive internal patterns of, and responses to, colonial and national domination. This hybrid external-internal theoretical approach is apropos for understanding the history of social change and development in the Peruvian Amazon—a region which has been all too often portrayed in official and elite discourse as *terra nullius*, a vast and uninhabited frontier awaiting national incorporation. Implicit in this liberal and at times populist political philosophy is the Civilizing Project: i.e., the creation of a national citizenry out of a heterogenous mass of culturally,

³ Influenced by early theorists of imperialism, such as Rosa Luxemburg (2011a, 2011b) and Vladimir Lenin (1948), dependency theory has a long intellectual history in Latin America.

linguistically, and historically diverse *ethnie* (ethnic communities).⁴ Peru's historically hegemonic classes have articulated the racially motivated ideology of the so-called *indigenous question*, or more directly, the "Problem of the Indian" (cf. Mariategui 1988, p. 2230). My use of the concept of hegemony follows Antonio Gramsci, who held that the hegemony, or the political, intellectual, and moral supremacy of a class, is based largely on the ascendant class' capacity to effectively render its *Weltanschauung* (worldview) into a dominant ethos and, in so doing, guide the collective will (1971; 1994). Typically, this entails a diffuse process whereby the dominant class articulates its own interests and those of other social groups. In the case of Peru, these auxiliary groups have included a broad spectrum of associations such as the military, religious institutions, the landed elite, merchants, industrialists, the petite bourgeoisie, and the professional classes. Hegemony, in Gramsci's usage (1994), entails not only economic and political dominance, but also the cultural preponderance of the ruling elite. Hegemony is a multifarious socio-cultural process by which the ruling class extends their domination throughout society and its various cultural fields. Typically, academic, religious, and military institutions contribute to the imposition of the ruling elite's values and norms upon society as a whole (Crehan, 2002).

Anthropological research has increasingly turned to assessing the connections between the micro and macro domains within the state. This has been an important corrective to the pitfalls of anthropology's traditional reliance on participant observation at the local level. Indeed, such a locally exclusivist approach has often led to an obfuscation of the significant relationships at and between different levels of social analysis (Devons and Gluckman, 1964, p. 211). As Moore has argued, earlier studies "of local communities as closed units of analysis made no sense when nation building was the slogan of the day" (1986, p. 324). Consequently, this work extends a multi-level analysis to include the connections between local domains, the state, and its allies.

The definition of the *state* used in this work is purposefully rather broad. Max Weber defined the state as that entity which monopolizes coercive violence.⁵ While useful, this definition is heuristically limited: it does not attend to the blurring of the line between *state*, or *public* domination and *private* domination. These concerns touch at the core of what Michel Foucault mapped out as the "micro-physics" of power

4 My use of the term *ethnie* follows directly from Anthony Smith's work on the ethnic origins of nations (1989). Attempting to strike a balance between the Modernists, as represented by the works of Wallerstein (1974), Barth (1969), Anderson (1987), and Gellner (1983), and the Primordialists such as Shils (1957) and Geertz (1963), Smith defines *ethnie*, "as named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity." *Ethnie* date to at least the Bronze Age and, "are to be found even in the most modernized states of the industrialized world" (1989:32).

5 According to Weber, "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (1958, p. 78; 1978, p. 56, 65).

(1980, p. 9297). For the purposes of this analysis, the state is regarded as the system of power and domination through which the interests of various classes are expressed. Following Peter Berger, ideology is used here to refer to those beliefs which serve to morally legitimate the vested interests of various sectors of society (1963, p. 111).

Louis Althusser's renowned essay, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État (Notes pour une recherche)" (1970) expands on the Marxist notion of the repressive nature of the state by elaborating the idea of the "ideological state apparatus(es)." For Althusser, these consist of *public organisms*, such as the governmental bureaucracy, political groupings, and/or the judicial and educational systems (1976). Perhaps, most importantly, they also include *private associations*, such as family, the arts, sports, and the church. Althusser asserts that the contrast between the *private* and the *public* domains is itself a function of the juridical ideology dominant in bourgeois society. *Private associations* can and do function as proxies of the state, or as Althusser would have it, as "state apparatuses." Hence, many institutions or social groupings, both *public* and *private*, serve to maintain and reproduce the capitalist relations of production and of state-based power. This is clearly evident in the Upper Amazon where armies, priests, merchants, extractive entrepreneurs, and indigenous peoples themselves, have all promoted the interests of the Peruvian state. Such a perspective is not to deny the relative autonomy of these social groupings, but rather to affirm that these associations have been the bearers of the hegemonic class' historically important Civilizing Project.

One of the most significant functions of the Civilizing Project is the provision of legitimacy. In Jürgen Habermas' words, legitimacy means quite simply "that there are good arguments for a political order's claim to be recognized as right and just" (1979, p. 178). The hegemonic classes' Civilizing Project has served to legitimate Peru's profoundly inequitable social order. The Peruvian elite has always formed a relatively minuscule sub-stratum of national society. The *modern* (i.e., post 19th century) Peruvian State's task has been to enact policies that favor the interests of the dominant classes. Governments in Peru have historically articulated the alliance of the various sectors of the entrepreneurial and middle classes, including civil and military bureaucrats, large-scale domestic and international enterprises, and the technical and professional specialists tied to these sectors. As Marianne Schminck notes for the case of Brazil, the state serves largely to guarantee social domination by these social strata so as to "ensure favorable conditions for the accumulation of capital, and to impede the formation of a power base for those classes excluded from the pact of domination" (1982, p. 342; Cardoso, 1975). Other commentators have underscored the extent to which the Brazilian state has recently gone to war with its urban poor (Gledhill, 2015).

In Peru, the hegemonic classes' liberal or populist Civilizing Project has been closely tied to a series of extractive, export-oriented economies. This monograph demonstrates

how the Civilizing Project, in conjunction with the notion of national *development*, have loomed large in the hegemonic classes' strategy of rule in Amazonia. These closely associated systems of belief have functioned as the ideological justifications for the region's economies of extractive mercantilism. Attention is placed in this work on elaborating the intricacies in the affinities among classes and within state structures, which themselves have been molded by the exigent requirements of extractive-export economies. In Amazonia, the implementation of extractive modes of production, coupled with the Civilizing Project of the state and its allies, has led to a devastating impoverishment of the region's socially and ecologically diverse communities.⁶

The relatively small and politically powerless indigenous societies of the Upper Amazon have been extremely susceptible to the social and demographic distortions associated with colonial and national domination. Lethal new diseases, such as influenza, malaria, measles, smallpox, and yellow fever, were introduced as was a ruinous system of bonded labor (debt peonage) dedicated to the exploitation of a small range of natural resources. The economic impoverishment of the Amazonian peoples has variously been ascribed to their indolence, so-called "collecting mentality," *Amerindian* blood, mental dispositions, irrational or defective moral universes, and non-European forms of agronomy. But as Eric Ross has indicated, their poverty has rarely been attributed "to their status as an exploited and non-autonomous class created by the systematic commercialization of the cultural ecology of the Amazon Valley" (1978, p. 193).

Before proceeding to the general discussion of the Awajún—or Aguaruna—as they have been labeled in the scholarly literature, the concept of *frontier expansion* requires some qualification. The notion of the *frontier* has been a useful heuristic in understanding the processes by which the state and nationally dominant strata have extended their orbit of power and authority into geographically peripheral areas, such as the Peruvian Upper Amazon.⁷ Traditionally, the notion of a frontier has implied the extension of a dominant socio-economic system into a vacant expanse, when in reality the process of frontier expansion in Amazonia entails the encounter and, in some instances, the confrontation of a number of distinct socio-cultural formations. Moreover, the idea of a *frontier* implies the inevitable incorporation of the *peripheral* region within the dominant society. The dynamics of Amazonian extractive economies, with their boom and bust cycles, have brought this assumption into question. Implicit in conventional conceptions of the frontier is the idea of linear and progressive expansion. In contrast,

6 On the trans-oceanic exchange of Old-World diseases see McNeill 1976, p. 176–207; Ashburn, 1947; and Crosby, 1972.

7 This text emphasizes the Peruvian Upper Amazon and defines it as the territory comprised of the primary river systems that flow north and south into the Marañón and Amazon Rivers (such the Morona, Pastaza, Nukuray, Urituyacu, Chambira, Tigre, Nanay, Napo, Huallaga, and Ucayali).

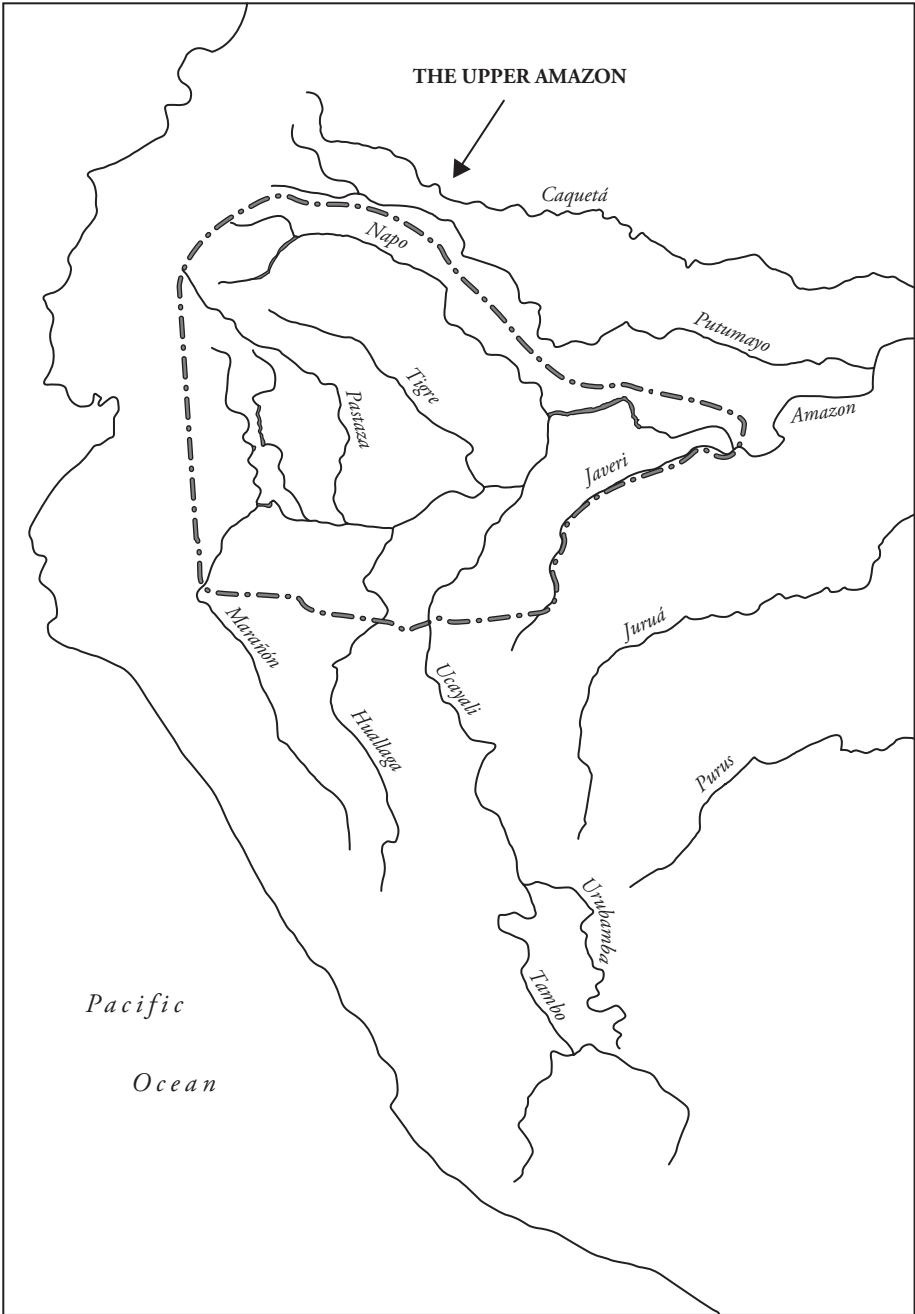
the extractive underpinnings of capitalist penetration in Amazonia “is anything but linear; rather, it follows the location of resources for which there is a market,” such as gold, lumber, rubber, coca leaves, and petroleum (Bunker, 1988, p. 99; cf. Anderson et al., 1991).

In order to understand the present condition of indigenous peoples in Peruvian Amazonia, I have situated their collective experience within the *longue durée* of history. This monograph takes a historical and structuralist perspective. I should mention at the outset the limitations of the chronological survey elaborated herein. Unlike the Andean highlands or the coastal regions of Peru, the tropical Amazonian lowlands have received extremely limited attention from students of Peruvian history. A comprehensive and critical history of indigenous policy in Peruvian Amazonia has yet to be written (cf. Davies, 1974).⁸ To wit, this monograph is a contribution to abbreviating some of the gaps in the present historiography of the indigenous peoples of the Upper Amazon (cf. Whitehead, 2003, p. vii–ix).

This is a study of the northeastern Peruvian Amazon. As such, no attempt is made to examine the historical developments of the Ucayali river basin (central Amazonia) or the Madre de Dios river drainage system (southeastern Amazonia). This monographic essay focuses on the specific case of the Awajún, one of Peru’s numerically largest Amazonian societies. By underscoring the example of the Awajún, I illustrate how indigenous peoples have coped with colonial and national forces ever since Francisco de Orellana became the first European to travel from the Andes down the Amazon to the Atlantic Ocean in 1541.

Various historical *epochs* are delineated in terms of both state Indian policy and the specific social, economic, and political contexts that have affected the indigenous peoples of Peruvian Amazonia. Written from an etic perspective, this ethno-historical account of social change in Native Amazonia relies largely on accounts that privilege official or elite voices and interests, rather than those of the Awajún. Despite its lack of *ethnographic voice*, this monograph provides historical context for those works on the Amazonia that emphasize “the many tribal peoples’ histories of their worlds” (Hugh-Jones, 1989, p. 53; Hill, 1988). While history imposes constraints on human action, Karl Marx was right to assert that those individuals conscious of it have a hand in forging their own destiny.

8 For the most comprehensive works to date on eastern Peruvian history see San Roman (1975); Werlich (1968), and Dean (2009).



MAP 3

CHAPTER 1

The Awajún

THE JÍVARO ARE a linguistically isolated group of five distinctive indigenous groups residing in the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Upper Amazon (Harner, 1973; Ribeiro and Wise, 1978; Olson, 1991, p. 165).¹ A widely dispersed, manioc cultivating society living along a number of northeastern Peru's major rivers (Alto Marañón, Bajo Santiago, and Alto Mayo) and their tributaries, the Awajún inhabit some 22,000 square kilometers of undulating tropical forest lands. Their ancestral territory ranges in altitude between 200 and 1,000 meters above sea level and comprised rugged Andean foothills, lush tropical forest, and countless waterways punctuated by swift whitewater rapids (Gullart, 1964).² The Awajún population was estimated in the mid 1970s to be about 25,000 people living in more than 170 communities (Chirif & Mora, 1977, p. 57). The Awajún belong to the well-documented Jivaroan linguistic family, which is subdivided into four distinct ethnic groups: Aguaruna (or Awajún), Achuara (Atchuara, Achual), Huambisa (Wampis), and Achuar-Shuar.³

Given they have withstood over four-and-a-half-centuries of colonial and national fronts of *domination*, the Awajún represent a case study par excellence in socio-cultural resilience. They represent one of the most active and politically organized indigenous groups in lowland South America. Historical survey of the Awajún highlights the dilemmas facing Native Amazonian peoples, and the

1 The five indigenous groups comprising the Jivaroan speakers include: the Jívaro (Jíbaro) or Shuar; the Awajún (Aguaruna); Wampis (Huambisa); Achuara (Achual, Atchuara); and the Mayna (Olson, 1991, p. 165; Ribeiro & Wise, 1978).

2 The famous Pongo de Manseriche divides the upland tropical forest (*montaña*) from the flat and humid lowland jungle (*selva baja*) and in doing so, contributes to both regions' isolation. The majority of the Awajún live in the high jungle, but some also inhabit the *selva baja*.

3 Note that the Jivaroan speaking Awajún should not be confused with the ethnonym Jíbaro used in many parts of Latin America to refer to peasants (*campesinos*) or racially mixed individuals, as in Puerto Rico or Mexico (Stephens, 1989, p. 135). In Puerto Rico, the term *xíjaro* is used for a "white rural peasant who tends to be crotchety but likeable" (Stephens, 1989, p. 243).

degree to which small-scale, politically vulnerable indigenous societies can effectively defend themselves against the onslaught of the ever-encroaching *outside world*. By this I do not want to imply the existence of a static, bifurcated social field: Native Amazonian peoples and the *outside world*. These are analytical constructs that grossly oversimplify the multiple realities of the glocalized social world. Furthermore, such a dichotomy is tied to a linear conception of social transformation. The proverbial steamroller effect of the process of acculturation or *Westernization* does not attend to the subtleties, or the nuances of the mutually transformative, partially indeterminate process of multi-cultural interaction that characterizes *glocalization* (Bauman, 1998).