Pasts that do not pass: Indigenous genocides, mobilization and the struggle against impunity in Brazil

In the face of recent crimes against indigenous peoples in Brazil, it is necessary to focus attention on the systematicity and the solid structure of interests and impunity that foster and sustain them. In this framework, it is necessary to talk about the past, genocidal practices and develop reparation policies, but it is also necessary to ensure what is essential for indigenous peoples to flourish. Speeches of contempt against the lives of indigenous people, such as those of Jair Bolsonaro, are here to stay and in the face of this new wave of conflict, impunity must be socially intolerable.

By Carlos Salamanca Villamizar – May 1st 2023

When Jair Bolsonaro was elected president in October 2018, Brazilian society and the international community had numerous indications of the radical nature of his contempt for the lives, existence and demands of indigenous peoples. While those principles were the result of a complex combination of beliefs, prejudices, ignorance and economic interests, they also reflected an atmosphere in which politicians like Bolsonaro felt empowered to express not only racist ideas, but ideas with declared hostility towards indigenous people.

It should be a matter of deep concern that these principles were the ideological basis of a democratically elected government. However, four years later we found that these beliefs appeared in an attempt to gain a political space that had lost strength with the fall of the authoritarian governments of the 1970s and 1980s.

Genocide in the name of "development"

In this context of uncertainty, in 2019 the seminar "Indigenous Genocide" was held at the University of Brasilia, which brought together anthropologists, documentary filmmakers, lawyers and professionals from the judicial branch, indigenous and non-indigenous. The results of the seminar are reflected in the book *Indigenous Genocides in Latin America (Genocidios Indígenas)*
en América Latina), which brings together research carried out in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia on the severe abuses perpetrated by State agents, settlers and companies dating back to the emergence of the States up to the present day. The book shows that all American states were built on the destruction and debris of multiple indigenous worlds.

A few months after the seminar, the way in which the Brazilian Federal Government dealt with the Covid-19 epidemic in the different regions and, in particular, in the Amazon, would bring back the terrible memory of the way in which diseases were deliberately used for the extermination of dozens of indigenous peoples. In fact, it was in the infamous "contact fronts" that settlers, informal miners and businessmen set out to annihilate the indigenous people, considering them an obstacle to their projects of "development", exploitation and economic accumulation. Worse still, this action also counted on the complicity and active participation of officials of the then-titled Indian Protection Service, a body created in 1910 that from 1967 onwards would be known as the National Indian Foundation (Funai).

In 1967, prosecutor Jader de Figueiredo Correia compiled a 7,000-page report revealing crimes against Brazil's indigenous population at the hands of powerful landowners and the Indian Protection Service itself. The document, which had remained lost until it was found in 2013 in Brazil's Indian Museum, describes how indigenous peoples were annihilated or decimated. The text details practices such as slavery, torture, sexual abuse, territorial dispossession, murder and large-scale death by poisoning and the deliberate spread of disease. In short, the report evidences the widespread neglect of Brazil's indigenous population between the years 1940 and 1960.

Despite the Figueiredo Report, with a new impetus for economic expansion and infrastructure projects in the Amazon region during the 1980s, businessmen and miners promoted a new wave of violence against indigenous peoples. In this context, a group of anthropologists, artists and politicians mobilized with the Yanomami people and achieved significant advances in the processes of recognition by the rest of Brazilian society and the international community.

The dictatorship, businessmen and Covid-19

Years later, in 2014, Brazil's National Commission for Truth delivered a report on human rights violations between 1947 and 1988. In the section on violations of indigenous rights during the dictatorship, it is noted that most of the crimes are a consequence of the territorial
transformations driven by the militarized interpretation of the colonial perspective that declared many indigenous territories free for exploitation. Along the same lines, in 2017, journalist Rubens Valente published the book *The Rifles and the Arrows. History of Blood and Indigenous Resistance in the Cictatorship. (Os Fuzis e as Flechas. Historia de sangue e resistencia indigena na dictadura.)*

In the context of large-scale violence against indigenous peoples in Brazil, another breakthrough was achieved in the framework of research on corporate responsibility in crimes against humanity. Since 2021, the research has been promoted by the Center for Anthropology and Forensic Archaeology of the Federal University of São Paulo in dialogue with various academic spaces, such as the Network of Repressive Processes, Companies and Workers, Women Workers and Trade Unions in Latin America. In this regard, the trajectories of various companies and economic groups are studied, as well as the large infrastructure projects carried out during the dictatorship. The research analyzes their ecological, productive, and territorial effects, and their impact on different sectors of the population, among which indigenous peoples are the main victims.

While the State, settlers and companies have been central actors in these processes of large-scale socio-territorial destruction, the practices of violence against indigenous peoples today also involve new actors. In the framework of this long trajectory of complaints against the government of Jair Bolsonaro made by Indigenist and environmental organizations, the action promoted in 2021 by the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) before the International Criminal Court in The Hague for the treatment of the pandemic in indigenous territories stands out.

During Covid-19, the government had a policy of deliberate omission regarding the contagion and allowed, if not encouraged, the arrival of thousands of people in the Yanomami territory. The government was aware of the risk of death on a large scale that would result from the multiplication of contagions and the withdrawal of all existing health care in the territory. In another document, the APIB points out: "The lack of health care, the weakening of the legal frameworks for the protection of the territories and the total collusion of the National Indian Foundation (Funai) with illegal mining within the Yanomami indigenous territory were the common thread of the indigenous policy during the period 2019-2022."
This time, unlike the genocidal practices that have been hidden behind Brazil's news agendas, Jair Bolsonaro's policies were exposed to the public eye and scrutiny thanks to the media. This time, the opacity did not come from difficulties in communication or in the documentation of cases, but rather from *fake news*: the communication tool most used by Bolsonarism to distort reality and offer "false truths" to public opinion.

**The need to reflect on genocide**

The public debate about the crimes against humanity committed in recent years against indigenous peoples in Brazil motivates us to continue highlighting not only the systematic nature of the violence perpetrated, but also the strength of the structures of impunity that sustain it. Through contributions from disciplinary areas such as anthropology and law, this edition of *Debates Indígenas* emphasizes the communities of Brazil through cases and experiences elaborated by indigenous and non-indigenous people who have been working on the issue in different regions of the country.

The term *pasts that do not pass* (*pasados que no pasan*), offered by Argentine anthropologist Claudia Briones invites reflection about the irradiations of the so-called "Conquest of the Desert" in Patagonia, and alludes to the manifestations in the present of memories, memories and debris resulting from actions of massive violence against indigenous peoples. At the same time, she refers to the possibility of the past radiating in other ways and finding less conflictive ways of expressing itself through good faith listening, replacing the usual entrenchment in "prejudices and accepted ideas that perpetuate and multiply misunderstandings and violence" around what she describes as indigenous genocides. Finally, she alludes to the question of the future by inviting us to reflect on what irradiations of the past and what forms of justice are enabling us to imagine plural forms of collective coexistence.

It is necessary to broaden what Latin American societies are usually willing to recognize as *genocide or genocidal practices*. Genocidal practices are also the *tragic stories of men and women who saw all their relatives die one by one* or who had no other options but to seek refuge among other peoples. They are also the traces of their territories of life and meaning destroyed or forever modified; or the relationships of affect and kinship that emerge after the loss as a way of making the present habitable.
As professor and indigenous anthropologist Felipe Tuxá affirms, we are confronted with the creativity of the genocidal technologies inherent to the territories claimed by colonialism. Talking about genocide and justice is not only about repairing the past, but also about finding ways to ensure what is essential for each indigenous people to flourish. It is necessary to work from different disciplines, with the active participation of the indigenous people themselves, so that Justice can deal with these crimes against humanity. Otherwise, they will remain unpunished and the door to their repetition will remain open. In this sense, the recognition of state responsibility in the massacres of Haximú and Capacete stands out, as well as the establishment of some reparatory measures.

**Justice, memory, truth and reparation**

Today we have the task of presenting evidence and arguments in the public space so that genocidal practices against indigenous peoples become unacceptable and impunity becomes socially intolerable. The living memory of these crimes must become a barrier to ensure that these practices and their repercussions in the present are never repeated.

The year 2023 marks the 10th anniversary of the rediscovery of the Figueiredo Correia Report, which drew attention to the need for a real transformation in the country's political culture. The creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples can be a step forward on that path, as can the public declarations of a federal government willing to break with the paradigm of impunity. Given the scale, diversity, systematicity, severity, and persistence of the violence, it does not seem possible that it can be addressed by the will of a government alone.

Perhaps it is time to think of a National Indigenous Truth Commission that would not only measure the scale that genocidal practices have had in Brazil, but also create a sustainable environment of justice, memory, truth, reparation and non-repetition of so much violence.

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**Carlos Salamanca Villamizar** is an Independent Researcher of the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina (CONICET) and of the Institute of Geography "Romualdo Ardissone" of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). E-mail: salamanca.carlos@gmail.com