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White Blood, Black Gold: The Commodification of Wild Rubber in the Bolivian Amazon, 1870–1920

The "rubber boom" played a decisive role in the integration of the Amazon rainforest into the global economy. Between 1870 and 1920, most Amazonian countries eagerly engaged in the rubber trade: first, Brazil, accounting for nearly 80–90 percent of the world market, followed by Bolivia and Peru, with 5–10 percent, and, finally, by Colombia and Venezuela, with a lower production.[1] This article discusses the commodification of rubber in Bolivia from 1880 until its decline in the 1910s. It poses the question of how social perceptions of rubber as a wild, inexhaustible natural resource grounded, and affected, the structure of its exploitation.

As early as 1867, there were reports about rubber tappers in the Bolivian Amazon.[2] The boom only really set in, however, when American explorer Edwin Heath discovered the connection between the Beni and Mamoré rivers in 1880, and a new export route was opened toward the Brazilian ports of Belém do Pará and Manaos. Major firms like Suárez or Braillard opened branches in London and met the international demand for rubber in Europe and North America, bringing about a "black gold" fever with rubber tappers

rapidly spreading along the banks of the main rivers of the region: Mamoré, Beni, Orthon, Acre, Madre de Dios. There were widespread legends of fortunes made overnight, heaps of pounds sterling and obscene luxuries in the midst of the rainforest:

> Rubber barons lit cigars with hundred-dollar bank notes and slaked the thirst of their horses with silver buckets of chilled French champagne. Their wives, disdainful of the muddy waters of the Amazon, sent linens to Portugal to be laundered. ... The great symbol of excess was the Manaus Opera House, a monumental Beaux Arts extravaganza designed by a Portuguese architect and built over a seventeen-year period ending in 1896.[3]

The rubber boom propelled the overlooked and obscure Bolivian east into the national and international imaginary. In addition to mass migration from across the Andes and Europe, it brought about the foundation of towns, land grants to private persons by the national government, the cartographic and scientific exploration of the rainforest, the incorporation of hitherto marginal territories into state administration, and the redrawing of the country's boundaries, concurrently with the concession of vast tracts of land to national and foreign-owned extractive companies.[4]

To legitimize the extractive expansion, the rationale of the modernist discourse in Bolivia came down to three basic postulates. First, the ideas of progress and civilization were generically attributed to that economic activity, as opposed to the savagery and wild nature (*naturaleza salvaje*), as one notorious rubber tapper put it,[5] of the Amazon rainforest and its inhabitants: "Without rubber this faraway region would still remain unknown and undisputed; moreover, today, should the rubber industry disappear, any activity, any progress would die."[6] In the regionalist imaginary of the Bolivian lowlands, the rubber industry was seen as a driver of national development and as the successful counterpart to mining, an industry historically associated with the Andean highlands.[7]

Second, the jungle was perceived as a desolate desert open to opportunities. The Achilles heel of the industry was the scarcity of labor, and a mixed workforce had to be consolidated: *mestizos*, Andean migrants, foreigners, and also members of indigenous tribes, such as the Cavineños, Araonas, Mojeños, and so on. Within the rubber labor system—the so-called *habilito*—a patron assigned a given territory to a tapper, where the latter would collect the rubber milk and then smoke-dry and coagulate it into rubber balls (*bolachas*). The patron advanced food, medicine, weapons, tools, and clothes to the tapper, which the tapper would pay for in rubber, settling part of the debt and receiving more supplies as advance payment, thus restarting the

credit cycle.[8] Rubber barons had exclusive rights over the purchase of the rubber and the selling of supplies so that the tappers were trapped in a vicious circle of debt that was hard to break even for European workers.[9] Contemporary debates were frequently focused on how to recruit laborers, who sometimes were willingly engaged but other times forcibly hired.[10] Indigenous workers were mainly seen as supporting actors, while the tappers facing heat, malaria, and attacks by the "savages" were presented as the heroes of civilization. The bottom line was clear; the natives had to become integrated into the agenda of progress or else be eliminated.[11]

Third, and most importantly, there was a notion of the rainforest as an almost endless source of natural wealth. Indeed, the literature reveals the extended utopia of an infinite nature. It usually consisted in a mere enumeration of natural resources; while the Bolivian highlands contained gold, silver, tin, and copper, the lowlands offered rubber, quinine, coca, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, cotton, and sugarcane, and, among these, rubber was clearly the crucial staple, which no one thought could ever be exhausted:

> Every year several expeditions explore the Beni region, penetrate its forests, find new tributaries of rivers, examine the land and come back with surprising stories of gold mines and the abundance of precious gemstones, the opulence of pastures, agricultural valleys and tropical fruits, and, crowning it all, the limitless treasures of rubber, one of the main products of world commerce.[12]

In some cases, this discourse of opulence reached quite a romantic fascination, akin to what William Cronon called "the sacred grandeur of the sublime."[13] Having spent several years working with rubber in Bolivia between 1907 and 1922, Swiss rubber tapper Franz Ritz eloquently describes this magnificence:

> There's life everywhere—from left to right, up and down ... images like in *One Thousand and One Nights* come one after the other, as if in a film. This tropical splendor is a delight to the eyes. The air is filled with charming aromas. Beetles and other strange insects buzz and hum. There is no other place in the world where vegetation proliferates with such voluptuous and unbridled exuberance.[14]

These postulates, to be sure, reveal a predatory logic in the Bolivian modernist rhetoric, obsessed with exporting natural resources and integrating the Amazon rainforest—and, therefore, the whole country—into the global economy. They also reveal, however, the canonical consensus about the rainforest being a deserted, wild space,

teeming with endless resources. Indeed, the Amazon rainforest would only come to be perceived with anxiety as a fragile, endangered, finite space toward the very end of the twentieth century, the time both of its most intense destruction and an emerging global consensus on the necessity of rainforest conservation.[15]

The perception of the rainforest as endless in the nineteenth century is also evident in discourses about its population. As Cronon observes, "the myth of the wilderness as 'virgin' uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home."[16] Amazonia was, of course, not deserted, but the indigenous owners of most of the rubber territory were commonly stereotyped as barbarous, savage, or even cannibals in order to justify land dispossession.[17] Indeed, numerous tappers believed that, among the endless resources, figured the natives themselves, who were as natural as the plants or the animals; once inside the credit cycle, workers were kept in permanent debt, and many observers even refer to the *habilito* system as a sort of slavery. Debates about labor conditions, involving several social actors—missionaries versus rubber tappers, *caucheros* versus *siringueros* among tappers, and so on—should in fact be understood along those lines.[18] Ernst Leutenegger, who worked in the famous Casa Suárez and knew firsthand the Bolivian rubber industry for a whole quarter-century (1905–30), summarized the issue:

> The product collected by dark-skinned, shabby, and skinny people constituted the source of the gold river that flowed into the pockets of rubber speculators from Manaos, Pará, New York and London. ... A large part of the indigenous population never returned to their homes. Like the Moloch god, the jungle swallowed everything.[19]

There were nuances to the predatory ideology, connected to technical or botanical features. We speak generically of "rubber," but, on the one hand, there was indeed *caoutchouc* (*Castilla elastica* or *Castilla ulel*) and, on the other, *siringa* (*Hevea brasiliensis* or *Hevea benthamiana*), which required very different forms of exploitation, varying in terms of the modes of extraction and commercialization they required. *Caucheros* felled the tree to obtain lower-quality and, hence, cheaper latex, while tappers made incisions to get finer and more expensive rubber. The former entailed a more nomadic and destructive method of extraction, while *siringa* allowed for a more sedentary, methodical, and less aggressive form of exploitation. Consequently, some *siringueros* claimed their *cauchero* colleagues impersonated a degraded and irresponsible version of the extractive endeavor and even presented *siringa* as a more ecological industry *avant la lettre*.[20] However, historical sources also show that differences were not

merely technical. The Amazonian regions, having as much *caoutchouc* as rubber, were normally border areas where tensions abounded, ranging from informal skirmishes (for example, the Juruá and Purús river basins) to formal wars between states (for example, the Acre War in 1899–1903 between Bolivia and Brazil). In these contested spaces, technical divisions were often interpreted in a nationalist key; Peruvians were described generically as *caucheros*, while Bolivians or Brazilians appear as *siringueros*, when, in fact, it is clear that in most cases there was cooperation with trade partners going beyond borders and that the very same traders dealt both with *siringa* and *caoutchouc*.

An important source of complexity relates to the sustainable condition of rubber. As early as 1901, a technical report of the *India Rubber World* pointed to the possibility that rubber might become exhausted. It described the dangers of limiting business to the wild variety and advocated large-scale cultivation, mentioning the waste of rubber in defective processes, the inexistence of government regulation, and the lack of improvement in navigation or railways.[21] But this diagnostic was not shared in Bolivia. The idea that rubber trees would always be at hand, never-ending and eternal, indeed allows for a better understanding of the overwhelming attraction of a merchandise item that literally "oozed from the trees."[22] On account of a utopian perception that the riches of wild rubber were inexhaustible, neither the Bolivian government nor the merchant houses seem to have seriously considered maximizing benefits through the setting up of plantations and practically no one managed to foresee the looming crisis.

While rubber demand flourished in Brazil and was budding in Bolivia, botanist Henry Wickham smuggled from Brazil to London about 70,000 *Hevea* seeds, which were planted at the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens and then transplanted to Ceylon. Brazil did nothing to prevent it and neither did Bolivia nor Peru.[23] In Peru, it was believed that wild rubber was of superior quality, that cultivated plants were more prone to catch diseases, and that Asian workers were less skilled, though inaction might probably also have been influenced by the notorious Putumayo scandal.[24] In Brazil, it was claimed that rubber trees would never grow in Asia and that if they did they would either not yield rubber or only yield rubber of very inferior quality. When Asian rubber eventually flourished, in excellent form, and also became less costly due to cheap Asian labor, it was just too late. In 1910, Brazil still produced roughly half of the world's supply. Within two years, however, the output of the Far East equaled that of Brazil. By 1918, these plantations produced more than 80 percent of the world's supply of rubber.[25] In 1911, the first Rubber Congress attempted to face the crisis, and, the following year, Brazil issued a decree contemplating experimental tree plantations and a tax exemption for importing equipment and the construction of railways, but the plan was discontinued for lack of funds.[26]

Though the Bolivian case was somewhat different, "rubber" remained a synonym for "wild rubber" from the industrial point of view. The early warning given by the report of the *India Rubber World* was never taken into account. When the value of rubber plunged from three US dollars to seventy-three cents per pound, the only reaction of large firms like Suárez was to put a halt to shipments and wait for the price to pick up again.[27] At any rate, with its attention focused on the struggle over borders with Peru in Puerto Maldonado and Brazil in the Acre region, the government was not in a position to face the crisis.[28] One of the conditions of the armistice with Brazil was the construction of the Madeira–Mamoré railway to transport rubber toward the Atlantic, but the works were only completed in 1912 when the decline of the industry could no longer be reversed.

The extended perception of rubber as a wild natural resource clearly also contributed to the blockage of any sustainable project of commercialization. This article has tracked significant variations in the imaginary of rubber as an engine of socioeconomic growth and insertion in the global economy. However, these discursive nuances were not sufficient to alter the general structure of the extractive paradigm. Despite some scattered diagnostics exposing concern about the sustainable potential of rubber exploitation—some of them external to the local industry, such as the *India Rubber World* report, and others within, like the *siringueros* preoccupation about the excesses of the *cauchero* colleagues—the underlying logic of rubber commodification in Bolivia was characterized by the combination of a predatory instrumentalism and a romantic utopia of inexhaustible nature. Thus, the rubber industry was doomed not only due to the unstoppable Asian competition but also because of an unfortunate chain of internal circumstances, among them a kind of ecological hubris.[29] Therefore, rubber changed everything on its way across eastern Bolivia, but it did so like a summer storm.[30] After altering the social, political, sanitary, economic, and cultural landscape, rubber only left ghost towns and old stories of grandeur transmitted by its current inhabitants, some of whom still longed for the times when their lives revolved around pounds sterling, gramophones, champagne, the Cachuela Esperanza theatre, and the "black gold" that flowed from the trees.

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Notes

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4 Pilar García Jordán, *Cruz y arado, fusiles y discursos* (Lima: Institut Français d'Études Andines/Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2001).
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24 The "Putumayo scandal" was triggered when several observers such as Benjamín Saldaña (Peru), Walter Handerburg (United States) and Roger Casement (Great Britain) denounced the atrocities and abuse suffered by thousands of indigenous and creole labourers who worked for the infamous rubber baron Julio César Arana in the Peruvian-Colombian frontier. Alberto Chirif and Manuel Cornejo, *Imaginario e imágenes de la época del caucho: los sucesos del Putumayo* (Lima: CAAAP / International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2009).
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