

## **5 · The Indigenous Peoples' Movement, 'forest citizenship' and struggles over health services in Acre, Brazil**

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### **Introduction**

For marginalized minorities, democracy brings dilemmas. In particular, it brings dilemmas of engagement with the democratic state, which is expected both to uphold the rights of minorities and to implement the will of the majority. Engagement through elections – the standard arena of democratic politics – is hampered by the small share of the total vote that minorities can muster, so that, if they are to have any success, alliances will be needed. Such alliances may depend on minorities framing their demands and identities in ways that dilute or contradict the cohesion of their own mobilizations (Ramos, 2002).

Other engagements with the state bring their own dilemmas. Participation as self-provision or co-production of outsourced state services – the mode of engagement favoured by neoliberal approaches – may divert the energy mobilized by rights-claiming strategies into management, and muddy once-clear accountability relations (Dagnino, 2008). Participation as the exercise of voice in shaping public policy – the mode of engagement favoured by deliberative approaches to democracy – may require minorities to frame their arguments in ways that devalue their own discursive logics and to acquiesce in notions of citizenship that tend to reject their rights claims as special pleading (Williams, 1998; Young, 2000). Given these tensions, it is unsurprising that minorities often choose to avoid engagement with state-sponsored participatory arenas, preferring a path of strategic non-participation (von Lieres, 2006; Robins et al., 2008).

This chapter draws on the experience of the indigenous peoples of Acre State in the Brazilian Amazon in dealing with these tensions over the two decades since Brazil's return to full democracy, symbolized by the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution. This has been heralded as inaugurating a new era of unparalleled democratic deepening and as giving constitutional as well as moral legitimacy to the rights struggles of social movements. Of these, one of the most prominent during the 1987–88 Constituent Assembly was the Movimento Indígena, or

Indigenous Peoples' Movement, which emerged from modest beginnings in a series of local assemblies sponsored by the Catholic Church to promote some of the most visible and effective mobilizations for constitutional rights recognition (Athias, 2007).

Other successful mobilizations in this period, such as that of the Movimento pela Reforma Sanitária (Movement for Health Reform), evoked an inclusionary notion of democratization by seeking the recognition of universal rights – such as the right to health – on the basis of equal treatment for all Brazilian citizens (Cornwall and Shankland, 2008). The Movimento Indígena, by contrast, campaigned for the right to difference, securing constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples' 'social organization, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions' (Brazil, 1988: 136, my translation). In the process, it evoked a transformative notion of democratization – one whose underlying logic implied a transformation in the identity of Brazil itself, from a unitary society where homogeneity was to be pursued by state policies of forced 'acculturation' and absorption of ethnic minorities, to a pluriethnic polity where the state's task was to mediate between the claims of multiple Brazilian cultures (Duprat, 2002).

In the period after the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, the underlying tension between universality and difference was complicated further by the rise of neoliberal approaches that sought to turn civil society organizations from vehicles for rights-claiming into implementation partners for targeted delivery of outsourced public services. These tensions contributed to the fragmentation of the national Movimento Indígena. Across Brazil, regional branches of the Movimento Indígena established different organizational forms and followed different pathways of engagement, as new alliances, enmities and opportunities emerged from democratic struggles at the federal, state and municipal levels.

This chapter seeks to explore these issues by focusing on movement dynamics in Acre State over a period of some eight years after 1999, when a new state government took office with a pro-indigenous agenda and when changes in federal government policy led to widespread outsourcing of indigenous health services. This period saw the focus of the Acre Movimento Indígena shift from an emphasis on rights-claiming mobilization outside the state to direct participation in the management of outsourced government health services – and then back again. The chapter explores the complex and sometimes contradictory strategies and tactics that representatives of Acre's Indigenous Peoples' Movement have deployed in response to the dilemmas of engagement with the state.

This exploration draws on the findings of an action-research

project undertaken between 2005 and 2008 with the health rights non-governmental organization (NGO) Associação Saúde Sem Limites (SSL – Brazilian Health Unlimited Association), which began when the SSL was approached by several indigenous leaders who were seeking help in dealing with the apparently disastrous consequences of their foray into health service management. The project aimed to facilitate a process of critical reflection among representatives of Acre's Indigenous Peoples' Movement on their experiences of engaging with the state on health policy and services, with a view to mapping out strategies for future action.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with the broader purposes of this book, this chapter asks what democratic outcomes flowed from the different forms of engagement pursued by the Movimento Indígena in Acre. In particular, it explores the possible trade-offs between different types of democratic outcome: between recognition and redistribution, and between inclusion and transformation (Habermas et al., 1998; Young, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Finally, it interrogates these trade-offs to see whether they can yield more broadly relevant insights into the dilemmas that minorities must confront as they engage with the state in mobilizing for democracy.

### **Indigenous peoples, the state and 'forest citizenship' in Acre**

Acre lies in the far west of Brazil, and the indigenous population of the state, currently numbering approximately 12,000, accounts for less than 3 per cent of its inhabitants (Ricardo and Ricardo, 2006: 570).<sup>3</sup> Acre's indigenous citizens belong to fourteen different ethnic groups. While these groups have different levels of contact and familiarity with non-indigenous society, all were directly affected by the occupation of Acre during the rubber boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – a time of intense conflict between the incoming *seringueiros* (rubber tappers) and the existing indigenous population. To this day, inter-ethnic relations in Acre are marked by the legacy of the rubber boom, as some indigenous groups allied themselves to the 'rubber barons', while others fled or resisted violently and suffered extensive processes of massacre, displacement and enslavement (Hemming, 1987).

Despite this legacy of conflict, in the late 1980s *seringueiro* leaders fighting for the preservation of the rubber-rich rainforest declared a 'Forest Peoples' Alliance' with Acre's indigenous peoples. The threat posed by the aggressive expansion of cattle-ranching into Acre, along new roads built by the federal government with funding from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, helped to create the