

# *Des politiques territoriales durables ? Leçons d'Amazonie*

by Xavier Arnauld de Sartre and Vincent Berdoulay

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The Brazilian Amazon, home to rubber tappers, rainforests, and rectilinear road projects, is a cauldron for sustainable development. It is the lungs of the world, in a country racing towards modernity and peppered with social movements. How then, has the vision of sustainable development, articulated so strongly at the 1992 Earth Summit (in Brazil, not accidentally), been implemented here?

This commendable book traces how sustainable development has morphed into “territorial” development, with diverse, often contradictory, consequences for local people, civil society, and the rainforest. The book ecumenically seeks insights from political geography, political ecology, and regional planning, and across French, Brazilian, and Anglophone literatures, challenging what sometimes appear to be formidable barriers (Fall and Rosière, 2008). As such it deserves to be brought to the attention to the Anglophone audience (two related English articles exist, cited below).

Arnauld de Sartre and Berdoulay dissect the tensions between modernist ideologies, local activism, and notions of sustainability. A key focus is *politiques territoriales*, which has no comfortable translation, sitting somewhere between “policies applied through territories” and a nod to regional planning. The expression has become common in Francophone and Lusophone governance speak, signifying an anchoring of policies and actions in *territoires*, extant or new administrative areas imagined as expressions of local or regional identity. This approach has developed in opposition to sectoral approaches, in which government branches acted independently, with little coordination. But the authors also play with the richness of *territoire* as a geographic concept.

The book is animated by a central tension: that “sustainable development” is at once a modern project, undertaken by the state and imposed on its subjects, but at the same time it is a postmodern critique of modernity’s environmental and social consequences, favouring a rhetoric of empowerment and diversity. The book asks whether the implementation of sustainable development through “territorial” approaches doesn’t push it back towards the modernist fold. After introducing this central tension, the authors review several centuries of modernist development, beginning in colonial Guyana and continuing to Brazil’s post-war efforts to assert

control over the Amazon. Whether under a military or democratic government, developers saw the region as a blank slate. Critiques of such modernist projects, like deforestation and indigenous rights, contributed to the rise of sustainable development.

Chapter 2 focuses on scale. While modernity is linked with the sovereign state, postmodern sustainable development is multi-actor and multi-scalar. The chapter demonstrates how Brazil's complex patchwork of protected areas results from interactions of diverse networks of actors – both within and between scales. It highlights global-local tensions, institutional legacies, internal ideological debates, and the dynamics of social movements. It shows, using examples like the *Verde para Sempre* reserve, that conservation in the Amazon is not, as some would assert, an internationalization of environmental governance contesting state sovereignty (Arnauld de Sartre and Taravella, 2009). On the contrary, the federal state uses sustainable development to extend its modernistic logic of control – enrolling locals, outsiders and territorial politics on the way.

Chapter 3 dissects the notion of territory. It highlights the 2007 Project for a Sustainable Amazon, which aimed to articulate diverse, sometimes contradictory, sectoral policies into “territories”. Territories in this Project are lived local spaces, as well as implementation areas that bring into contact diverse interests and actors. While the federal state uses sustainability and territorial approaches to try to safeguard its sovereignty, in effect this means opening the door to participation, hence to unpredictability. This is demonstrated through the story of the thirty-year struggle over the Xingu River, in which social movements successfully challenged not just dam construction, but the whole federal approach to the region. Chapter 4 argues that the state uses “place” and “territory” to accommodate its cultural diversity in a way that enrolls people as singular citizens, as agents in projects of rational natural resource management. The chapter traces the roots of postcolonial, nationalist ideologies, and illustrates its case by analysing a 2006 policy document entitled *Diretrizes para o desenvolvimento rural sustentável*. This document seeks to institutionalize family farming (as opposed to large-scale, *patronal* farming) in a very modernist way using the rhetoric of sustainable development.

The following chapter continues the focus on family farmers. The sustainable development agenda advocates attention to people marginalized by modernity. Yet, the efforts of the state and other actors to implement this imperative – using territorial approaches – are poorly adapted to these people's lives. First, *Pronaf*, an agrarian development ministry program, requires actors and municipalities to group into “territories” to receive funds. Yet, these territories feel artificial to locals, and social movements like labour unions are wary that they might reduce their own power. Second, farming schools, meant to be bottom-up structures, are instead distributed territorially and serve to create a class of “citizens”. Third, an analysis of the Boa Esperança settlement project (made infamous through the assassination of Sister Dorothy), shows the difficulties encountered in translating a plan for sustainable development into reality (Arnauld de Sartre et al., 2012).

Chapter 6 directs our attention to Brazil's “traditional populations”: communities like rubber tappers, *quilombolas*, or *ribeirinhos*. It reviews their recent political recognition, highlighting the role of social movements and of IUCN advocacy under a sustainable development agenda. Several examples are used to demonstrate how the “territorialisation” of sustainable development succeeded in linking identities to place and empowered traditional populations in ways that compete with the state. Empowerment is a fundamental part of sustainable development, and when applied in a territorial and identity-based context, it has powerful effects that the state cannot control, mitigating against very modernist planning approaches.

The Conclusion plays on notions of modern “utopia” and postmodern “heterotopia” in thinking about the Amazon as a testing ground for sustainable development. The performance of sustainable development requires a spatial approach, implemented in the Brazilian case through territorial policies. As both a scale of government action and a scale at which actors gain rights and assert identities, territory becomes an end in itself. In the end, the territorialisation of sustainable development preserves the modernist state – and its utopian visions of control and order – but accommodates postmodern attention to diverse actors at multiple scales. In taking this stand, Arnauld de Sartre and Berdoulay extend Scott’s (1998) critique of the combination of modernity with state power (without citing it). They show that the state’s tendency to simplify diversity and facilitate control, particularly through the use of territorial approaches, has allowed the modernist spirit to creep into sustainable development, despite it once being a critique of modernity. Yet they avoid Scott’s swinging of the pendulum to the other side, by seeing strength in the very tensions between modern and postmodern, in the contradictions within sustainable development. They hope for an “altermodernity”, a modernity that, due to tensions with postmodernity, knows its limits and acts with this in mind in a world that remains very modern.

The book is astutely theorized, a fertile consideration of the conceptual and ideological aspects of sustainable development. The arguments are at times difficult and dense, overlapping between chapters and examples, as complex as the on-the-ground realities in the state of Pará which serves as the book’s main source of empirical detail. Chapters are rich in ideas, and weave multiple narrative and theoretical threads simultaneously. None of the case studies or examples are explored exhaustively, but always with enough detail to make the necessary points. In sum, the book is a rich theoretical contribution, full of insights, and worthy of serious attention.

## References

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