



Online Public Talk (EN/FR)

The Invisible Conquest: From Indigenous Territories to National Frontiers in the Western Amazon (1850-1912)

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With simultaneous translation into French

In 1850, Peru and Brasil signed a contract to establish steam navigation from Manaus to Peruvian ports in the Hullaga river. Before this, merchants in the continental Amazon had adapted to indigenous economies by exchanging indigenous products like manufactures or forest resources. The Amazon was indistinctly indigenous before steam navigation, as we can see through the extreme dependence on indigenous knowledge, resources, labor, and products that colonizers had. Steam navigation started to modify this slowly as it required the reorganization of the forest in service of the steamships and the expansion of export and import economies. The reorganization was, of course, centered on the indigenous population. Steam navigation began an era in the Amazon in which nations desired these territories and attempted to colonize the region by transforming indigenous people into working settled citizens and their territories into public lands or national property. However, the dreams of civilization were easy desire than done. My research focuses on the many relations that started unfolding after 1850 until the end of the first rubber boom in 1912, showing the advantage that indigenous populations had in their own territories over colonizers. It is essential to break the idea of stagnant or “uncontacted” indigenous groups and instead see the long history of relations and experiences that indigenous groups already had with colonizers even before 1850. However, with the intensification of certain colonial economies like rubber extraction, despair grew between private entrepreneurs and the nation states administration as it became clear that indigenous groups would never be “useful to the nation” as long as they retained their independence. After 1870 the rubber economy began one of the most violent periods in the history of the Amazon. Slavery became extended through all the Western tributaries of the Amazon alongside the forced displacement of indigenous territories. In this context, indigenous groups kept adapting to colonizing pressure by getting involved in the economy, negotiating protection with political authorities or catholic missionaries, or escaping and rejecting any commerce or contact with the colonizers. The second half of the nineteenth century was a crucial moment in the history of indigenous relations with colonizers and nation-states that had a long-standing effect in the Amazon even today.

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