Abstract

Cattle ranchers are often presented as the wealthy, violent, and environmentally destructive villains of Amazonia. Ranchers in the state of Acre, Brazil, are viewed in a particularly negative light, due to their perceived association with the assassination of “rain-forest martyr” Chico Mendes in 1988. The objective of this paper is to increase our understanding of this enigmatic, powerful group through an ethnographic description of ranchers in relation to features of their villain label: elite status and environmental destruction. Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork with Acrean ranchers and other rural groups, I analyze the ways in which the ranchers conform to and challenge classification as an elite group in relation to economic and political power, describe how rancher status is constructed and expressed in social situations, and compare the extent to which other rural social groups agree with perceptions of the ranchers. Understanding the ranchers’ perspective, especially with regard to environmental debates, requires an examination of how they perceive their work in relation to history and ideology, and how they have adapted the term to defend their interests and engage current political debates centered on environmental preservation.

Keywords: Amazonia, work, environmentalism, ranchers, elites

Introduction

In the entryway of the Biblioteca da Floresta (Library of the Forest), in Rio Branco, Acre, there is a dramatic wall display entitled “O Acre Como um Pasto de Boi” (Acre as a Cattle Pasture). This construction by the state “forest” government chronicles the environmental destruction and social conflict that took place in Acre during the takeoff period of Amazonian colonization in the 1970s and 1980s. In the first photo, a military officer aims his binoculars to the horizon—the Amazonian frontier.

In the 1970s, the military government opened the Amazon up to settlement by smallholders, landless populations, and urban poor from other parts of Brazil (Moran 1981; Smith 1982; Almeida 1992). Entrepreneurs and ranchers from central-southern Brazil were also attracted by incentives and subsidies to establish large-scale cattle ranching operations (Hecht 1993).
of the ranchers in terms of race, wealth, status, conflict, and command of labor. Although there is an idealization of the rancher as rural gentry, a brief discussion of 20 Acrean ranchers shows that they are a diverse group composed of both landed elites and persons of more humble origins.

Now that the land conflicts have subsided in Acre, many ranchers feel that the tensions have entered the political and ideological realm as a contest between traditional ideals associated with development, both economically and socially, and environmentalism, which the ranchers see as inhibiting economic growth and a step backward for the country and society in general. Understanding their criticisms of environmentalism, aside from the fact that it directly challenges the material basis of the wealth and status, requires an examination of how they perceive their work.

Rural Amazonian groups agree that work (trabalho) is the application of one’s labor to produce food or other products. Amazonian work results in two physical transformations: forests are converted to cultivated spaces in the form of agricultural fields or pastures and smooth hands become calloused. The ranchers are assumed to have “smooth” hands because they command the labor of others, a key component of elite status. Ranchers emphasize the social function of their production over labor and draw on developmentalist notions of landscape transformation as progress to defend their ranching livelihood and to dispute environmental ideology and policies.

Methods and Research Area

This paper draws on data collected over four field seasons from 2007 to 2010 totaling 18 months in the upper and lower Acre regions of southwestern Acre, Brazil. Upper Acre was the epicenter of rubber tapper–rancher land conflicts and the primary site of organization and mobilization of the rubber tapper movement (Bakx 1988; Keck 1995). Upper Acre and the adjacent lower Acre region, which includes the capital city of Rio Branco, are the most deforested areas of the state (Governo do Acre 2006) (Figure 2).

In this analysis, I focus primarily on the ranchers, but I also examine perceptions of the ranchers among three rural groups residing in upper and lower Acre: cowboys working for ranchers, smallholder agricultural colonists, and forest extractivist rubber tappers. The rubber tappers and colonists in my sample were drawn from communities in upper Acre. Because of difficulties in gaining access to ranchers and cowboys in upper Acre, my sample of these groups includes some ranches in lower Acre.

Rubber tappers arrived in Acre with the rubber booms of the mid-1800s, and another wave of “rubber
soldiers" came when the industry briefly rebounded during World War II (Martinello 2004). Although their livelihoods are changing, they historically made a living from the extraction of forest products, such as rubber and Brazil nut (Salisbury and Schmink 2007; Gomes 2009). Colonists and ranchers are migrant groups who arrived with the opening of the Amazon in the 1970s and 1980s. The term “colonist” is applied to those who reside on one of the smaller (~40–100 hectare) plots of land in the settlement projects established by the Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform. Native Acreans and former rubber tappers residing in the projects are also considered colonists. My sample of ranchers is confined to individuals owning large ranches with approximately 5,000 head of cattle. Unlike rubber tappers and colonists, the ranchers do not reside in a centralized rural community, but live scattered throughout the capital of Rio Branco. Cowboys, often native Acreans and descendants of rubber tapper families, generally do not own land; they make a living by working cattle on the large ranches where they often reside.

The first three field seasons (2007, 2008, and 2009) were devoted primarily to participant observation of the economic and other cultural features of the cattle industry and to establishing rapport with the four rural groups. In 2010, I administered a questionnaire to 20 members of each group (ranchers, cowboys, colonists, and rubber tappers) on their perceptions of rural groups, landscapes, and forms of livelihood. Additional ethnographic observations of some ranchers were obtained while I accompanied them on errands around town, visits to their ranches, and urban social events, such as auctions, barbecues, and public meetings. Out of the sample of 20 ranchers, I came to know 7 of them well through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and personal interactions over the course of multiple field seasons. I visited the homelands of two of these ranchers in south-central Brazil to understand their reasons for coming to Acre in relation to their family history.

There are challenges to gaining access to any elite group, and most of the ranchers were naturally suspicious when a foreigner and assumed ecologista (environmentalist) expressed an interest in them. My first meeting with a rancher was facilitated by a government contact. I spoke briefly with the rancher in his office and he invited me to my first cattle auction, where I was able to meet other ranchers, and gradually expand my network. I made it clear that my purpose was to collect data on the cultural and economic features of the cattle industry among different rural groups, which also included rubber tappers and colonists. Although they were always skeptical of my real intentions, some of them gradually began to trust me to some extent. Those ranchers that let me into their world embraced the fact that I was attempting to get to know their lives beyond the villain label, of which they are highly aware.

Over time, I began to understand the logic of their actions based on their view of history, perceptions of land, and evolving political economic structures. My purpose here is to present some of their perspectives and provide a conceptual framework for understanding their views through examinations of class, environmental policies, and notions of work. A description of one of the “elite” cattle auctions, where

Figure 2. Acre, Brazil, and the upper Acre region (highlighted).
I often sat among the ranchers, providing a useful vehicle for introducing some of the themes of this analysis, and shows how the ranchers’ elite status is expressed and perceived in social situations.

The Acrean Rancher as Rural Elite
An Elite Cattle Auction

On Saturdays and Sundays during the dry season months of May through August, ranchers put on leilões de gado elite (elite cattle auctions) to sell their pure-bred Nellore bulls and cows. Each auction began when the first hulking white bull burst onto the stage through a little red door. The bull’s entrance was trumpeted by the choruses of famous sertaneja (Brazilian country music) songs and instrumental riffs from Europe’s “The Final Countdown” and Van Halen’s “Jump.” The announcer, from his perch high above the stage and the crowd, boomed on about the bull, “Reprodutor grande! Raça final!” (Great reproducer! Fine lineage or breed!)

Once in the arena, the bulls often just stood there huffing and staring at the sea of people in front of them. A cowboy on a skinny ledge 10 feet above the stage jabbed at the bull’s hump, haunches, and face with a long pole, which got the beast bucking and kicking up clouds of dust. The bulls never looked up at the cowboy, but instead charged forward, and their behemoth heads and horns sometimes got stuck in the reinforced fencing. Just below the stage, dust wafted over the spectators and potential buyers, who sat around square plastic tables.

The ranchers often pushed their tables together, making one long, snaking table on the right side of the arena. These “grandes” of Acrean ranching, the fazendeiros, sometimes paid careful attention to the bulls. Most of the time, however, they just appeared to be laughing and talking with their friends, the very picture of the vida boa (good life). They took bites of steak and sausage with little toothpicks, dipping the morsels into piles of dry farinha (manioc flour). They absently held up their empty glasses, and waiters in black vests and bowties scurried to refill them with whisky, cachaca, beer, or soda.

When a new bull entered the stage, some ranchers scrutinized their auction booklets. They were evaluating the potential quality of the bull, from its family lineage and growth rate to its scrotum circumference, a measure of productivity. All of the auction cattle were created using the frozen semen of long deceased, legendary bulls, whose names were printed in the family tree going back several generations. These cattle were all certified puro origem (pure origin) Nellore breed, with some selling for over 14,000 reais (US$8,880).

There were also weekday auctions, which the ranchers only attended if they needed a lote (lot) of calves for quick fattening, but they often sent their gerentes, or foremen, to buy for them. The breeding stock at the weekday auctions was not considered “elite,” but was comprised of mixed-race cattle, graduations of the white Nellore and the Acrean tucura, a smaller, harder animal with stringier meat. The tucura was the only kind of cattle in Acre before the arrival of the white Nellore cattle and the southern ranchers in the 1970s.

At the long rancher table, ranchers from Minas Gerais and São Paulo, who sometime shared kinship ties, often sat together in little clusters. The host rancher’s cowboys, mostly native Acreans, and their families also attended the elite auctions, but they generally sat apart, at the smaller tables. A group of newer ranchers, both native Acreans and migrants who had success in business and bought ranches within the past decade also sat around these smaller tables. There were also people at the auctions who had no intention of buying cattle and owned no land. These men said that they just enjoyed seeing the beautiful animals and partaking in the free food and drink. The groups sitting at the smaller tables sometimes mixed with the traditional ranchers, but the ranchers usually came to their table, not the other way around. When a rancher arrived, the seated individual rose quickly, and bowed slightly before extending their hand to grasp the smooth, uncalledous hand of the rancher.

In recent decades, the ranchers and the pure-bred cattle have been built into Acrean social hierarchy and common perceptions as an elite stock imported from outside that is more “productive” than the mixed-race Acre native. In social settings, many ranchers exhibit cues of class distinction, and a jeito, or way of interacting with people, which combines an ease of social interaction and macho jocularity with the commanding and no-nonsense style of a person of power. When other rural groups imitate ranchers, they stride purposefully with their elbows out and bark staccato orders, usually with an exaggerated paulista (a term applied to ranchers from outside of Acre, although it literally means native of São Paulo state) accent.

As a result of their wealth and the perception that they gained or consolidated their elite status through violence against native Acreans and destruction of the forest, ranchers are both emulated and disdained in rural Acre. They are an exclusive group that fulfills the local characteristics of an elite class with their whiteness, southern origin, smooth hands, and expectation of deference from socioeconomically subordinate classes. It is also assumed that the ranchers have political and economic power, central features of elite status, which I now discuss.
Economic and Political Features of Rancher Status

Over the past 40 years, anthropologists have made progress in conceptualizing the upper strata of society and describing how they maintain and express power (e.g., Cohen 1981; Marcus 1983; Shore and Nugent 2002). In the following discussion, I briefly discuss the Amazonian ranchers in relation to two criteria commonly used to denote elite status: economic position, or class, and political rule (Marcus 1983). My aim here is to demonstrate how the ranchers challenge and fit into conceptualizations of an elite class.

According to a Marxian view, the ranchers possess central attributes of elite status as commodity producers who hire the labor of the proletariat and sell goods through connections with national and international capitalist classes (Cancian 1989:165). The ranchers have greater economic power in relation to other rural groups – cowboys, colonists, and rubber tappers – but their relationship with each group is distinct. For example, the average rancher may buy calves for fattening or rent pasture from peasant groups who own land – the colonists and rubber tappers. These arrangements bring greater financial benefit to the rancher than the smallholders, but the relationship between the two is not coerced. Some smallholders used rancher improvements to their land to make the transition to become small-scale independent ranchers.

Cowboys, often former colonists and rubber tappers or their sons, form another rural subordinate category: proletarians selling their labor to the ranchers. Many cowboys grew up in the cities, where their families may have moved as the rubber industry declined, or as a result of land conflicts with ranchers. With the transition from rubber to the cattle economy in Acre, the ranchers assumed the previously dominant rural position of the seringalista (rubber baron), who controlled the labor of the rubber tappers in a debt peonage system (Bakx 1988).

All of the cowboys that I interviewed felt a sense of loyalty to the ranchers, referring to them as patrão (boss), a term also used by the rubber tappers for the seringalistas. The cowboys, however, emphasized that they were free laborers with the ability to leave their position if they wished. In the case of the cowboys, there is a clearer relationship of domination, both historically, when they may have been forced from their lands by ranchers, and in the present, as wage laborers. Economic domination is useful for conceptualizing a capitalist landowning class, but it does not capture the diversity of socioeconomic relationships between subordinate and dominant classes, or the fluidity of the smallholders, who may move between autonomous peasant and wage-dependent proletarian categories on a seasonal basis (Figure 3).

The seminal writings of Pareto (1968) and Mosca (1939) emphasized structural-political features of elite classes that allowed them to maintain political power. According to Giddens (1973) these works represent an attempt to “transmute the Marxian concept of class as founded on the relations of production, into an essentially political differentiation between ‘those who rule’ and those ‘who are ruled’ ” (quoted in Marcus 1983:14). In Acre, the ranchers remain economically and politically dominant in the minds of subordinate groups, but they feel that their political power has eroded with the decline of developmentalist ideology and policy.

When the ranchers arrived in Amazonia, they had a great deal of power – the ability to impose their will successfully on less powerful groups (Schmink and Wood 1992:13–14). Within the context of the frontier, Acrean ranchers could pressure state entities to act on their behalf, especially against the socioeconomically marginal rubber tappers (Bakx 1988; Keck 1995). The ranchers were also backed at the time by the developmentalist ideology and policies of colonization, which saw the ranchers’ work as the vehicle for “progress” and “development” (Hecht and Cockburn 1989).

The rubber tapper movement challenged the developmentalist discourses of “empty lands” and
government officials are puppets for an international organization because of the high visibility of their properties in the eyes of all, one also must fulfill a series of characteristics that indicate economic power and a historical association with the upper strata of society.

After a year of fieldwork, it became apparent that ranchers were commonly associated with a number of specific characteristics. I administered a survey to measure the extent to which members of four rural social groups (n = 20 respondents/group) associated the ranchers with these characteristics, including, whiteness, wealth, southern origin, land conflict, and a separation from labor. Table 1 shows the percentage of members in each group that agreed with these statements.

Because of the violent land conflicts that took place in Acre, ranchers are often associated with conflict and the displacement of native Acreans. Ninety percent of rubber tappers, the group that felt the brunt of these land contests, agreed that ranchers caused conflict. Seventy percent of colonists agreed
with the conflict statement, but only 55 percent of ranchers and cowboys agreed.

When most Acreans think of a rancher, they imagine a white man. In cases in which statements were considered to be a social fact, I reversed the statement to mitigate respondent bias, asking the opposite – if ranchers were moreno (dark skinned or mixed race). At least 95 percent of respondents in all groups said that ranchers were not moreno. Acreans will often use “foreign” names to describe individuals with a light complexion: paulista (native of São Paulo state), suísa (southerner), gaúcho (native of Rio Grande do Sul), Alemao (German), and gringo. These descriptors indicate the racial differences between foreigners and Acreans, who tend to be mixed race, as well as the assumption that white populations were born outside of the region. All rubber tappers and 90 percent of colonists agreed that ranchers came from outside of Acre, but ranchers (60 percent) and their cowboys (75 percent) (who were interviewed separately) agreed less with this statement.

Compared to the geographically isolated state of Acre, southern origin is also associated with a connection to the economic and cultural centers of Brazil, and with modernity. Although Acreans are very proud of their state, it is generally agreed that roots in southern Brazil are socially desirable. The ability to travel outside of Acre is also an indicator of high social status, and at least 90 percent of respondents in each group agreed that ranchers can travel outside of Acre every year. Travel was often listed as a characteristic of the rancher “good life,” which also included a new truck, a nice house in the city, a beautiful wife and/or girlfriend, and drinking whiskey.

Elite status is thus related to series of features that are both ascribed (race, origin) and realized through actions or behaviors (conflict, travel). With the exception of land conflict, these features are not unique to the ranchers, and describe much of the urban elite. What makes the ranchers unique is that their work takes place in the countryside, a setting where there are no office jobs and people must work with their hands. For many rural people, the proof of a true fazendeiro is written on the hands.

**Smooth Hands and the Command of Labor**

In greetings, class differences become apparent in the meeting of rough and smooth hands, which, along with other contextual evidence, such as clothing, race, and material possessions, can indicate a life of manual labor or the command of labor (see Schmink 1982:350). Calloused hands are seen as a physical connection to work, and a connection with the land. Maintaining “fine” hands demonstrates that one is above physical labor and makes a living by “thinking” in the city, or by commanding the labor of others in rural settings. When rural subordinate groups recounted their experiences in Amazonia, they often held out their hands, and told me to look at their mãos caldejadas (calloused hands). Their thick, deeply creased hands were often offered before they even began speaking, serving for them as indisputable evidence of a life of hard work.

It was often said that fine hands, those belonging to urban bureaucrats, the foreign anthropologist, and wealthy ranchers, demonstrated a disconnection from the trials of life in the countryside, and a fundamental inability to comprehend their experience. Questions about rancher work were often met with an incredulous guffaw or statement, such as this one offered by a colonist, “Humph! The rancher has fine hands. The only thing his hands touch is the steering wheel!” Table 1 showed that only 30 percent of rubber tappers agreed that ranchers had calloused hands. Only 10 percent of cowboys, the group that has the most direct contact with ranchers, thought that the ranchers had calloused hands. The ranchers also subscribe to this vision of themselves, with only 25 percent agreeing that ranchers had calloused hands. These findings indicate that in the minds of some rural groups, the ranchers are strongly associated with the command of labor.

Alternatively, a high percentage of colonists (70 percent) agreed that ranchers had calloused hands. This indicates some disagreement in conceptualizations of the rancher. Through the acquisition of neighboring landholdings, some colonists have amassed enough land and cattle to be considered fazendeiros. This same colonist-turned-fazendeiro might not be considered a true fazendeiro by the rubber tappers, who have a more idealized representation of them.

For many people, being a rancher means not only commanding labor and owning land and cattle in the present, but having done so throughout one’s life as a landed elite. “Self-made” ranchers, those who engaged in manual labor to obtain their position, and thus have calloused hands, are not accorded the same level of prestige as the true patrão. In general, subordinate groups assume that ranchers come from a legacy of rural wealth and privilege. There is truth to this belief, but as the following profiles of 20 ranchers demonstrate, there is some diversity within the rancher category.

**Diversity of Rancher Origins and Trajectories**

Some of the ranchers who migrated to Acre in the late 1970s and early 1980s came from traditional agricultural and ranching families, but others came with little and made their fortune in Acre. Of the 20
ranchers interviewed for this study, only four were the descendents of affluent ranching families in the center-south who came to Acre with the purpose of establishing large cattle ranches. These individuals are among the biggest ranchers in the state, with each owning more than 50,000 head of cattle.

Three ranchers, Zedo of São Paulo state and cousins Ribeiro and Lui of Minas Gerais, also came from traditional landowning classes, but their family’s lands had been subdivided to the point that they felt that their prospects were limited in their homelands. Enticed by government incentives, they came to Acre—not to raise cattle but to plant rubber trees. João, Ronaldo, Lissero, and Modesto were not affluent or members of traditional landowning families prior to their arrival in Acre. They used capital from the sale of land, or savings acquired through business ventures or professional careers, to finance the purchase of land and cattle in Acre. Four ranchers were born in Acre, including Moroldo, who recently bought a ranch because it was a good investment, but he disliked being associated with “crude” ranchers. Almedo and Chaga owned gas stations and bought ranches with their earnings.

Some ranchers came to Acre with humble beginnings. Migdalio was born to a small farmer family in Pernambuco. He drove trucks for a living before settling in Acre. Tedies came as a cowboy and worked his way up the ranch hierarchy before acquiring his first piece of land with the help of his employer. Through profits accrued from the sale of smaller holdings, he gradually acquired a large ranch. Three other ranchers have similar histories.

All of these ranchers now have high socioeconomic status because they own a great deal of land and cattle, but some of them come from working-class origins or acquired their initial wealth through means other than cattle. They all feel that they earned what they now have in Acre through courage and hard work. Their ideas of work were formed in relation to their family history, the developmentalist policies that encouraged their migration to Acre, broader notions of what it meant to venture to the frontier in search of opportunity, and strong beliefs about the social value of making land produce. Some of these features of the rancher perspective are illustrated by Ribeiro.

**Ribeiro’s Story: History, Ideology, and Rancher Migration to Acre**

Much of the information presented in the following section was obtained from numerous interviews with Ribeiro, a rancher who is widely respected by his peers, employees, and government officials. Ribeiro was one of the few ranchers who let me accompany him in all of his daily activities and ask him difficult questions. He also allowed me to visit his hometown in the state of Minas Gerais, where I spoke with his family and other residents about his migration to Acre. Ribeiro’s history illustrates some of the features that led others to become ranchers in Acre, and helps to frame the way that they understand themselves and their work in the present.

Generations of Ribeiro’s family prospered in the fertile mountains of southern Minas Gerais, a land of dairy cattle and, more recently, coffee. When Ribeiro and some other now-Acrean ranchers came of age, they were parts of established, economically secure, and often wealthy families. Their economic standing was derived from the land, usually cattle (mostly for milk production), agriculture, and commercial enterprises related to agricultural production.

With each generation, however, there was less available land due to a process that Ribeiro called “land reform made in the bed” – the division of parent’s land between their children, eventually reducing large landholdings to smaller plots. After Ribeiro graduated from college with a degree in agronomy, he was eager to get to work building a future for himself, but he knew that he would have to seek his fortune somewhere else, as there was not enough land in his homeland to sustain him and the family he hoped to have in the future. Similarly, many other Acrean ranchers felt that they would be the first generation unable to achieve an equal or better standard of living than their parents if they stayed in south-central Brazil.

In the 1970s, ranchers began arriving in Amazonia to establish cattle ranches with the aid of generous fiscal incentives offered by the Brazilian military government (Hecht 1993). The Acrean state, headed by Governor Wanderley Dantas (1971 to 1975), courted investors from the south and facilitated the sale of the vast rubber estates to the ranchers (Bakx 1988). In 1980, Ribeiro sold his fusca (Volkswagen Beetle) to help finance his journey, and set out for Acre with his cousin, Lui, a veterinarian. They initially planted rubber trees with the help of loans and subsidies from the government. After their rubber plantation succumbed to disease, Ribeiro entered the cattle industry, which he had always intended to do at some point.

The decision by many ranchers to come to Amazonia was also related to their understanding of history. Many recalled the migration of their ancestors from Europe in search of a better life, which they achieved through hard work and often great suffering. Back in Ribeiro’s hometown in Minas Gerais, his sister explained to me how their ancestors had come to Rio de Janeiro from Portugal at the end of the 17th century, and then struck out for what was then the wilderness of Brazil in search of gold. About 150 years ago, Ribeiro’s great-grandfather decided to settle down in the town where much of the family currently
resides in Minas Gerais state. From this perspective, Ribeiro’s family saw his migration to Amazonia as a courageous step and an extension of their pioneer heritage.

Ranchers also relate their migration to Amazonia to a sense of patriotic duty to bring Amazonia under control and make it productive, a perspective fervently propagated during the military government’s efforts to colonize Amazonia (Schmink and Wood 1992). Many ranchers see their actions in Amazonia as part of a broader historical narrative about bringing progress and development to the wilderness, a process that was romanticized in other, previous Brazilian frontiers (Moog 1994). Ranchers often said that they expected to be treated more like heroes than villains. They stressed that they never expected to encounter land conflicts after buying their land, nor could they have anticipated the drastic shift in perceptions of the forest – from an obstacle to development to a valuable resource to be preserved. Rancher criticism of environmentalism is informed by their sense of history and commitment to traditional ideals that reinforce their class position, but many of these beliefs are shared by others, as seen through a discussion of work.

**Environmental Perceptions and Policy Debates**

**Links between Landscape and Landowner Character**

The ranchers, much like smallholder groups, employ a discourse of work that is central to their class-based identity. For smallholders, the need to work is a basic right, one which was instilled in them through personal experience (Porro 2002). This perspective is also based on biblical understandings of the social function of land and its fundamental importance for producing food (Schmink and Wood 1992:181). The transformation of the land through work was also reinforced by developmentalist policies that encouraged smallholder migrants to demonstrate productivity through cultivation as a means for establishing their right to land. From this perspective, forest extractivism, based on harvesting products from the forest, was seen as an atavistic form of livelihood to be replaced by agriculture and ranching.

Despite the growth of pro-environment sentiment among much of the urban public and policymakers (PM), rural groups are socially and economically rewarded for their ability to transform not to maintain the forest. Spending time in the countryside, one hears many remarks about the character of landowners, based on quick evaluations of their landholding. This is most common among rural populations, but some non-governmental organization (NGO) workers and PM groups also made similar statements when I traveled with them. They recognized that a property with well-maintained, “clean” pasture demonstrates that the owner is a hard worker. Conversely, a person whose home is not clearly distinguished from the forest may be described as lazy, or lacking the will to work (falta de coragem). Table 2 shows the extent to which different groups agreed with these statements (n = 20 in each group). I have also included two new groups from the capital city of Rio Branco – urban policymakers and employees of environmentalist NGOs.

The clean pasture–hard worker association was nearly unanimous among rural groups, but is somewhat lower among PM and NGO workers. Alternatively, if a house cannot be seen from the road because of forest, or if a house is surrounded too closely by the forest, it is often said that the proprietor lacks the will to work. Interestingly, it was the rubber tappers, the group that is often judged negatively for their forest extractivist livelihood and lifestyle, and the cowboys who agreed with this statement the most (75 percent). More than half of colonists also agreed. However, among the NGO and PM groups, urban groups who are more likely to be called “environmentalists,” there is extremely low agreement that leaving the forest intact denotes laziness. Although the ranchers often made this sort of statement in conversation, they only agreed with it 20 percent of the time in the survey. As with many questions that were worded negatively, or would indicate a politically incorrect stance, the results do not capture the prevalence of the statement in natural speech.

**Perceptions of Men and Work in Rural Amazonia**

Amazonia was marketed to migrants as a “land without men for men without land,” and men continue to be evaluated based on their ability to demonstrate work through landscape transformation. There is a distinction made between “men” who work, and those who fail to demonstrate their work by transforming the natural environment. Individuals who do not show clear separation of human and natural spaces are considered to be less “men” in terms of gender roles, which assert that real men should perform physical labor.

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**Table 2. Percentage of Social Group Agreement with Statements that Landscape is Reflective of Landowner Character.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>A person with a clean pasture is a hard worker, %</th>
<th>A person who lives in the forest lacks the will to work, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rubber tappers</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonists</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranchers</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowboys</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policymakers</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO employees</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The process of work is inscribed on the body through calloused hands, and on the material world through the transformation of “wild” nature into cultivated spaces. Work and landscape transformation also serve to distinguish, in the minds of some, men from “less evolved” people and animals. According to some ranchers, colonists, and former rubber tappers now residing in cities, the rubber tappers’ “cultural underdevelopment” is the result of living in the forest, which has made them “more like animals than men.” This belief is related to a variety of theories, from a lack of sunshine, which hinders cognitive functions, to isolation from “civilization,” which limits socialization and access to education.

The rubber tappers often asserted their humanity in relation to a similar human–animal continuum. When describing the arrival of their ancestors to Acre, more than one rubber tapper said, “There were no people here, só bichos e índios” (only animals and Indians). It is thus assumed by some that groups who do not transform their environment – extractivist rubber tappers and Indians – and do not labor in the sol quente (hot sun), lack defining features of both men and humans because they have not tamed the corrupting influence of wild nature.

Although the domination of nature, if labeled “deforestation,” is distasteful to most Acreans, it is widely acknowledged that creating a clearly cultivated landholding, and thus demonstrating “work,” brings a person positive social values. There is evidence of a contradiction between the stated values of environmentalism, with an emphasis on forest preservation, and a real-world preference for cultivated spaces (Adams 2008). Ranchers, despite their separation from physical labor, draw on these broader notions of work as landscape transformation and production to defend their socioeconomic position and to critique environmentalism. Environmental legislation that limits “work” is considered to be highly objectionable by the ranchers, as can be seen through a discussion on the political legacy of rubber tapper leader Chico Mendes.

Rancher Perspectives on the Legacy of Chico Mendes and Environmentalism

On December 22, 1988, Chico Mendes was murdered in his home by the son of rancher Darly Alves da Silva. In an interview on the national television program O Fantástico 20 years after Mendes’ assassination, Alves da Silva explained his actions to the host, saying, “Ninguém matou Chico Mendes. Quem se matou foi ele mesmo” (No one killed Chico Mendes. He got himself killed).³

I will examine the ranchers’ interpretation of this statement, but first a few notes are required on how they feel about Darly Alves da Silva. The following rancher perspectives are based on the conversations I had with a handful of ranchers with whom I established sufficient rapport to broach this heated topic. They made a point to say that Alves da Silva was a criminal before he arrived in Acre, a bad apple that has given the whole group a “dirty name.” They also emphasized that the land conflicts that did occur were the result of the inherent confusion of the situation, in which a rancher bought land and then had to find a way to come to terms with the rubber tappers, who also had legal use rights to the land. All of the ranchers that I interviewed stressed to me that they worked with the rubber tappers to find a peaceful solution to the land issues.

No rancher defended the actions of Alves da Silva, but some offered an explanation of his enigmatic words about the murder of Chico Mendes. They said that in the rural context, it is generally agreed that interfering in the affairs of others is not well regarded by most landowners and that inhibiting the work of others is seen as a form of aggression and an insult. One rancher said about Chico Mendes, “It is all a myth. He was a vagabundo [bum]. Anyone can start a problem, but it is hard to solve one. Interfering – keeping a man from working is bad, real bad.” Presented in this way, a conscious invocation of a working-class discourse, Mendes did not work, and through his insistence on saving the forest, he inhibited the ability of others to work.

Many ranchers feel that the rubber tapper history has been turned into a fairy tale that is used by “them” to justify the shackling of the Acrean economy for “their own personal benefit.” When pressed to explain how conservation benefits “them” and who they are, some ranchers mentioned the following: the current state and national government of the Worker’s Party, academics and environmentalists, the Catholic Church in the 1970s to 1980s, international conservation entities and their Brazilian puppet NGOs, North American and European business interests, and the liberal media based out of Rio de Janeiro.

They contrast their frustrated ambitions in Amazonia with American western expansion, in which there were few limitations, and the nation and people subsequently prospered. While some ranchers admire the pioneer spirit of North Americans, they also resent the contemporary gringos, whose actions toward Amazonia are not motivated by an authentic concern with the environment, but are rather indicative of international powers that “have theirs and don’t want us to have ours.” They focus their ire on local and national governmental officials, who are thought to be in the pockets of these international entities. Amazonia’s inability to “progress,” they say, is the result of politicians who, by promoting international conservation
interests, stifle the ranchers’ ability to produce affordable food, which they claim they can do more efficiently than smallholders.

Smallholders may defend themselves against environmental violations in the name of providing food for their family, and thus be viewed somewhat sympathetically, but wealthy ranchers have no such moral high ground on which to stand. Although they are not “workers,” ranchers frame their opposition to environmentalism through a discourse of work. One rancher has a bumper sticker on his truck that says, “Já comeu hoje? Agradeça a um fazendeiro” (Did you eat today? Thank a rancher). Migdalio, the truck driver-turned-rancher, asked me, “What do people eat that doesn’t come from the earth? Where does Marina’s food come from?”

In their use of the work discourse, they de-emphasize physical labor, focusing on how their actions and initiative produce vital food for society.

Many ranchers are active in the ongoing debates surrounding the Brazilian forest code, which currently requires that Amazonian ranchers and colonists maintain 80 percent of their land as forest reserve. Lissero is the head of an organization that has been fighting for revisions to the code. When I first met him in 2007, he was defiant about any form of environmental regulation. In 2010, the last time we talked, he had softened his stance, saying:

[Deforestation] is too politically incorrect these days. You can’t argue against the forest anymore. Now we are focused on trying to get the forest code revised so that it is more reasonable.

Ribeiro likewise expressed a position that demonstrates how the ranchers are searching for a balance between economic and environmental concerns, and how they are linking their ideals of work and production to social concerns to engage political debates about environmentalism.

There are one billion people in the world now living in hunger and the world’s population continues to grow. They call the Amazon the “lungs of the world” because of the forest, but maybe we need to also think about the “stomach of the world” – all those hungry people. Here we can produce the food that the world needs.

By tapping into the discourse of work that is centered on production and aligning themselves with a nationalistic stance in which they are doing what is best for all sectors of Brazilian society, the ranchers seek to diminish their class distinction and villain label, and give themselves the moral and ideological foundation from which to engage environmental legislation.

Conclusion

The designation of the ranchers at the apex of the rural social hierarchy is related to subordinate group’s perceptions that they have both wealth and political power – perceptions that are reinforced in social situations in which ranchers exhibit elite cultural symbols, behaviors, and characteristics historically associated with the traditional landowning classes. The ranchers once exercised economic and political power with the backing of ideology and policy. They no longer enjoy these benefits, but they have remained economically dominant, despite the ascendance of a subordinate group in symbolic, ideological, and policy terms. The ranchers contest perceptions that they have political power, pointing to their disfavor in the halls of state power and to international economic and environmental interests that seek to constrain them.

Although all ranchers are considered to have high social status and to be above physical labor, they are a diverse group composed of both landed elites and persons of more humble origins. In general, rancher and subordinate group perspectives are similar in that they view work, as informed by biblical and developmentalist ideas of land and production, as an essential activity. The rancher’s class position, however, is defined in large part by their separation from physical labor, which puts them in opposition to the working-class rural groups. Ranchers seek to demonstrate that they do, in fact, work, by pointing not to labor but to production. Ranchers use the concept of work as production to oppose environmental legislation by framing beef production in terms of its positive social function; they claim that by producing a large amount of food more effectively than smallholders, they increase access to affordable foods among the lower classes and also benefit the national economy by increasing food security.

Amazonian deforestation has been framed as an issue that threatens the future of humankind. It is only natural that in such a contest the good and the bad have been clearly defined. Traditional anthropological realms of inquiry and ideological commitments, however, need not preclude the thoughtful analysis of a society’s more powerful groups. Issues of access will remain with elite groups, but if preserving the Amazon forest is an issue of such pressing global importance, it is essential to better understand the perspectives of all of those involved, especially those with the most on-the-ground political and economic power in the region. This ethnographic description is only a first step in understanding Amazonian fazendeiros, and further research is needed to revise theoretical and policy debates regarding the environmental preservation and economic development in Acre and Amazonia.
Notes

1 Rivière (1972) studied an Amazonian rancher community prior to the era of Amazonian colonization of the 1970s.

2 All of the names of the ranchers are pseudonyms.


4 He was referring to Acre native Marina Silva, a former rubber tapper leader and Brazil’s Minister of the Environment from 2003–2008.

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