

“Jañemosé hikuai mantereí” (We Are Frequently Expelled): Indigenous People Live Stroessner’s Legacy

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This article explains the impact of Alfredo Stroessner’s regime (1954–1989) on the Indigenous people and natural environment in Paraguay. Our analysis argues that Stroessner’s programs for growth allowed the elite to enrich themselves enough to tolerate authoritarian rule; at the same time, the schemes changed Indigenous lives and the environment through displacement and deforestation. Grounded in postcolonial theory and framed in studies of regimes during the Cold War, this article identifies five ways in which Stroessner’s regime altered Indigenous lives going forward. The first legacy was the use of a legal framework to cover the negative social results of state economic programs. Second was the launching of development projects that allowed the upper class to enrich themselves. Third, the adoption of a neoextractivist economy that displaced rural peasants, dispensed with their labor, and caused environmental emergencies. Fourth, the promotion of a ruling mentality that allowed corruption and graft at Indigenous people’s expense. Fifth, organization and protests by Indigenous people pushed to react to the regime’s programs. These forces permanently changed subaltern lives and led to broad environmental destruction in Paraguay.

Keywords: Paraguay, history, Indigenous peoples, environment

Este artículo explica el impacto del régimen de Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989) sobre los pueblos indígenas y el medio ambiente natural en Paraguay. Nuestro análisis establece que los programas para el desarrollo económico de Stroessner permitieron a la élite enriquecerse lo suficiente como para tolerar un gobierno autoritario; al mismo tiempo, los programas cambiaron la vida de los indígenas y el medio ambiente a través del desplazamiento y la deforestación. Basado en la teoría poscolonial y enmarcado en estudios sobre los regímenes durante la Guerra Fría, este artículo identifica cinco formas en que el régimen de Stroessner alteró la vida posterior de los indígenas. El primer legado fue el uso de un marco legal para cubrir los resultados sociales negativos de los programas económicos estatales. En segundo lugar, la puesta en marcha de proyectos de desarrollo que permitieran a la clase alta enriquecerse. En tercer lugar, la adopción de una economía neoextractivista que desplazó a los campesinos rurales, prescindió de su trabajo y provocó emergencias ambientales. En cuarto lugar, la promoción de una mentalidad dominante que permitía la corrupción y el fraude a expensas de los pueblos indígenas. En quinto lugar, la organización y movimientos de protesta por parte de los pueblos indígenas ante los programas del régimen. Estas fuerzas cambiaron permanentemente la vida de los subalternos y condujeron a una amplia destrucción ambiental en Paraguay.

Palabras clave: Paraguay, historia, pueblos indígenas, medio ambiente

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Introduction: Historical Importance, Current Exclusion of Indigenous People

Indigenous people are everywhere in Asunción these days, and that, in itself, is one important result of the Stroessner regime (1954–1989). Indigenous people are on city buses, begging in the streets, selling bows and arrows at the airport, waiting in front of stores and government offices, peddling handcrafts at marketplaces, and sniffing glue in the parks. When asked why they moved to the city, Native people explain: “We were evicted from our lands.” The irony of the Indigenous presence in the cities is that Stroessner tried to disappear them from the countryside, to make their land available for cattle and soybeans, and his efforts clearly succeeded. When the displaced Indigenous migrants resettled in the cities throughout Paraguay because they had nowhere else to go, however, they posed new problems for authorities. Again and again, in a revolving door that excluded rather than welcomed, officials bussed Native people back to the country so they would not be an eyesore, where they again challenged the ranchers and farmers who had ousted them in the first place, and then eventually returned to the cities.

The resulting cycles of internal migration confirm that Native people are unwanted in Paraguay: in their rural homelands, in the forests they defend tenaciously from the loggers and ranchers’ bulldozers, in the shantytowns around the big cities, and everywhere in between, there is simply no place for Indigenous people. Paradoxically, Paraguay is known for, and proudly sells itself, as a nation with a rich Native heritage. Everyone, even immigrants, uses the Guaraní language informally as they sip mate tea, shop at the market, or buy fruit along the street. Museums vividly display Indigenous artisanship to captivated tourists. The nation touts support for its Native heritage, then, just not the live and displaced Indigenous people who seem to be an embarrassment and are in the way.¹ The final irony is that Stroessner’s attempt to disappear the Native peoples from his country, instead, pushed them to the cities and made them more visible than ever before to Paraguayans, tourists, and the global community.

This article explores the causes and results of Stroessner’s development projects for Indigenous people and the natural environment in Paraguay. The dictator inherited and then developed a program of internal colonialism and extractivist economic expansion designed to move settlers into rural areas and render them economically productive through ranching first and later, soybeans. These policies allowed the postdictatorship “new democrats,” who framed the opening democratic period, to embrace neoliberal changes that fomented internal Indigenous migration.² There is already important

¹ On the early state promotion of Indigenous handcrafts for tourism, see Harder Horst (2007, 114).

² Sociologist Gregg Hetherington coined and employed this name effectively in his analysis of Paraguay after the regime (2011, 33). For more on recent Indigenous migration, see my forthcoming book, *Into the*

theoretical analysis of neoliberalism, extractivism, and internal migration that helps to explain the longer term social and environmental results of the dictator's policies.³ Since this article analyzes the regime as a bridge that linked inherited economic programs with the displacement of Native peoples, environmental changes, and neoextractivism that followed the democratic opening, it will concentrate on specific state policies that changed Indigenous experiences during the years after Stroessner's downfall.

The theory on settler colonialism helps to analyze how the dictatorship inherited and then passed along a project of internal expansion with negative long-term results for the Native people. Forced dispossession of land and the exploitation of Indigenous labor have been central themes in this analytical framework, as have state expansion and settler privileges at the expense of Indigenous populations (Correia 2023, 29).⁴ Both processes flourished during the regime and then grew during the political opening that followed (Elkins and Pedersen 2006, 8–9). The appropriation of Native land, another hallmark of settler colonialism, was a direct result of the dictator's rural programs (Goebel 2017, 142). This study will argue that Stroessner inherited a process of rural development, settler colonization, and economic expansion already underway. The regime developed these programs during its long tenure for short-term economic gain and internal political support. The resulting colonization by 300,000 Brazilian immigrants, deforestation, and neoextractivism directly changed Native lives through displacement and internal migration during the thirty years since the regime collapsed.⁵

A Personal Indigenous Perspective

So often during the last several years, Indigenous people have patiently explained to me how soy planters and ranchers pushed them off the lands where they had lived. One of these persons who took the time to tell his story to a stranger was Tino López, who had migrated from the northeastern department of Canindeyú. One afternoon in September 2019, in the Luque suburb east of Asunción, Tino listed the challenges that his Avá Guaraní community living in the city faced daily and that he wanted outsiders to know about. Drawing a cool swig of *tereré* tea through a *bombilla* straw from the mate gourd we were sharing, Mr. López explained:

Indigenous people cannot get ahead because nobody listens to our requests. Our first need is land in every department. We are always blamed for invading lands,

Wolf's Mouth: Indigenous People fight Displacement, Corruption, and Environmental Change in Neoliberal Paraguay, 1992-2022.

³ For more on this economic transition, see Harvey (2007, 154, 159–163) and Villagra (2011); for more on recent extractivism, see Harder Horst (2019, 49); for additional theoretical analysis of recent Indigenous internal migration, see Penz et al. (2011, 90).

⁴ See also Zevaco and Kretschmer (2011, 147).

⁵ See Correia (2023, 5); Hirsch et al. (2021, 142, 157); Hetherington (2020); Nickson (2025, 71, 73).

even though it was originally [our] land. If we Indigenous don't have land, we can't plant or raise animals or teach our children anything. I came to Asunción eighteen years ago from the Yva Porondú [beautiful flower] community in Canindeyu, because the soy planters took our lands. As soy fields spread everywhere, first the honey disappeared, then the water became contaminated, and the fish died, so then we could not fish or hunt anymore. Brazilian, German, and Paraguayan soybean planters fenced us in everywhere. Finally, when there was no way to make a living anymore, we came to Asunción to survive.⁶

Mr. López's story reveals an Indigenous perspective about how Stroessner's regime changed the lives of Indigenous peoples. The dictator's development of hydroelectric energy, ranching, and export crops, as well as the promotion of internal settlement, displaced over a third of the Indigenous peoples and forced them into urban shantytowns. Living in closer proximity allowed Native leaders opportunities to organize, participate in politics, and lobby state agencies, although Indigenous city dwellers also turned to prostitution, drugs, and begging to survive.

It was an historical coincidence that Stroessner's thirty-five-year dictatorship, which had precipitated such dislocations, finally ended in February 1989, just eight months before German people toppled the Berlin Wall, yet the proximity of these events was notable for several reasons. The infamous wall had for nearly thirty years symbolized the division of Europe between communism and capitalism during the Cold War. The political change helped end the socialist states that had symbolized Cold War divisions and allowed capitalist interests to flood Eastern Europe and highlight glaring wealth disparities with the West. Likewise, Stroessner's regime represented one of the last dictatorships of the Cold War in the Southern Cone, and its collapse caused profound economic changes. The dictatorship's legacy of terror, torture, and internal repression left national traumas that limited popular expression, political participation, and a culture of deep-seated fear.

The neoliberal administrations that followed expanded Stroessner's rural development schemes by deforesting eastern Paraguay for soy plantations, and the western Chaco for ranching. While the resulting exports brought in dollars and purchased the support necessary to extend his rule, the environmental and social costs impoverished thousands of people and displaced many more from their traditional lands. The long-term results of the dictator's programs were negative for the lower classes, because they displaced and turned peasants and Natives against each other, created a rural terror insurgency, and, perhaps most seriously for the long term, contributed to deforestation and global warming.

⁶ Interview by author with Tino López (name changed for protection), Avá Guaraní, from Yva Porondy community in Canindeyu, Luque, Paraguay, September 7, 2019. Author's translations from the Guaraní.

This article will show how five of Stroessner's initiatives, which dictator inherited and expanded, significantly changed the lives of Indigenous peoples. The first was the use of a formal legal framework to cover the negative social results of the regime's economic initiatives; second, the implementation of large development projects that allowed the upper classes to enrich themselves and purchased their allegiance; third, the transition to an extractivist economy that displaced peasant and Indigenous communities in the countryside and caused environmental damage; fourth, the perpetuation of a governing mentality of state corruption and graft at Indigenous people's expense; and fifth, organization and protests by Indigenous people affected by the regime's programs. Undergirding these legacies was the threat of terror that Stroessner used to bully his people into submission.⁷ While state repression changed Indigenous communities negatively, it unexpectedly pushed them to organize broadly, protest state abuses, and participate in electoral politics to demand improvements during the political opening that followed.

1. Legal Frameworks to Obscure Human Rights Abuses and Placate Foreign Critics

Stroessner's use of a legal framework to conceal his abuses of human rights was not new; the traditional absence of a professional public administration had long allowed officials to abuse their positions for personal graft (Harder Horst 2007, 27). Foreign aid and public expenditure both increased during the 1970s, providing state employees with more chances to enrich themselves and making corruption a hallmark of Stroessner's administration, as in surrounding military regimes at the time.⁸ Corruption among public officials in Brazil, for instance, grew so serious that military leaders returned to civilian rule to save the military government from public scrutiny (Hunter 1997, 36).⁹ Stroessner's toleration and concealment of embezzlement were broadly known.

One example of a legal cover-up that affected Indigenous people dates to the 1970s, when the regime restarted settlement of the Ache, a Guaraní people leaving eastern forests because of increasing attacks (Harder Horst 2007, 35). The reservation manager in Guairá, Manuel Pereira, embezzled the medicines and food sent by the state, sold them to neighboring ranchers, and rounded up more Ache to grow his racket (Münzel 1974, 58).¹⁰ When visitors found the Ache dying on the reservation from diseases and understood that officials tolerated the abuses to clear Ache out of the forests, they called

⁷ On Paraguay's participation in the Operation Condor's network of terror, see Kornbluh (2004, 331).

⁸ See, for instance, on the legacy of corruption, Nickson (2025, 70).

⁹ See also Skidmore (1988, 282).

¹⁰ Steve Herrick, former Peace Corps volunteer, interview by author, 26 February 1999.

attention to the case.¹¹ Foreign embassies grew concerned when officials ignored their inquiries, especially as more and more Ache died from pneumonia and measles. Concerned advocates notified the Vatican, the UN 1972 Conference on Human Environments, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Amnesty International, the Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights, and the International Commission of Jurists. The Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish parliaments presented the Ache case at the United Nations and to the IWGIA conference in Copenhagen in February 1973, after which letters of concern poured into Asunción demanding the immediate end to the “heinous manhunts” intended to “wipe [the Ache] off the face of the earth (Harder Horst 2007, 87). British, German, and Swiss newspapers, eager to denounce premeditated murder after the Nurenberg trials, all published letters about the Ache situation.

In the US meanwhile, the American Indian Movement protests at Pine Ridge caused the Nixon administration to proceed cautiously on the Ache case, especially because support for Stroessner was already on tenuous grounds due to Paraguay’s role in the global drug trade (Mora and Cooney 2007, 188). During the 1960s, Kennedy’s and Johnson’s military assistance to the regime had grown tenfold; by 1969, 400 Paraguayan officers had trained at the School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone. The US even built Stroessner a new military school at Capiatá in 1972 (Nickson 2014, 38). As the regime grew more repressive, drug trafficking expanded, and internal dissent developed, though US support wavered (Tyvela 2019, 118). Still, critics concerned about Native affairs continued to push the Nixon administration (Münzel 1973,28; Abourezk, “Genocide Activities,” 5941). Suddenly, US support for Stroessner was in question as Washington investigated human rights, and the results changed Indigenous lives.

Regime officials in Asunción, aware that foreign states and human rights organizations were debating whether they were engaged in genocide, responded swiftly to these charges; bad press might challenge their recent arrangement to build the hugely expensive Itaipú hydroelectric facility with the neighboring Brazilian regime. In April 1974, the president of the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Justino Aréchaga, asked Paraguay to clarify charges of “serious human rights abuses against the Ache Guayakí, that in your judgement might indicate whether or not measures have been adopted to address this issue.”¹² In response, Minister of Defense Samaniego heavy-handedly forced state ministries, religious agencies, educational institutions, and even a US diplomat, to sign a document stating that in Paraguay genocide did not exist in any form, rejecting

¹¹ One should note the difference between the settlement of European people, which the regime promoted, and the forced resettlement of Indigenous people, which Stroessner did to clear them off land designated for colonists of European heritage. As Goebel has shown, the dispossession of Indigenous land was a component of settler colonialism central to postcolonial Latin America (2017, 142).

¹² “Difícil sobrevivencia,” 11; Infanzon to J. María de Mahieu, Buenos Aires, 11 May 1974, file 110, 1970, Department of Indigenous Affairs, Asunción.

foreign accusations against the nation, and promising to publicize the declaration. The regime thought a public denial would hide the abuses to the Ache.

It took the regime seven years of additional legal wrangling and displacements of Native people by ranchers to enact an Indigenos rights law as a legal frame to respect Indigenous rights. The 1970s, meanwhile, were tumultuous as people, tired of repression, pushed back (Rabe 2012, 153). Native peoples organized to recover their traditional lands. The regime pushed colonization of the western frontier using what Correia termed its “state as patron” model, and settlers fenced in new properties to ranch, leaving Native peoples landless and dependent on sporadic wage labor (Correia 2023, 93). The Toba-Qom, Maskoy, Ayoreode, and Enxet all defied odds and pressured the regime to return their ancestral lands (Harder Horst 2007, 111–113). To show foreign critics its plan to uphold Indigenous human rights, in 1981, the regime at last enacted Law 904, giving new powers to a revised Paraguayan Indigenous Institute (INDI). Heavy opposition from ranchers, however, eliminated the key pledges to purchase land for Indigenous communities and issue titles to Native squatters.¹³

While Stroessner placated foreign critics and accusations of human rights abuses, Native people employed the legislation to fight for better conditions and land protection. Five Maskoy leaders from the Chaco immediately traveled to Asunción to press the INDI for land. Enxet families in the lower Chaco moved to the gates of El Horizonte ranch, which had appropriated their tribal lands, and waited for the new law to work in their favor. Felipe Caballero, leader of his people who still camped along the busy highway at Paraje Pirahú, recalled his renewed hope when he heard about the new legislation: “We knew something about our rights and that there was hope. By law [we now] had the right to ask for land where we had been born and lived.”¹⁴ Native activism became an important result of the regime’s attempt to cover up its human rights abuses.

The legacy of Indigenous abuses and the regime’s attempt to present a positive legal front carried over into the post-Stroessner democratic period, because politicians realized they could spin the news and their legislation to avoid criticism and get away with illegal actions. As extractivism overran rural Paraguayans, and politicians embraced neoliberal deconstruction of state responsibilities, the government again resorted to this tried-and-true strategy: distracting critics through legislation that promised improvements. In April 2004, President Nicanor Duarte Frutos tried to employ Indigenous legislation to undermine Native rights and obscure rising rural conflicts. The president dismantled the Indigenous Institute and dispersed its work to other state departments, a neoliberal saving measure, by revising Law 904.

¹³ “Anteproyecto de ley que establece,” July 1980, 11, 13, INDI, Asunción.

¹⁴ Felipe Caballero, Enxet leader, interview by author, Paraje Pirahú, 28 Sept. 1995.

Yet 2004 was not 1984, and by this time, Native people had built on their experience during the last years of the regime. Organized into the Committee for the Indigenous Peoples' Self-Determination, Indigenous people gathered in Asunción to assess Frutos's threat. Together they pledged to continue pressing for "Unity, Dignity and Respect" from the state and forged greater Indigenous unity. Delegates agreed to process the proposal for a new Indigenous rights law first in their communities, promising to meet again. At this later gathering, the Natives altered state plans, forcing Frutos to postpone changes to the Indigenous rights law (Duckworth 2008, 240).

2. Development to Appease Upper-Class Supporters: Projects Caaguazú, Caazapá, and Itaipú

A second regime legacy that changed Indigenous lives in the long term was the dictator's use of "development" programs to secure elite support. Businesspersons invested and enriched themselves through Stroessner's schemes to expand production in rural Paraguay. One of the earliest projects began in 1975, when the regime issued ninety thousand land titles for four million hectares in the northeast to *campesinos* from the Central zone (Baer and Birch 1984, 786). The resulting surge of peasant resettlements to cultivate cotton, soybeans, and rice, overran Indigenous communities (Goebel 2017, 143). By 1980, the project had displaced five local Mbya communities—a total of 280 families—from their lands (Fogel 1989, 54). Between 1978 and 1986, Paraguay invested US\$ 4.47 billion in fifteen similar rural projects to expand export crops (Fogel 1989, 33, 135–136). These so-called "development" projects, funded by foreign businesses, did not consider the results of changes to the countryside for those who lived there, *campesinos* and Indigenous people alike.

Rural changes continued unabated. In 1982, the dictator set in motion a US\$ 54.3 million program to resettle colonists from the crowded Central district to boost agriculture in Caazapá. While the program pledged to title Indigenous lands in the area, the scheme allocated no funds to move, purchase, and legalize properties for extant Native communities (Fogel 1989, 64). Aware of foreign scrutiny, the regime claimed that only ten "difficult-to-locate" Indigenous families lived in the region, the official justification for relocating peasants onto Indigenous lands. More than four hundred Mbya families had long called Caazapá home, though they were horticulturalists who preferred isolation from national society and raised crops in sheltered clearings. Over the next year, as workers deforested, built roads, and opened Caazapá forests to Paraguayan and Brazilian settlers, the Mbya fled to more dense forests to escape the internal colonization project (Prieto 1989, 148).¹⁵ Angelo Garay, the eighty-year-old leader of Yukerí Karumbey, told

¹⁵ For additional theoretical analysis of settler colonialist attempts to disappear local Indigenous peoples, see Elkins and Pedersen (2006, 3); Correia documented how settler colonialism in the Lower Chaco displaced and dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their lands (2023, 13).

project surveyors to never return as he pushed them out of the community, declaring: “They can do what they want in their own nation, but not on Mbya territory!” (Smith and Fogel 1982, 67).

In addition to extending export crops and settling colonists, the regime invested in huge construction projects, just as military colleagues in Brazil built hydroelectric dams in Amazonia.¹⁶ In 1983, Stroessner and neighboring Argentina began to construct the Yacyreta dam on the Paraná River. An even larger project was the Itaipú hydroelectric dam along the Paraná River just north of today’s Ciudad del Este, a city along the Paraná River, at the time still named after the dictator. Started in 1973, this project was the world’s largest when finished in 1984 at a cost of over US\$ 15 billion. The project provided ample opportunities for the dictator’s supporters to enrich themselves through investments and embezzlement.

The results for the Indigenous people above the dam, though, were catastrophic and profound. Within the frame of this unprecedented engineering project, Paraguay expropriated 1650 km² to accommodate part of the plant’s enormous new reservoir. The resulting lake, which today covers a total of 144 km², is so large that it altered the map of South America. The regime resettled the Avá Paranaenses’ communities violently, without considering adequate alternatives for their survival. Itaipú even restructured their sociopolitical organizations by dispersing families and changing the ways they made a living (Servín 2017, 36–37).¹⁷

Sister Mariblanca Barón, who studied Itaipú’s impact on the Avá Guaraní, documented that the regime expelled thirty-eight indigenous communities, 688 families, by expropriating their lands along the western side of the Paraná River. In 2016, Barón recorded testimonies from relocated survivors of the Tekoha Sauce community (Servin 2017). Even considering that the Avá testimonies reflected anger at being forcibly displaced from their communal lands along the Paraná River, and therefore possible glorification of their homelands, they communicate the lack of adequate payment by the regime and its hydroelectric enterprise. As the Avá people asked, how could even a handful of small bills, quickly spent, compensate for their ancestral farmland along a plentiful river, perceived in these communal memories as even having been paradisiacal? (Servin 2017).

¹⁶ In 1975, Brazilian authorities began plans for the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam on the Xingu River.

¹⁷ For examples of forced resettlement of Indigenous peoples in Africa (Algeria), for instance, see Stora (2006, 225).

3. *Extractivist Projects, Resettlements, Indigenous Displacement, and Environmental Change*

In addition to hydroelectric projects, Stroessner's extension of ranching into the Chaco and extractive agriculture into eastern Paraguay broadly displaced over thirty thousand Indigenous people during the following neoliberal period. While forced relocation of peasant populations has been a global trend since at least the mid-twentieth century, in Paraguay the tendency was another grim result of Stroessner's expansion of the economy to secure elite political support. Because growth is increasingly less labor-absorbing over time, in Paraguay it produced an ever-increasing number of displaced, marginal sectors of people, despite eventually creating economic growth for upper-class investors and the nation.

One must note that expulsions of Indigenous people in Paraguay were part of a larger settler colonial project begun long before. Throughout Latin America, from 1950 to 1980, the rise in the transitional ratio of the traditional agricultural sector toward the urban economy, also known as the displacement in marginality, grew from 38 percent to 84 percent (Janvry et al. 1989, 402). As settlers filled the rural areas, soybeans and ranching displaced both peasants and Native communities during the neoliberal period, leading to direct conflict with both groups.¹⁸ Unlike the much earlier British enclosure process, by the early twenty-first century, mechanized farming and ranching in Paraguay had made peasant labor irrelevant to extractive rural production. In addition, cultural differences rendered Native people less able to run machinery; much more often they served only for wage labor to build ranch infrastructures, at times in debt peonage (Correia 2023, 11).

Paraguay's meteoric rise in cattle exportation was a direct result of Stroessner's program, begun in the late 1950s, to basically develop Paraguay into a vast ranch (Correia 2023, 12–13). The dictator's Agrarian Statute of 1963 created the IBR (Rural Welfare Institute) to raise the nation's rural production. The following year, the IBR resettled hundreds of peasants from the densely populated central region to state lands in eastern and northern regions, which by 1962 still only had 1.8 persons per square kilometer (Nickson 1981, 114). To boost frontier settlement, the IBR then offered cheap land to thousands of Brazilian migrants. By the 1980s, the Institute titled millions of hectares of land and created hundreds of settlements for what became one quarter of the national population (Hanratty and Meditz 1990, 116). While the Agrarian Statute limited single properties to ten thousand hectares and pledged to dismantle large holdings, because the IBR was lax about enforcement, its Agrarian Statute led to little actual reform. One part of the legislation that the regime tried to follow, though, was to resettle Indigenous people into state-run colonies to make room for cattle and agriculture.¹⁹

¹⁸ See for the classic work on this process, Thompson (2016).

¹⁹ Law 854, Agrarian Statute, Art. 16.

The result of the regime's support of ranching was that many Indigenous communities lost their remaining land (Correia 2023, 39–41). In September 1963, the minister of Defense appointed a colonel to the Department of Indigenous Affairs charged with “hastening the work of assimilating” Indigenous people into national society (“1964 Memoria Annual Report”). The dedicated and ruthless director, Anancio Zárate, expelled Natives with zeal and violence. The displacement of Native people from their lands was successful in the long term. By 2020, almost 95 percent of Paraguay's Chaco, over 233,000 square kilometers, was owned by private ranches (Correia 2023, 5). Since 1985, nearly eight million acres of forest have been clear-cut for cattle. The growth of this extractive industry displaced Indigenous people, raised regional temperatures, altered Native cultures, and even pulled ranchers from eastern Paraguay into the Chaco.

Without anywhere else to go, and unable to afford mechanized agriculture, both peasants and Indigenous people migrated to the cities. A great example of urban occupations took place while Nicanor Duarte Frutos was president. By 2003, soy farmers had cleared all the Mbya forests in the northeast, 85% of the forest cover in eastern Paraguay, reducing their communities to small islands of trees and huts surrounded by soybeans. Early in 2007, after years of futile lobby, the Mbya arrived again at the INDI to demand land, and soon their numbers overwhelmed the old agency building. When officials shut their doors, the people camped on the street, sleeping on sidewalks and in empty lots. By April, eighty more Mbya arrived to insist that the INDI provide them with somewhere to live. Within a few weeks, 150 people moved to the Plaza Uruguaya and set up camp beside the railway station. Hundreds more Mbya arrived over the next weeks, becoming the focal point of the downtown. There seemed to be little that people in the capital could do about the onslaught, and President Frutos could not stem the flood of rural migrants. Sales fell as Indigenous people occupied downtown Asunción, so businesses pushed the administration to remove the Mbya. The city mayor restricted the occupation of public sidewalks, parks, and plazas with high metal fencing, and the INDI finally agreed to buy 295 hectares in Canindeyú for the Mbya (Reed 2015, 279). Similar occupations have only grown since then.

The expensive programs that Stroessner set in motion to boost exports rapidly changed the rural environment. In addition to displacing over 30,000 Native people, agro-industrial soybean production and ranching caused deforestation and environmental emergencies. By the turn of the millennium, the deforestation rate in eastern Paraguay had grown to second highest in the world. Entrepreneurs had cleared seven million hectares of forest during the previous forty years for commercial land use, not only displacing Native communities, but eliminating countless animals and their biospheres. Already in January 2003, the INDI documented 4,000 Native families displaced by ranching in the Chaco and 3,000 Indigenous families in eastern Paraguay evicted by soy

production (CODEHUPY 2003, 376).²⁰ The rapid changes to Native lives provide clear evidence of the environmental catastrophe that followed in Stroessner's wake.

Environmental concerns, however, hastened public interest in Native conditions as much as did growing peasant invasions.²¹ By 2004, all the Upper Paraná Atlantic forests, the Paĩ Tavyterã homeland, was endangered. Deforestation had turned this dense forest into a series of patchy, isolated fragments of trees, with only 13% of the original forest remaining. Working with a team of consultants, the World Wildlife Fund designed a forest conversion plan for the eastern region. In response, the Congress approved the proposed logging moratorium as the "Zero Deforestation Law." This legislation, formally passed in December, made it illegal to deforest for the following two years, even if forests comprised more than 25 percent of a property, or convert any land into agriculture and pasture. While not a permanent halt to deforestation and very difficult to enforce in the mountainous area, this measure was a step toward protecting 300,000 hectares of Paĩ Tavyterã forests and lands.

Indigenous peoples wasted no time in telling the new Nicanor Duarte administration, elected in 2003, how angry they were about rising displacements and deteriorating environmental conditions. Creeks and swamps were drying up. Even the once broad Pilcomayo River no longer reached them, and its alligators were literally desiccating. Desperate times demanded desperate measures. In April 2003, members of the Enxet community of Yakye Axa occupied central plazas and marched through Asunción to publicize their struggle to recover their homelands (Correia 2021, 169–170). Inspired by neighboring communities that were also mobilizing to protect their changing environment, the Enxet organized to recover their traditional 10,000 hectares by partnering with NGOs in Asunción.

Yakye Axa is located in the President Hayes department, roughly halfway between Pozo Colorado and Concepción. This community had since the 1940s squatted outside their homelands, living from odd jobs along the highway without reliable water and food. The community's bid for land joined efforts by Sawhoyamaxa, and the Sanapaná community Xakmok Kásek, which had just the former year demonstrated in the capital. In February 2003, shortly before Nicanor Duarte Frutos became president, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights finally ruled in favor of the Sawhoyamaxa, which inspired other communities to press their own claims for land. The Enxet from Yakye Axa again appealed to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which had in February declared their

²⁰ CODEHUPY, 2003, p. 376;

²¹ During 2005, for instance, land invasions led to the deaths of over ninety campesinos. For an excellent analysis of peasant invasions of private land, see Hetherington 2020 and my forthcoming book, *Into the Wolf's Mouth*, Ch. 4, 16.

plight a viable case. The media, human rights organizations, and the public began to support Yakye Axa's struggle for land.

Displaced Indigenous peoples challenged authorities because they moved into the cities. In May 2003, state ministries and NGOs designed a plan to deal with internal migrants in Asunción. Led by the INDI, the Ministry of Public Health "disinfected and readapted" Native people, forcibly gathering, showering, and vaccinating the people wandering city streets before busing them back to their communities. The process became frequent, and increasingly severe weather made the back-and-forth migration even more common.

Rapid climate change, as experienced in Paraguay over the last thirty years through devastating droughts, floods, and excessive heat that also pressured Native migration, marks a broader global change visible around the world. Hurricanes, wildfires, climate-induced drought, severe weather extremes, including plagues of locusts, have marked recent years (Mann 2021, 180). Rapid climate changes have been most severe for nations without sufficient means to address environmental and human results. Scholars are documenting the ways by which climate change, as well as the displacement and relocation of Indigenous people and peasants in Paraguay, are clearly related. In *Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World*, Gaia Vince has recently shown that climate change will make significant extensions of the world lethal for human habitation and cause huge changes in nations and cities where migrants have left and arrived. Added migration, Vince shows, is already evident around the world in cities to which large numbers of displaced people, including Indigenous people, have fled for survival (Vince 2022, 190).

Paraguay presents a good example of a nation whose socioeconomic choices, augmented by the Stroessner regime, have pushed it closer to the tipping point, that time at which, according to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, many small environmental changes will together cause irreversible results. Paraguay is among the many nations that have recently seen serious fires, floods, droughts, and storms.²² These trends reveal dangerous prospects for human life as we know it on planet Earth, and most seriously affect subaltern people.

Deforestation and uncontrolled clearing of forests and grasslands may have caused serious problems for Paraguay's environment in recent decades, but they have been disastrous for the Indigenous peoples, who traditionally relied much more directly on forest products for their independent livelihood. In April 2007, for instance, flood waters isolated Payseyamaxyempa, an Enxet community in the Lower Chaco, making delivery of aid impossible. Increased flooding is one of the serious effects of a warmer world, a trend

²² See my forthcoming book *Into the Wolf's Mouth*, throughout.

that will likely only worsen. As sea levels rise, ice melts, and the warmer atmosphere causes more violent storms and precipitation; rising water threatens people, especially in lower areas. While rivers in Paraguay have flooded before, the intensity and frequency of the rising waters and displacement of peoples have become much more urgent since Stroessner's years in office.

4. *State Corruption and Graft at Indigenous People's Expense*

A fourth legacy of the Stroessner regime is corruption within the administration of Native affairs. Officials at the INDI routinely embezzled state funds at the Indigenous people's expense. Between 1984 and 1986, the INDI undermined increasing Guaraní organization by dividing their leaders with bribes, exploiting community factions, and extracting and selling Indigenous timber reserves ("Denuncian que el INDI reconoció a falso líder," 1987). In 1986, INDI employee María Elva González co-opted Paĩ Tavyterã leaders in Amambay with gifts and pledges to provide their communities with goods, schools, and health facilities. In return, regime employees removed dozens of truckloads of lumber from the forests that enriched González. The INDI employees also stole timber and yerba mate from Avá Guaraní and Mbya communities that same year (Proyecto Paĩ Tavyterã 1988).

Embezzlement at the Natives' expense proliferated after the regime's fall. In May 2015, Rubén Quesnel, president of the INDI, Paraguay's Indigenous Institute, since 2012, received a prison sentence of six and a half years for the illegal sale of 61,776 acres belonging to the Ayoreo community of Cuyabía in the Chaco, where nineteen families lived, as well as swindling US\$ 700,000 designated for poverty relief by the INDI. The theft might have passed without much attention, as had so many during the Stroessner regime, except for the Ayoreo themselves, broadly organized by this time in many formal groups, who blocked major highways and demanded that officials honor their rights to the land. Broad attention to the case, spread through the media because of the Indigenous protests, pushed the corruption inquiry up to the Special Unit for Economic Crimes and Corruption of the Public Prosecutor's Office, which imprisoned the corrupt officials for their crimes.²³ One important difference since the end of the regime, then, is that after thirty years of struggling to counter state corruption and abuses, Indigenous people by this time were organized and much more adept at publicizing state abuses.

²³ See for example, "Desvío de Fondos. Confirman prisión para Rubén Quesnel" (2015).

5. *Regime Programs Push Indigenous People to Organize and Protest*

Indigenous people did not easily accept expulsion from their homelands. Instead, they organized to counter the regime's plans to displace them. Native people defended lands from peasant invasions, countered the new Paraguayan People's Army in the east, and lobbied state officials in Asunción. By 2020, they had formed dozens of registered Indigenous groups throughout the country to publicize their demands and slow state development programs.

The Ayoreo in the Northern Chaco were among the most threatened by ranching and deforestation, yet also the most organized. Even though they had recently contacted national society, they stood to lose the most and, by 2007, had formed multiple communal agencies, as well as nationally with their Unión de Nativos Ayoreo del Paraguay. This larger pan-community Indigenous NGO successfully recovered ancestral land from the ranching company Umbú S.A., for instance, in the Boquerón department, that same year (CODEHUPY 2007, 357).

An even more dramatic highway blockade by organized Indigenous people occurred in 2019. After INDI's president Ana Maria Allen entrenched herself in the army headquarters to escape their protests, a coalition of enraged Indigenous people moved onto the national stage. On October 11, the day celebrating Indigenous Dignity that had replaced Columbus Day, Native peoples blocked the Remanso Bridge over the Paraguay River just north of Asunción. Furious over deforestation and state inaction on their land claims, their unexpected and defiant protest drew broad media attention: that bridge was the only one that linked the Western Chaco to eastern Paraguay. Hundreds of angry Native people stopped cars and trucks for eleven long, tense hours. Very few times had Indigenous people drawn such broad attention so quickly. The people who had supposedly disappeared into the urban poor were still very much present and obviously incredibly angry. Pushing back the police, Indigenous demonstrators demanded an end to deforestation and the resignation of INDI's president. By nightfall, Native protestors met their goal with Allen's resignation and lifted their blockade. Paraguayans sighed in relief as traffic entered Asunción and another potentially violent conflict ended peacefully.

Conclusions

This article has argued that Stroessner perpetuated and set in motion changes that seriously altered the lives of Indigenous people in Paraguay. The dictatorship's use of laws to portray a positive image to critics, obscured human rights abuses and showed later administrations how to cover changes that threatened the lower classes. The regime's choice to borrow from eager international lenders to fund huge development projects

proved detrimental to the subaltern peoples in the way of settler colonization, with its resulting extension of ranching and soy production, which forced over one third of the Native people into the cities, where they have eked out a desperate living since the dictatorship.

As did surrounding regimes, Stroessner used military rule to implement development projects that deforested much of eastern Paraguay and evicted at least one third of the Native people from their communities. Massive hydroelectric dams displaced thousands of Indigenous people, killed animals, and flooded many square kilometers of forest. While these efforts allowed regime supporters to enrich themselves, the environmental results bring into question their longterm viability. The results for Indigenous peoples, including displacement, poverty, and dependency on national welfare programs, at a time when neoliberal reforms were gutting such programs, also brings their longterm benefits for most Paraguayans into question.

By launching huge extractivist programs, including ranching and commercial agriculture, Stroessner ensured that succeeding leaders and supporters would enrich themselves while displacing peasant communities. Dislocated *campesinos*, and the settlement of thousands of immigrants from neighboring Brazil, displaced Native communities over the next thirty years, and the resulting conflicts were deadly for both sides. Broad internal migration to urban centers by Indigenous people and peasants led to new lives as the urban poor, radical cultural changes, and new ways to make a living in dangerous peripheries. Paraguay shows an example of ways in which settler colonialism, and the extractivism it produced, has displaced Indigenous people from their homelands and changed their lives in unexpected ways.

Working alongside South American neighbors, Stroessner grew the national program of settler colonialism to develop Paraguay's economy. Leaders who followed continued to dismantle the state welfare apparatus and its safety net. While perhaps saving money, the resulting collapse of the social infrastructure proved lethal for the Indigenous people. Resettled into cities, living shocking cultural changes without hope, forced to beg and prostitute themselves for food, many Native youths turned to drugs. Violence reached new levels in resettled urban communities, yet Indigenous people were at least no longer poaching on ranches and obstructing soy plantations. Also serious for Indigenous communities everywhere was the regime's legacy of graft, corruption, and theft that still infected democratic administrations. Leaders at the Indigenous agency used their positions to enrich themselves by stealing millions in funds designated to purchase Native lands.

One positive change was that in democratic Paraguay, some officials were caught and punished for their crimes, even though legal admonishments rarely returned to the

Indigenous people the funds designated for them by law. Another positive development for Native people was the way in which growing threats to their lands, as well as life in closer proximity and the new use of Spanish and/or Guaraní as a lingua franca, allowed Indigenous people to join forces and protest. Time and again, Indigenous peoples formed organizations to defend themselves. Native leaders entered politics to compete for government positions. Others allied with NGOs and designed projects to benefit their urban situations. Indigenous people employed new connections to appeal to broader justice and in some cases won international support for their land claims. Foreign support provided some Indigenous people with new venues to link forces, gain broader support and publicize abuses and successes. While the dictator's legacy for their country and people was profound, Indigenous people are forging ways to make that legacy work for them and the nation. Their concerted action will hopefully bear fruit before it is too late for them and Paraguay's environment.

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