Black Awareness Month and the debate on Environmental Racism

By Maria Cecília Santos for ROOTS

In Brazil, the month of November has become known as ‘Black Awareness Month’. The origin of the event is based on the specific date celebrated on 20 November, the ‘Day of Black Consciousness’, which from this year (2024) will become a public holiday in the country. The month reinforces the fight against racism while celebrating black identity and its representations. In the Brazilian context, there is no way to debate the various social agendas, such as the struggle for land, women's rights, and the defence of human rights, without considering the reality and participation of the black population.

Almost 56 percent of the Brazilian population declare themselves to be black or brown, according to data from the 2022 Demographic Census (IBGE)[1], the year in which for the first time the sum of black and brown people exceeded that of white people. This was a social milestone that broadened the debate on racism in various layers and highlighted environmental racism, the subject of this article.

This is the second article in the Black November series developed by ROOTS and you can check out the first article here, where we looked at the historical perspective and origin of 'Black Awareness Day'.

What environmental racism is, its expressions and origins

The term 'environmental racism' was coined by the American Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. in 1985, when he developed a report showing that 3 out of 5 African and Hispanic Americans lived in areas without hazardous waste control. The report, entitled 'Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites,' also analysed that in 10 major metropolitan areas, the situation was even worse, with 90% of the population living in hazardous areas.[2] The report was published in the US Department of Health and Human Services.

In Brazil, there are many issues that aggravate environmental racism - an environmental face of structural racism[3] - which especially affects black, brown, indigenous, quilombola[1], and other ethnic groups placed in vulnerable situations. In 1888, the Golden Law was passed to abolish slavery in the country, after 388 years of the regime, without guaranteeing any rights to the more than 700,000 freed black people, nor was there any work to integrate them socially. On the contrary, there had already been a process of gradually replacing exploitative activities with cheap immigrant labour, especially from Europe [4], since 1850, with the creation of Law 601, Brazil's first Land Law. At that time, the Portuguese crown sold or ploughed up Brazilian territory for farmers, immigrants, and owners of mills and other structures of economic interest. [5]

The Portuguese Crown served the interests of the national and European elites by increasing the concentration of land, which gave rise to latifundia. The newly freed population, lacking any alternative, found itself divided, particularly in Quilombos and the port cities, where the former enslaved and illiterate population still found employment. These processes created a population that was seen as disposable and without the political strength to bring about changes to their reality. The urban areas, which had also been granted or bought, were densified in the peripheral areas of the cities, on

[1] Quilombola is a person who comes from the Quilombos, communities formed by people who fled the situation of slavery in Brazil, forming spaces of black struggle and resistance. The word comes from the Bantu word kilombo, which means 'camp' or 'fortress'.

the hills and close to watercourses, giving rise to under-housing, such as favelas and stilt houses. The cities of Salvador, Recife, São Luís (in Maranhão), Pelotas, Santos, and Rio de Janeiro still comprise a large part of Brazil's black and brown population. [5]

Environmental racism speaks of the people who are most vulnerable to floods, landslides, climate disruption, and food insecurity, and who, contradictorily, contribute the least to global warming. Climate change has affected this population 15 times more in the last 10 years than those living in regions with greater infrastructure. [6] Like São Paulo, the largest capital in Latin America, the poorest neighbourhoods suffer from recurrent water rationing, precarious sanitation services, and negligent urban management, which results in energy supply crises and flooding.

According to a survey by Pólis Institute, commissioned by IPEC (Intelligence in Research and Strategic Consultancy), 7 out of 10 Brazilians have already experienced at least one extreme event associated with climate change, which is equivalent to more than 118 million people. Waterlogging, flooding, and flash floods are of 25% more concern to classes D and E (people with incomes of up to 2,000 reais[2]) than to classes A and B (people with incomes of between 8,000 and 11,000 reais). In terms of race, the black Brazilian population is 25% more concerned about weather events than the white population.

Violations and relaxations of environmental laws and codes also express environmental racism. Lack of oversight in the construction industry aggravates the situation and has already caused major environmental disasters. Large-scale construction projects are carried out without a proper socio-environmental impact study and with periodic maintenance processes that are often omitted by public and private initiatives. Over the last decade there have been three major environmental accidents in Brazil: in 2015, the collapse of the dam belonging to the multinationals Samarco, Vale, and BHP, in the city of Mariana, in Minas Gerais (MG), flooded the Doce River Basin with heavy metals [7]; in 2019, another Vale dam, in Brumadinho, MG, broke and buried the entire surrounding area in toxic mud. The accident contaminated more than 300 km of the Paraopeba River, affected 138 hectares of native forests, and affected more than 600,000 people.[8] In the same year, the Greek company Delta Tankers dumped 2,500 tonnes of crude oil into the sea in an attempt to empty its ship to

[2] Data published by IPEA, mentioned in Inflation 2024 weighs more heavily on very low-income families

correct the vessel's stability. The consequence was an environmental tragedy on the country's coastline that affected 111 Brazilian cities, most of them located in the north-eastern region of the country,[9] which killed several animals, polluted the coastline, and directly impacted the lives of the local population, fishermen and those who lived off coastal tourism.

‘Our future is ancestral’

We talk a lot about the adversities of the present and our future projections, associating technological development as a way of recovering all the damage already done to the environment. We have developed electric cars, express public transport, carbon markets, wind turbines, and so on. However, within the capitalist system, in which profit is the key objective that comes about through the exploitation of human labour and nature, all alternatives are reduced to damage mitigation.

> *‘The capitalist and colonising development model has no answers to what it itself has created, not least because it is this same model that oppresses and keeps the majority of the black population under the ‘invisible hand of the market’ in inhuman conditions and that in climate change scenarios are the most affected. This Eurocentric model of development had to create the concept of race and supposed white superiority, denying other epistemologies, other ways of conceiving and living in this world. But, what do you know, many of the solutions to today's socio-environmental problems were already common practices of African and indigenous peoples and other cultures.’ (Santos, 2023, p.30) [10]*

Indigenous environmentalist Ailton Krenak defends the importance of looking at our ancestry to understand what kind of future we want, because how we see the world is most likely how we will coexist. He comments that our ancestors didn't see natural resources as a commodity, as we do today, and that's why environmental zeal promoted nature conservation. Rivers and forests were not a commodity, but natural flows with their own dynamics, of flood and drought, according to their natural cycle. [11] In the name of modernisation and progress, we have normalised paradoxes: we divert rivers to build roads, we close springs to urbanise territories and we contaminate soils and forests with poison to produce food. To paraphrase the writer Conceição Evaristo, we must think of a possible alternative way of

life within the capitalist system itself, while fighting to change it, since this is the system in force and it is within it that we develop our way of life. Evaristo comments that we are so used to living with exploitative logic that it is easier to think about ending the world than ending the system. [12]

In contrast to the logic of perverse exploitation, popular groups, and organisations are resisting, determined to promote solutions to minimise the effects of the current structure, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), which for 40 years has been fighting for territories, for conservation and coexistence with nature, for paradigm shifts, and is developing agroecology in agrarian reform territories - conquered, literally, with sweat and blood. The 'Planting Trees, Producing Healthy Food' plan, launched in 2020, has already planted 25 million trees and plans to plant a further 75 million by 2030, as well as strengthening the production of poison-free food in Brazil. [13] Against the backdrop of capitalist practices, popular and counter-hegemonic initiatives like this strengthen the fight against environmental racism and confirm the maxim that to achieve socio-environmental and climate justice in Brazil, we must first conceive of racial justice.

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