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Tommaso Protti

TERRA VERMELHA

Overexploitation, drug smuggling and violent conflicts are putting a heavy burden on the highly sensitive ecosystem of the Amazon region in north-west Brazil – with devastating consequences for people and nature. On assignment for the Fondation Carmignac, Tommaso Protti and journalist Sam Cowie travelled together to South America to document the situation.



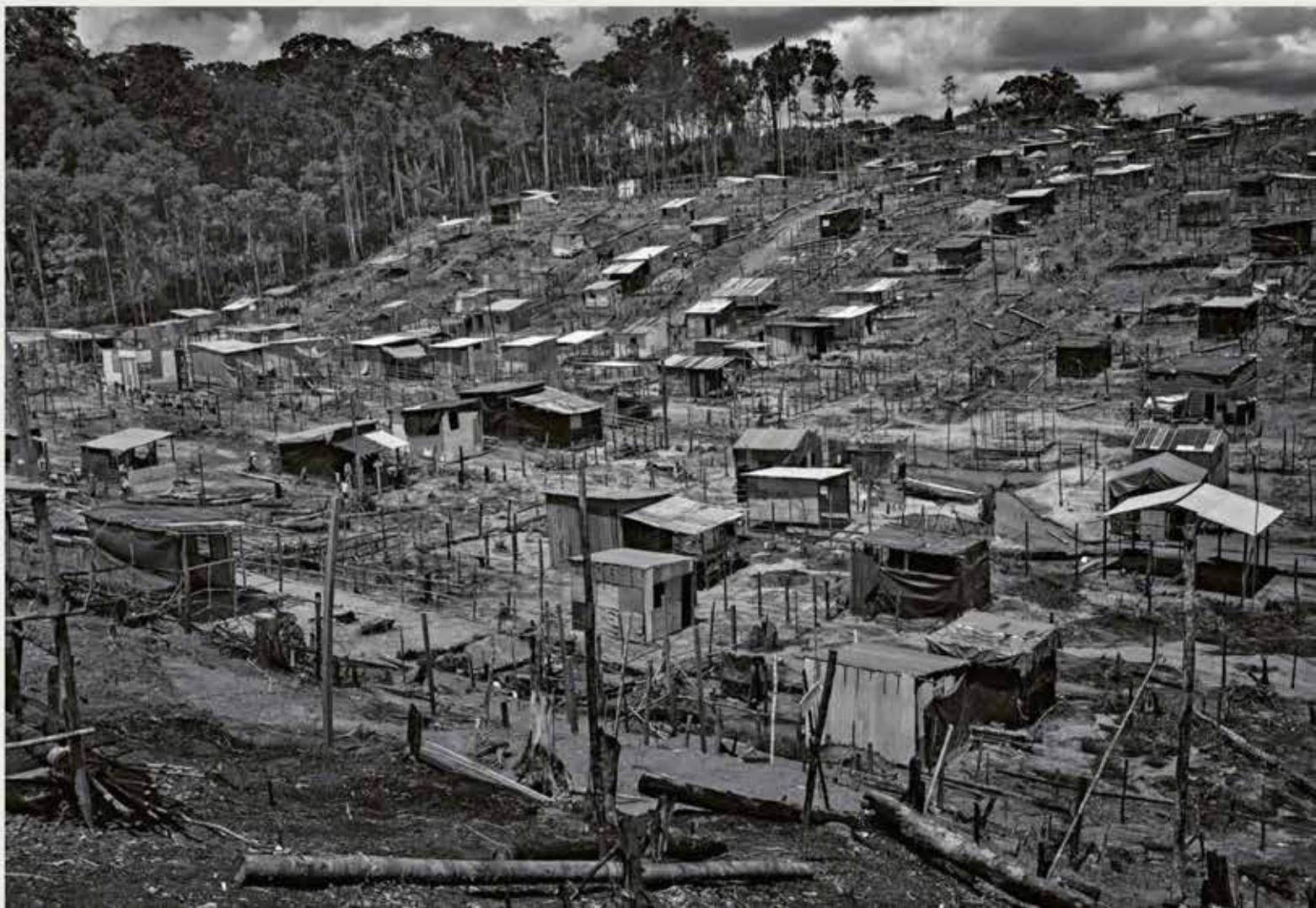
Illegal logging is once again in full swing, and for many people in the state of Rondônia in north-west Brazil it represents their only source of income. The indigenous people of the area have however, come together to protect their homeland. During patrols, they quite frequently destroy logging camps and seize the equipment. It is particularly dangerous when they catch loggers in the act, because both sides are armed. Most of the murders related to land and resources are never solved.



The strong tensions in the Amazon region can be seen just as much in the cities as in the rural areas. Above: A member of the Guajajara Forest Guard on patrol. Indigenous activists like him are regularly harassed, threatened and in the worse cases, even murdered. Left: A leader of the movement of landless farmers close to the Canaã dos Carajás region. The movement is fighting for agricultural reform in the whole of Brazil



Proff always went right to the middle of the action, as for example, in the illegal Monte Horebe settlement in Manaus (below). Left (from top to bottom): A girl from the Juruna tribe in Xingu River, which is increasingly experiencing dry periods; thousands of migrants have taken refuge in recent years in Manaus, 1000 kilometres from the border to Venezuela; a covered body in a poor district of Manaus. The police and locals suspect that it was a murder related to unpaid drug bills





Above: In Manaus a young man is accused of having smuggled 50 kilos of a cocaine derivative. He remains silent in the face of the reporters. The Amazon region is a known transit point for drugs, with a blossoming local market. Left: A woman from Venezuela, who came to Manaus six months ago, lives with her children in an improvised camp for the homeless

Below: Members of the indigenous Kayapó people celebrating a ritual dance. Their land serves as an important barrier against further logging towards the south. Right: Kayapó indigenous people prepare for a ritual (middle); Crepurizão serves as a base for many illegal miners, who are taken from there to different mining areas (below); Beatriz, a 17 year-old prostitute was told that there was more money to be made in Crepurizão than in her home town of Manaus (above).





The various conflicts have ensured incisive changes in the Amazon region. For Tommaso Protti and Sam Cowie it was very important to document their experiences as detailed and unadorned as possible.

TOMMASO PROTTI

Protti was born in Mantua, Italy in 1986 and grew up in Rome. After studying Political Science, he moved to London in 2011 where he studied Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at the London College of Communication. Since then he has been working as a freelance documentary photographer whose work has been widely published. He currently lives in São Paulo, Brazil.

It covers a surface area larger than the European Union: the Amazon rainforest is a 'green lung' that stands as a protective shield against increased global warming. However, the more you look into the Amazon region, the more obvious are the varied and pressing problems and issues currently at play. Tommaso Protti spent a number of weeks travelling Brazil with journalist Sam Cowie, sketching a haunting portrait of an area of primary importance for the continued existence of humanity; but one that represents hell on earth for many of its inhabitants.

LFI: What prompted you to document the situation in the Amazon region in north-west Brazil?

Tommaso Protti: I took on the project together with British journalist Sam Cowie. We had both already visited the region frequently on behalf of various clients – mainly to report on the drug wars waging there. As Brazil headed towards a crisis, and the problems in the region started to pile up, we recognised that something larger was on the line – not just for Brazil, but for the whole planet. We felt a need to combine our experiences as a writer and a photographer into one larger story. We wanted to speak about the changes in society, and to concentrate on something that we hadn't yet been shown: the spilling of blood and the destruction taking place there.

How did your collaboration go?

Working with a journalist helped me to see things that I don't normally give attention to as a photographer. The constant exchange of information and feelings also allowed for a continual evolution of our project.

It appears as though many of the situations were not without danger... did you have a specific photographic approach?

Most of the people I met felt abandoned and forgotten. To be able to take pho-

tographs of these people, you must convey the fact that you are not there to judge them, but rather to tell their story. Other than that, I didn't keep to any particular rules. Each situation is different, and in the end it is always the instinct that tells you what to do best.

What impact are President Jair Messias Bolsonaro's policies having on the Amazon region?

As far as the fabric of society in the Amazon region is concerned, things look extremely bad. First of all, it's important to understand that many of those clearing the rainforest belong to those forgotten communities, who have no other alternatives for their survival. For this reason, they become accomplices to underground criminality, which is legitimized by the large landowners and multinational concerns, wherever climate change is questioned and the forest is freed up for exploitation. This leads to a targeted threat against the indigenous people and landless farmers. Consequently, impunity is a key factor to understanding the Amazon crisis.

Manaus is a populous hot spot in the region. How would you describe the atmosphere in the city?

Manaus has a dirty aura. The city grew rapidly during the rubber boom at the end of the 19th century and is today one of the most violent places in the world. I spent whole nights going from one crime scene to the next, following police WhatsApp groups that posted live reports about felonies. This happened every day, and a dozen times per day at the weekends. At the crime scenes you find women and children looking at dead bodies riddled with bullet holes, while waiting for the corpses to be picked up – as though the whole thing is some kind of show.

Is there anything that can improve the situation there?

The situation in the region intensified in recent years, because Brazil has slipped from a political crisis into an economic one, and resources to fight illegal activities are limited.

With the rise of an ever more powerful legislative that is unfriendly towards the environment and human rights, it's not a phenomenon that is likely to disappear in the near future. There is no way to save the environment without also fighting against poverty.

What can one do as someone not directly involved?

The violence in the Brazilian Amazon region affects us also, and sometimes we are unwitting co-perpetrators. The violence is one of the consequences of the dynamics of world markets and the demand to consume – from cocaine all the way to beef. According to scientists, the rainforest has reached the point of no return as a result of logging and agricultural expansion. In addition to this, there are deforestation projects led by the state and by private business. I think it's important to increase awareness for this situation and to question what is happening. Are there other ways of arranging our lives, and if the answer is yes, what is stopping us from changing now?

Your project was the recipient of the Carmignac Award for Photojournalism. What does this award mean for you?

It was a great honour and a privilege to receive this award. I am eternally grateful to the jury and the Carmignac Foundation for this great opportunity. With such an award, there is enough time and resources available to concentrate exclusively on the story – and in a completely independent manner.

INTERVIEW: DANILU ROSSIGER

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EQUIPMENT: Leica SL with Vario-Elmarit-SL 24-90 1/2.8-4. Asph, Leica M Monochrom with Summicron-M 28 1/2. Asph and Summicron-M 35 1/2. Asph

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