

REVIEWS

Peter Redfield, *Space in the Tropics: from Convicts to Rockets in French Guiana*

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SUSANNA HECHT

ON THE WILD COAST

From the other side of the border, French Guiana seemed a place of marvels. It was from there that coffee first came to Brazil, via a love affair between Francisco de Melo Palheta, a diplomat from Pará, and the glorious wife of the French Guyanese magistrate. The contraband was tucked into the charming bouquet that Palheta—sent to arbitrate various accidental problems of Dutch and French colonialism in the region—offered as a little *lembrança*, after the exchange of kisses; a miniature act of biopiracy involving the commodity that would define the Brazilian economy for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was the chill of the penal colony on Devil's Island, where Dreyfus was imprisoned; later transformed into fantastic technicolour for Steve McQueen's escape across the water in *Papillon*. Yet French Guiana was not, officially, a colony but a *département* of France, just like Vosges or Provence, and could elect two deputies and a senator to the National Assembly.

This was in the 1980s, a time when the Brazilian Amazon was in a state of violence approaching that of civil war. The generals still ran the country; Indians and forest people leapt away from the juggernaut of development and crashing forests rather like grasshoppers fleeing a lawnmower. Rainforest was hacked down, rivers ran with mercury, bloodshed was everywhere. In French Guiana they seemed to have skipped all this; there, they were launching telecommunication satellites. While the militaries and local *caciques* were signing off on corrupt land deals, the French Guyanese were contracting

physicists and engineers. Their publicity pamphlets hymned the ‘stylish towns’—not the usual fetid assemblages of Amazon urbanism, concrete block houses and wattle-and-daub shacks, linked to the outback by roads either choked with dust or greasy with mud. Guyanese students, ‘devoted to physics and mathematics’, were recruited to high-tech jobs at the space centre.

It was all very far from the malarially fraught and militarized frontier that most Amazonian youth had to face; it seemed that French Guiana inhabited a kind of parallel universe. Sleek Ariane missiles lifted into the sky, the product of a harmonious public-private partnership to advance communications—or at least, those in Europe. In the rest of the Amazon, the radio gabbled its ‘message minutes’, reporting one domestic tragedy after another between lilting *nordestino* tunes—‘João, your mother is very very ill, please come home at once’. This was as good as local communication got. There were intimations that, somewhere, these worlds intersected—the Nixdorf computer assembly in Redencao; the talk of wireless telephones. Meanwhile, with elegant regularity, more than half the world’s commercial satellites blasted out from the remote Guyanese edge of the Rainforest.

Peter Redfield’s aim, in this wide-ranging and imaginative book, is to bring together the nineteenth-century penal colony and the twentieth-century space centre, to consider colonization and technology—within this ‘northeast corner of South America, where a vast array of trees meets a slow and placid quadrant of the Atlantic’—in a double focus. The operation of two ‘grand plans’—‘key elements of different historical moments of a world system, here glossed as “Empire” and “Globe”’—comes into view. Redfield guides us through the multiple dimensions of what seems at first to be a kind of Guyanese exceptionalism, but which ends up as something more dauntingly universal. His project embraces both theoretical complexity and an increasingly surreal landscape and history. If this is the anthropology of globalism, it indulges in none of the jargon that has come to characterize so much of the discipline’s post-colonial literature. His volume integrates some of the key themes of contemporary anthropology: colonial history, globalization, science and technology. While these elements also inscribe space and place elsewhere, French Guiana is a locale where the vista is a lot clearer; this is a historical ethnography of an enclave.

Redfield frames his narrative within the moment of three powerful *mythos*, though he avoids the standard metaphors of Lost Eden—El Dorado that have characterized other recent attempts—Slater’s *Entangled Edens*, for example—to understand the foundational ideologies of Amazonia. Instead, Redfield begins with Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, that seminal *mission civilizatrice* in which the castaway dictates the political terms of the island and the technical forms of its settlement. As Redfield points out, Crusoe’s island is both a kingdom and a prison, Guiana’s destiny in the nineteenth century.

Crusoe does not remain an explorer but becomes a colonist—a condition that separates him from earlier travellers, adventurers or merchants, Odysseus or Sinbad. The island, too, has a specific location: it is set in the Caribbean, ‘raw entryway to the New World’, between Trinidad and the mouth of the Orinoco. Crusoe has in fact sailed past the ‘long, flat expanse of the Guianas’ on his voyage, blown off course from his Brazilian plantation. In this setting, where ‘political economy and morality weave together’, Crusoe turns the master–slave dialectic on its head. Here it is the master who works, taming the empty land of settler myth with his salvaged chest of tools, improvising practical solutions to the problems posed by nature. Redfield sees in Crusoe the emergence of a key figure for modernization: the mobile man, a displaced agent who carries with him the technical knowledge to transform his surroundings. Crusoe’s heirs—figures ‘cast in the role of agents of change’, who ‘expressly lack unquestioned attachment to their surroundings’—are central to his study. The development of the island, the ‘land of displacement’, is seen as the assertion of mobile cultural forces over a fixed locale.

While their hinterlands lead down into Brazil and Venezuela, all three Guianas—British (now Guyana; independent since 1966), Dutch (now Suriname; independent since 1975) and French—represent an exception to South American normality. They share a legacy of non-Iberian European colonization, and remained colonies long after the rest of the continent won political independence. Often they have been classified as part of an expanded Caribbean, a practice Redfield follows here. Each, too, has played a relatively marginal role within their respective colonial empires. France secured its foothold on the Wild Coast only in 1676, having fought off the English and Dutch—the northern European powers vying to take advantage of Spanish and Portuguese neglect. Yet French Guiana, as Redfield explains, continued to languish at the edge of its colonial empire, out of the loop of the sugar boom and the Caribbean plantation economy. The harbour at Cayenne was ill-suited to the slavers’ ships, and the prevailing winds were unfavourable. Worse, the undrained, low-lying ground proved swampy and malarial. A concerted attempt at settlement after the loss of Canada in 1763 foundered amid widespread epidemics. Lack of labour and low-level development reinforced each other in a cycle of inertia, while preserving ‘an open horizon for future dreams’.

The second framing narrative that Redfield deploys is that of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*. Beneath the burning sun of some forgotten outpost, a voyager is shown the extraordinary apparatus that carries out executions by continuously engraving the condemned man’s sentence into his body until he dies. The traveller witnesses the final, mad demise of the system, its officers and its exaggerated principles—‘a nightmare of reason gone astray in some distant tropics’. It was the British who had first explored the ingenious double solution to the problems of social pressures at home

and labour shortages in the colonies through the deportation of convicts. By 1826, French frigates were plying the lands between the Oyapock and Maroni rivers, searching for the New World's Botany Bay—although a range of possible holding sites, from the Marquesas to Texas, were under review. The revolutionary year of 1848 proved the turning point. The workers' uprising that June resulted in over 12,000 political prisoners, crowding the old Mediterranean *bagnes*—the naval prisons, whose inmates had once been chained to their galley-oars. Louis-Napoleon's *coup d'état* created another 27,000 detainees. The emperor-to-be argued persuasively that punishment by hard labour would be 'more efficient, more moralizing, less expensive and more human' if it were used to advance the noble aims of French colonization. The abolition of slavery in 1848 had removed one central objection to a penal colony—the damage to the creed of racial authority if white men were seen in chains, doing manual labour. The *bagnes* closed, one by one, and their inmates were transported to the tropics.

The first shipment of convicts arrived in 1852, disembarking initially at a trio of tiny islands off the coast: St Joseph's, Royale and Devil's Island. The cargo was composed of common criminals, political prisoners and problematic priests—counterparts to the God, Gold and Glory that had animated earlier New World conquests. Like moles, blinking in the glare of tropical light, they emerged from the gloomy holds to gain their redemption through labour. For many, it came instead through tropical disease—some 20 per cent of the inmates died in the first year. The French authorities experimented repeatedly with different sites and acclimatization procedures, meticulously recording and comparing death rates. In 1859, the first batch of thirty-six women prisoners were imported, in hopes of fostering the growth of convict families that might populate Guiana along Australian lines. Nearly a third of them died in the first six months.

The theme and practice of the 'natural prison' would gain ground throughout Amazonia by the end of the nineteenth century. The great Euclides da Cunha wrote of the Amazon rubber boom as a form of incarceration. Tappers, imprisoned by the forest and by debt, served out their sentence through the rubber trails that inscribed the impenetrable structures of their solitary confinement. More formal and less metaphorical visions of the penal colony are described in Llosa's *The Green House*. Convict settlements graced the great Amazon interior across Peru, Colombia and Bolivia, the vast tropical isolation providing a more formidable barrier than iron bars. Japanese incarceration camps found their way into central Pará during World War Two. The whole region was seen as a vast penitentiary, in which unending toil and unlimited distance were the parameters of control.

Guyanese death rates and reports of poor administration—the colony would have seventy-eight governors in seventy-seven years—made unsettling

reading for metropolitan proponents of the moral and economic benefits of convict labour. Like the fantastic machine in Kafka's story, Redfield argues, the French penal colony had lost its claim to the very reason that had produced it, becoming an impure, inefficient instrument of torture and elimination. From the mid-1860s New Caledonia was promoted as a more salutary alternative, for white prisoners at least; it was here that the bulk of the Communard prisoners were dispatched after 1871. Yet by the 1880s the Pacific island was seen as 'too luxurious' by the Freemasons and other law-and-order factions of the Third Republic, and Atlantic transportations resumed. It was within this context that Devil's Island was considered the most appropriate place of incarceration for Captain Alfred Dreyfus, convicted in 1894 of spying for Imperial Germany. By this stage the larger convict settlements were at Kourou, the capital Cayenne, St Laurent and the other two islets—hence Dreyfus's status as the sole prisoner on Devil's Island, in a hut specially built for him, surrounded by a double stockade. It was here that he spent the four years of his confinement before his second trial, writing the 'wild, raving letters'—'the climate alone is enough to set fire to the brain!'—that the Duchesse de Guermantes would gently deplore. By the 1920s, the place had given birth to a literary sub-genre of its own—*Horrors of Cayenne*, *Hell's Outpost*, *Isle of the Damned*. It was not until after the Second World War that French Guiana would finally be 'neutralized' through DDT spraying, political incorporation into the motherland as a Département d'Outre-Mer and, in 1946, the final closure of the penal colony.

Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* provides Redfield's third narrative lens. Written in 1865, the former stockbroker's prescient tale envisions US artillery masters, at a loose end after the Civil War, redirecting their talents towards the moon. It foresees a Florida launch site, an ocean landing and much store set on public relations, military expertise and human cargo. (Another option discussed by Verne's protagonists at the Baltimore Gun Club was that of blasting the earth itself to render its axis vertical, producing a world without seasons.) France's rocket programme, though vastly overshadowed by the Cold War space race, was also intimately linked to military and imperialist aspirations. In 1962, Algerian independence forced the French Army to seek an alternative to its Saharan test-site at Hammaguir. Once again, functionaries scanned the globe for a suitable location.

French Guiana met all the requirements: political stability, an open eastward horizon over the ocean—permitting a flight path in the direction of the earth's rotation—and proximity to the equator. Satellites can only orbit the centre of another body and, since the earth spins, an orbit at any angle other than directly above the middle plane of rotation would not stay constant relative to the ground below. Geostationary orbit was crucial for the chain of communications satellites which—circling the globe

at 17,000 mph, some 22,000 miles out from the planet's midriff—would famously transform contemporary social and economic life with their high-speed, long-distance telecom facilities. Financed by military budgets and international corporations, they would also dynamize the commercial space market of the mid-1980s. Observation satellites, by contrast, speeding low over the earth in polar orbits, and capable of monitoring spots at the same local time each day, required a launch site with an open horizon towards the north or south. The Centre Spatial Guyanais—construction had started at Kourou in 1965—was ideally placed. Redfield describes the night-time launch of an Ariane: 'a flare, then a flash of light as bright clouds billow' and slowly, ponderously, the sleek white rocket rises, far in the distance, wavers for a moment, then gathers momentum and vanishes over the ocean, powering its burden, a Japanese satellite, away from the earth. He writes acutely, too, of the highly stratified urban geography of Kourou, which descends in social status as it falls away from the sea. The luxury shoreside villas of the CSG directors and their deputies give way to the 'executive' area and Italianate town centre; bordered, in turn, by the Calypso quarter—some three hundred chalets, built for CSG engineers, lying among the ubiquitous Chinese corner shops. From there, the lower-income, semi-skilled, mixed-race suburb stretches away to the south and west, until the high-rise flats of the creole manual workers appear. Beyond these stand the concrete blocks of the *cit   stade*, housing those relocated by CSG development; the maroon village, rows of rudimentary shacks built around an old waterpipe by Samarakas and Bonis; and the huts of the Kali  na Indians.

The penal colony and the space centre have played comparable roles as state projects, moulding the environmental and metaphorical realities of French Guiana while hollowing out the region's natural economy. Each has created its own administrative hierarchy, staffed by the modern Crusoes of technical expertise, and carved out its own territory within the larger political entity; each has become a 'symbolic nexus' within the Metropolitan imagination. Yet as the two come into double focus, Redfield delineates a series of differences between the 'imperial' and 'global' moments. He examines the nineteenth-century challenges to 'biological cosmopolitanism'—arguments that drew, in part, on French Guyanese death rates to substantiate their claim that man 'cannot change his latitude and climate with impunity'. Redfield considers them in the context of today's 'new tropics', whose heat, humidity and threat of disease have been neutralized by sanitation, refrigeration and mosquito control, dark glasses, vaccination and air conditioning—to create the 'warm climes of tourism and retirement'.

Attitudes to nature are equally changed: the fierce jungle that menaced the nineteenth-century convicts has been replaced by a fragile, threatened biodiversity, ambiguously protected by a new 'environmental cosmopolitanism'.

Within the world of work, though, Redfield sees more in the way of continuities: the reality of the penal system was not redemption through labour, but the hope, perhaps, of survival, of getting by on the strength of small pleasures found in the midst of oppression. Colonization, which involved importing tools and methods designed elsewhere, left a gap between the system and the locale that was open to negotiation, *bricolage*, making do. Similarly, in the new space of Kourou—where international consortia, communication networks, corporate finance and a technical framework that is planetary in scope define the meaning of development—there are, for every technocrat, a dozen *bricoleurs*, adjusting and making do in the interstitial spaces of the tropics. Here, rather than resistance, we find a space of action between the official structure, on the one hand, and everyone else: a place of moments to be seized, the ‘latitudes of accommodation’. This is a world of improvisation in the midst of grander plans—pharaonic projects of dams, roads, cities of industry, whose necessary counterpart seems to be the shanties of indolence where, somehow, so much of the real work gets done. It is this tradition of improvisation and *bricolage* that forms the real historical link between the failed penal colony and the successful space centre. These tropics look more familiar; the glistening rockets also seem less strange.

Inevitably, in a work of this scope, some questions will go unanswered. Redfield defines ‘globalism’ in technological terms, and writes lyrically of the transformations wrought by the space age:

Although the airplane opened up the sky, and the radio tower filled the air with waves . . . neither made the limits of the Earth entirely visible or transparent. Space technology closed the sky again, bounded it from above and sealed it whole. Only then could the sky become fully modern in an active, technological sense, and only then could what lay beyond it become meaningful as space, a vast sea of darkness surrounding a blue and green point of human place. At last the world was one.

He pays less attention, perhaps, to the political and economic dimensions of globalism—so that the continuing colonial status of French Guiana as a DOM, for example, is scarcely questioned. In reality, as Redfield partly attests, rule from Paris has been quite strongly contested. The independence movement of the early 1970s, though brutally suppressed, left its traces. Columbus Day, 1992, saw the start of a week of rioting and general strikes against French domination. Yet this aspect of Guianan experience is given little conceptual weight.

Do Redfield’s persuasive arguments for including the Crusoes in anthropology’s remit involve scanting the Fridays here? The ‘metropolitans’ who are his central focus make up 8 per cent of the overall population of French Guiana—something under 200,000 in total (though this figure excludes

large numbers of illegal Brazilian immigrants), for an area the size of Maine, or a sixth that of France. Of the official population, creoles—the descendants of Africans, from Guiana and elsewhere in the Caribbean, and Europeans—make up the largest block, of around 48 per cent, while Haitians compose another 22 per cent. ‘Maroons’—descendants of the African slaves who escaped, largely from the plantations of Dutch Guiana, to found independent communities in the interior between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries—constitute a further 6 per cent; these include the Aluku, Saramaka, Ndjuka and Paramaka. Amerindians—Arawaks, Emerillons, Palikurs, Wayanas, Wayampis and Kaliñas, by far the most numerous—total roughly 4 per cent. The Chinese community, mainly small shopkeepers, make up another 1 per cent; as do the Indochinese Hmong people, resettled in French Guiana in the wake of the Vietnam War.

To pose this another way: if, for Redfield, the global frontier lies upwards, in outer space, for many Guyanese it seems to be southwards, opening up to Brazil and the rest of Latin America—and away from France. Redfield cites a fascinating TV debate between a Creole road contractor and a metropolitan representative of the World Wildlife Fund, over the construction of a road going south from Cayenne towards the Brazilian border. The WWF, the contractor points out, had not protested against a ring road for the space centre, nor the construction of a hydro-electric dam to power the satellite launches and air-conditioning at Kourou. The southern highway would represent 0.001 per cent of French Guiana’s forest: ‘We need roads, need to redistribute the population, need to have links with our neighbours, with Brazil, even to Venezuela, to end this artificial tie with France’.

These days, the colonization of the tropics—monitored by Raytheon spy satellites calculating the rates of clearing and the movement of cocaine through the vast equatorial forest—takes place not so much in the margins as in the ‘space between’. The dynamics that shape social life have grown more complex, the power relations that underlie them more ambiguous. The environment, along with the *bricoleurs*, increasingly fractures the standard analytics about development and its meanings, providing a ‘proliferation of impure categories’. As Redfield puts it: ‘Storms of progress blow, but the angles of history no longer fly in a single line’. The conceptual horizons remain open at the end of this striking, eloquent work.