

A View of Manaus

1910 – A Historical Portrait

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Abstract: The city of *Manáos* in 1910 was the centre of transformation due to the boom years of the extractive rubber industry; both Manaus and Belém do Pará were the two most modern tropical metropolises of that time. This is a portrait of the economic and social structure of the city.

An Irishman lands at Manaus, more than a thousand miles up the Amazon River, deep into the heart of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, in 1910. This Irishman is Roger Casement (*Ruairí Mac Easmainn*), the man who would later die after being tried for high treason against the British Empire – at the height of the Great War that would consume Europe – after, indeed, being knighted by King George V of England for his work on behalf of the oppressed Amazon Indians.

This, indeed, was the task for which he came to *Manáos*: a mission from the British Foreign Ministry, to investigate irregularities in the *Peruvian Amazon Company*, an English-registered firm, represented locally by the notorious Peruvian “rubber baron” Júlio César Arana, and headquartered in Manaus – although most of its properties and rubber plantations were in the Putumayo area of the Amazon region in Peru.

Casement was sent as an experienced, successful investigator and campaigner: he had been British Consul in various African colonies – and indeed also in Rio de Janeiro, in the previous year – and his career included decisive roles in various human rights issues. His report was expected to seal the fate of the Peruvian Amazon Company, after its activities had been questioned in London following accusations of atrocities against the Huitoto Indians, who worked as its rubber tappers.

The aim of this article is not to speak about Roger Casement’s important consequences of his presence in this region but to paint the portrait of the city of Manaus in his times. Decades earlier, the arrival of a foreigner in the bucolic settlement of *Manáos* would have been a notable event, exciting great local interest and gossip among the city’s population; but by 1910 a foreigner’s arrival aroused little curiosity – and this reflected the huge changes in the region, all caused by the development of rubber.

What was effectively a new city had emerged in less than ten years, maintained and peopled by a social structure comprising large landowners, traders, government

employees, technicians, adventurers from various regions of the world, and a large contingent of workers who had migrated to the region. Economy based exclusively on the collection and sale of rubber had created a level of prosperity that was able to finance a most varied range of products. Part of the surplus was put into urban improvements; the apparent ease of gain attracted investors, workers, artists and adventurers to the region. There were substantial changes in the city's appearance, in its population's habits, and in the pace of local life – activity in general had speeded up, in tune with the modernity of the time.

Motivated by the desire to be part of the “civilized” world, and stirred by speeches on progress, the city tried to create safe and beautified spaces, duly equipped with public services and the facilities demanded by the requirements of public health. At the same time, stimulated by a sense of competition, it tried to build the idealized image of a modern city, in the middle of the jungle, disputing sought-after foreign investment –and that precious commodity, manpower – with Belém, the other tropical Brazilian state capital of Pará on the Amazon river, near its estuary.

Manaus was consciously investing in creating a shop-window city, an image to seduce and attract investment, and workers. To disguise its mercantile intentions, it was decked out with squares, theatres, and luxurious buildings to meet various demands: for safety, the desire for easy consumption, and up-to-date forms of leisure for a population that was avid to show off its newly-acquired status.

The aim was a very different image from the somewhat pejorative descriptions that had characterized Manaus up to the end of the 1880s. From the coarse, unsophisticated, and provincial settlement, a city with European features – safe, modern and beautiful – emerged. By that time, the majority of its population was no longer native: the wide variety of its origins was one of the causes of its cosmopolitan nature, and there was an intense flow of visitors.

The architecture of Manaus was one of the elements that most impressed travellers. An eclectic conjunction of public buildings, some of them extremely luxurious –including the Amazonas Theatre, the Palace of Justice, The Benjamin Constant Institute, the Public Library, the *Ginásio Amazonense* college, the government palace, the Treasury, the Customs House – and garden-landscaped squares, bridges, tree-lined avenues and public schools – all blended with private houses and mansions, major commercial establishments (shops, ateliers, tearooms, hotels, restaurants and many other services) to make up the fabric that was the background to the city's daily life.

The impact of finding a modern and vitally active city in the middle of the jungle impressed most of its visitors. Almost all of them would report on its rare cosmopolitanism, classifying it as one of the three most exciting cities in Brazil. However, the very diversity of its cosmopolitanism gave rise to other, less conventional, contacts and experiences. In the early years of the twentieth century, cultural statements emerging from the recently-arrived populations began to provoke reactions in the established structure. On February 23, 1900, a report in the republican newspaper *Federação* called

for police intervention in the *forrós* – the name refers to a popular dance of Brazil's Northeast – on the basis that they were “a source of shame, and moral degradation for the social class.”

Questions of order and security had been part of the Municipal Codes of Behaviour since the 1860s, governing the use of public spaces. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, moral prohibitions began to be included, reflecting more concern by the city's administrators. In the *Municipal Codes of Behaviour of the City of Manaus, for the Year 1901*, certain prohibitions stand out, specifically the type of activities most enjoyed by the lower-income population. As well as the traditional prohibition on bathing naked in the city's creeks and on its shoreline, “in the full light of day, in public places such as might offend moral decency” (23), or hanging out clothes to dry in public places. It was also prohibited to play “rhythmic drum music and sambas” or any other events which might disturb “public tranquillity.”¹

As from 1904, reports by the Public Security Authority on issues affecting public order and customs, such as vagrancy by minors, begging, gambling, drunkenness and prostitution, became increasingly frequent. The authorities expressed concern about “young men/boys” [*rapazes* in Portuguese has an imprecise age range] “without occupation, and with no domestic education, some abandoned, and some completely perverted” (Nery 210-11). The Governor, Silvério José Nery, recognized the inappropriateness of keeping them in jail, due to the risk of promiscuity with criminals, “some of them completely degenerated,” which would further increase the youths' degree of perversion – and requested creation of a Correctional School for young people between the ages of 14 and 21.

In spite of the changes caused by the crisis, the city enjoyed a certain calm compared to other centres, said the Governor, Raymundo Affonso de Carvalho, in a report of 1908. While recognizing that Manaus “was visited by people coming from all sorts of places, and has a more lively night life than many cities with a larger population” (31), he reported that in that year, although public order and tranquillity had not been disturbed, he did however lament that “vagrancy” by minors, and begging, were on the increase.

In spite of the social problems and a growing financial crisis, the city maintained a prosperous appearance, with its trade maintaining vitality, and an effervescent social life. Landing in Manaus in 1908, Duque Estrada – author of the Brazilian National Anthem – was impressed with what he saw:

A person arriving has an extremely pleasant impression, not only due to the beauty of everything in sight, but also due to the ease with which the landing takes place, with the ship simply moored up to the warehouse. Wide streets, broad avenues, superb buildings stand majestically before the visitor, who penetrates into the heart of the city in two minutes, after passing through the Market and a very pretty square crossed by various electrical tramways. (5)

Estrada noted that the city was undergoing a “calamitous crisis as a result not only of the devaluation of rubber, but also because of the lamentable condition of the State’s finances.” However, he noted that there was “great vitality everywhere,” and every corner of the city was alive with activity. The city was to keep up its frenetic rhythm for several more years, but its days were numbered.

Some years previously, the city’s state of crisis had become a recurrent subject in the city’s cafes, newspapers and brothels, but a major part of the players in the scenario appeared not to believe in the evidence, and continued to spend recent fortunes, surrounded by others who tried to pick up as much as they could. At that moment, it would have been surprising to find anyone in that far-away state capital city who was not looking for some financial gain –nor indeed anyone who had remained unaffected by a certain Amazon disease.

The source of this malady was not the feared yellow-fever mosquito, whose eradication would be announced only in 1913, ending a controversy begun some years before in Brazil’s capital. It was not *beribéri*, nor the “bad-character fever,” outbreaks of which were frequently announced in local newspapers. According to Anníbal Amorim, poet and soldier of the state of Bahia, it was the “Amazon orgy virus,” a contagion which completely transformed the conduct of men who in Rio de Janeiro were “examples of private austerity and morals, though on arrival in the capital of Amazonas, they were completely transformed” (158). Faced with so many attractions, it was natural that Amorim almost forgave the attitudes that he so much criticized, with the justification that only a person with extremely strong character and immense determination and capacity for achievement would succeed in surviving the social life of Manaus unscathed.

Those who did not resist, and gave into the pleasures offered, became part of a group that Amorim classified as “a society of debauched men and women, whose main meeting point was the *Praça da República*, where they delivered themselves up to an unrestrained life in the company of *coquettes with foreign accents*, consuming German *chopp* beer and French *champagne* in the *cafés-chantants* that were multiplying throughout the city. Outstanding in this category were the *Chalet Jardim* and the *Café dos Terríveis*, which never closed” (157). As well as the Amazonas Theatre, the *Juliet* and the *Alhambra* presented ever-changing shows, and every night the city’s leading hotel’s offered concerts – something that had not yet developed in Rio de Janeiro.

It was not only the “debauched” society with its bars and cafes that gave vitality to the *Praça da República*, but also the politicians, government officials, members of the military and visitors that frequented the government palace, the barracks of the military police, the *Hotel Cassina* and other places in the area. The *Praça* had also become one of the city’s most frequented places since the end of the previous century, when the military police band began to present a musical program that attracted a large public.

Speeches by governors promised to offer great attractions and leisure options to attenuate the hard life of most of the region and undo negative reports of the region as an unsafe and savage place. Urban excitement played an important role as one of the fundamental attractions in the construction of a new image for the capital of Amazonas.

One of the first official examples of the attractions of worldly city life on offer in the region is a text in the book of photographs *Álbum do Amazonas – Manaus 1901/1902*, widely published outside Brazil as promotional material for the State of Amazonas. Alongside images of a modern, beautified city, the introductory text invited the visitor to make the most of the seductive offers available:

As well as the Amazonas Theatre, Manaus has another theatre, in the form of a tent, situated in the *Praça da República*. This is the Eden – a theatre for the people, where the companies of a lower order operate; a bullfighting circus or coliseum, in the *Bosque da Cachoeirinha* [Little Waterfall Wood], and the *Cassino Amazonense*, in Eduardo Ribeiro Avenue, which offers singing and dancing shows, etc., by artists of a range of nationalities, with different programs each night, in the “café chantant” style. Various breweries hold small concerts in the afternoon and at night, to attract visitors and provide them with distraction, and finally, to complete the chapter on public entertainments, on Sundays, Thursdays and public holidays, in the Municipal Garden of the *Praça da República* one of the magnificent bands of the Military Regiment of the State plays a selected program, from six to nine p.m., attracting a very large public to this small but elegant little garden. (5)

The flexible hours of functioning of these establishments were totally supported by the *Code of Public Behaviour* of 1910 which states: “Theatres, variety theatres, casinos, cafés-concertos or *cafés-chantants*, and other houses of public entertainment... may remain open on any day or night until their respective functions terminate.” (45).

If, on the one hand, the public administration had, in the name of the new civilization and trade, assumed a flexible position on functioning of the new leisure facilities –which were, without a doubt, one of the local attractions – on the other hand, in the same *Municipal Code of Public Behaviour* there are clear examples of commitment to morals and good customs. Rules, fines and imprisonments were frequently imposed, aiming to regulate the use of public spaces and the individual’s behaviour in them.

For example, in the chapter “Public Behaviour and Morals,” there were prohibitions on popular dances such as *cordões*, other than at Carnival time, and also drum sessions (39). It was widely known that prostitution was increasing in Manaus, and this was frequently referred to in official reports. One of the more curious prohibitions related to this practice is referred to in Article 148: “Women of easy life are not allowed to make conversation at their windows with passers-by, on pain of a fine of 50\$00” (42). Article 164 laid down that “hotels, guest houses and inns that accept prostitutes and disorderly persons will be closed.” (46).

The introduction of the electric “tramway” with its tram cars, in 1896, brought a considerable change in the speed of activity in the city, together with the arrival of electric lighting. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the arrival of automobiles, known as *Landaus*, which paraded, roofless, through the central streets of Manaus, added another material feature of the modernity aspired to. Today’s reader will be

surprised to discover that the maximum speed allowed inside the city limits was 10km per hour, while the speed limit in the suburban and rural areas was 20km/hour.

Most of the travellers and writers referring to the Manaus of this period speak positively of the progressive aspects of its prosperous, civilized and beautiful appearance. However, the critical position taken by Euclides da Cunha, even though of a personal nature, in a letter sent to Domício da Gama, in 1905, sounds a discordant note from this chorus:

I stopped at the place that was the entry point for my mysterious journey into the desert of the Purus river. And more unhappily, after walking about three miles, I came upon the **vulgarity of a great and strictly commercial city** – of sly insects, aggressive bees, and Englishmen with white shoes. **Commercial, and unbearable.** Its sudden growth from nothing has brought to this place, mixed in with the civilizing outer clothing, the remains of the tattered thong-skirts of Tapúia Indians. A city that is half bumpkin, half European, where slum buildings stand low beside palaces, and the exaggerated cosmopolitanism places the tall-as-a-beanpole Yankee side by side with... the coarse rubber tapper. The impression that it gives is of a crude native cabin transformed into Ghent. (312)

Cunha's criticism may even have sounded like praise to some of those who earned a living in Manaus, at that time: traders, workers, public employees and adventurers, but almost all temporarily favoured by the contrasting conditions of this scenario of change – a field propitious for greedy traders and consumers of less demanding tastes who flirted with the novelties of the time.

A large part of the population was fuelled by the sense of opportunity and of profit, and doubted that anyone would go to such a faraway and inhospitable region for any other reason. Seduced by false proposals of easy enrichment, a vast contingent of workers was attracted, and then submitted to a rough and unjust system of work that kept them isolated in remote locations in the Amazon jungle. Brazilian Northeasters, Indians and mixed-race cowboys suffered under the hard working conditions, and tapped and collected from the rubber trees (*Hévea Brasiliensis*) the latex that was the lifeblood of this whole empire. The latex, smoked in a precarious and unhealthy system, was exported, in the form of large balls, to the major industries of Europe and North America.

Far from the eyes of those who enjoyed the benefits of their work, these workers were kept in precarious living conditions, daily confronting the rigidity of the semi-slave work system, while coming face-to-face with the adverse conditions of nature at its most grandiose, confronting savage animals, evasive Indians, and diseases which affected, and extinguished, them with no help or assistance.

Under this exhausting work routine, the rubber tappers were not notified that all their efforts had been in vain, when decisions and changes taking place in Manaus did not succeed to hide the evidence of the crisis that ushered in a new phase of the city's history and habits. On July 10, 1913, the governor, Jonathas Pedrosa remarked that "the outlook for our situation, in the world rubber market, in the near future" (31) was very

discouraging, and explained that in 1911 Amazonas had lost its status as practically the world's sole producer, and now supplied only 11.6% of world production – falling in 1912 to 9.9%. The evidence of the new situation led the governor to predict: “I am sorry to say that this percentage will progressively diminish as oriental production expands.” This was his justification for the precarious financial situation – which already made it impossible even to repaint the *Teatro Amazonas*, the capital's main building.

On June 15, 1913, a popular demonstration in Manaus practically demolished the head office of *Manáos Improvement Limited*, in reaction to an exorbitant increase in the charge for water distribution services made by that English company. The next year, after a long lawsuit, the *Peruvian Amazon Company* applied for bankruptcy – with no significant punishment – but the news was overshadowed by headlines about the First World War.

This, then, was what had become of the Manaus where Roger David Casement, the visitor whom we saw arriving, had landed in 1910; and he who, with his reputation and motivation as a defender of the oppressed, was later, under this regime of war, accused of high treason against the British Empire, stripped of his prerogatives, and hanged in 1916.

Notes

- 1 In the Code of 1901, this prohibition was still in the Manaus Municipal Code of Public Behavior of 1910 – Law 639 of September 13, 1910, printed at Manaus by the Public Printing Office, 1910, page 39.

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