



Japhy Wilson, *Reality of Dreams: Post-Neoliberal Utopias in the Ecuadorian Amazon*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780300253429 (paper); ISBN: 9780300262933 (ebook)

Reality of Dreams confronts the magical realism of the Citizens' Revolution. Following a series of megaprojects across the Ecuadorian Amazon, Wilson captures the promises and illusions of the utopian projects of post-neoliberalism. The book traces how the distortions of utopian dreams participate in the construction of the socio-political space and material realities of the Amazon. Advancing the thesis of fantastical materialism, the text opens with the mythical histories of El Dorado and the making of the oil frontier in the Amazon, and then moves to describe the rise of social organising and radical dissent in the northeastern Oriente region preceding the emergence of the Citizens' Revolution. The subsequent chapters trace the launch of a series of megaprojects, from the Manta-Manaus interoceanic corridor and the creation of the International Port of Providencia, to the creation of Ciudades del Milenio ("Millennium Cities"), and the building of IKIAM Regional University of the Amazon. As each project unravels, fantasy mixes with reality in the making of a captivating post-neoliberal myth comprised of successive failures. The megaprojects of the Citizens' Revolution, that shimmering "utopian oasis" promised on the horizon, are exposed by Wilson to be a mirage built on the inflated price of oil in the early 2000s.

One idea of the Citizens' Revolution was to transition away from the use of finite, natural resources—like oil and mining revenues—to the "infinite resources" of collective knowledge of the economy, biodiversity, and the genetic wealth of the Amazon. Instead of trying to make sense of the distortions that Wilson finds while researching the megaprojects of the Citizens' Revolution, he claims to describe projects in their own terms. Here, the argument goes, reality need not be coherent; in the end, even the most charismatic of capitalist social realities turns out to be every bit as absurd and fantastical as one might have feared. A story smoothed over with captivating detail, told from a position of unparalleled access from his position within the (then) state-funded National Center of Strategies for the Right to

Territory (CENEDET), *Reality of Dreams* offers insight into the material realities of the contradictory social and environmental politics of the Ecuadorian state.

Reality of Dreams is a good read; the story catches you as you ride each crest of utopian failure. It was also of great personal interest to me, given that I know many of the individuals Wilson writes about. From 2011 to 2013, I lived in Lago Agrio, the city founded with the oil boom and state-sponsored settlement and colonisation of the Amazon at the end of the 1960s, while conducting ethnographic research on the oil industry. I was witness to the immense construction projects of the Citizens' Revolution, such as a large bridge over the Napo River in Coca, the improvement and creation of roads, lined with celebratory billboards enumerating the dollars invested in a particular public works project. I travelled with Ecuador Estratégico (the public company created in 2011 to administer the funds generated by the 12% of royalties on Amazonian oil through various development projects in the Amazon) on trips to the Ciudades del Milenio, observed community meetings, and spoke with people who alternated between their new homes constructed by the government and their forest homes. I worked closely with activist Donald Moncayo, whom Wilson cites, and with architect Santiago del Hierro on the Plan ZIMM-S project (which is confused in the text with the Divining Providencia project, a purely academic collaboration between the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador and the University of California, Los Angeles). On a week-long trip with del Hierro and a team of architecture students, I peered over his shoulder as he examined maps of the International Port of Providencia, while bulldozers cleared red clay in preparation for future construction outside. In short, each of the megaprojects he writes about intersected in significant ways with my own work. In 2016, Wilson and I spoke to discuss resources relevant to his research for this book project.

There are some aspects of the contradictions amid extraction and political ambition recounted in *Reality of Dreams* that resonate with my experiences in the Amazon. Wilson pieces together the backstories of each project, a patchwork of loose ends which was often difficult to parse. Outstanding questions I had about the creation of IKIAM, or the disappearance of the 12% of oil revenue that was slated for investment in oil producing

regions, were answered in the book. That said, there are other aspects of the text that I found disquieting. The first is the lack of work that the author does to reflexively position himself and his research in relation to life in the Amazon. The second has to do with the narrative arc of the book, and the possibility that reality contains truths beyond his own.

The title summarises the premise of the book: while there are many dreams, there is only one reality. From his position as a foreign, male, “gonzo journalist” (p.15), Wilson seems to be the only one who has not been drawn into the enchantment. In each chapter, he pulls back the curtain to unveil the unworkable and incongruous combination of ideologies and practicalities of these utopian projects, and concurrently, other people’s ignorance or duplicity. The subtext is that no one else sees the “reality” of these dreams for what they actually are. Wilson falls captive to his own narrative at times, such that particular people and events—some of which I either know well or have direct knowledge of—that unfold in the book are portrayed in ways that are more convenient to the “emperor has no clothes” plot, than they are faithful to the many, messy realities on the ground. Further, given the rich array of explanations from Ecuadorians and Latin Americans of the many realities enclosed in these megaprojects, a humbler geography (Saville 2021) would have helped to contextualise, and decentre, the singular truth presented in the book.

The narrative rise and fall of the Citizens’ Revolution is revealed through dramatic detail in which each project—whether IKIAM, Divining Providencia, or the Tena airport—was a political show without a plan, an empty spectacle that ultimately only serves capital’s ends. Yet, I would argue that the “failure” of each of these utopias is more complicated than Wilson suggests. A few years ago I was attending an academic conference in Padova, Italy, where several students from Yachay University—the sister university to IKIAM created as part of the vision of a “bioknowledge for *buen vivir*” as part of the Citizens’ Revolution (p.157)—presented their theses. The students were working on a digitalisation project in Indigenous communities, bringing their background in computer programming together with Kichwa language specialists. The pride of the students—in their work, in the growth of Yachay and development of new possibilities for higher education in Ecuador—was palpable.

The same is true for IKIAM: the university has grown dramatically since the formative years described in the text, taking shape through the labour of students and professors alike. There is simply more to these projects—in both content and form—than acknowledged in the book.

Similarly, many of the farmers and residents in Sucumbíos and Orellana that I worked with were genuinely pleased about the material investments in the Amazon, even if often largely symbolic. Others were proud of the construction of the airport, the clean roads, the creation of new hospitals and expansion of access to healthcare through the Citizens' Revolution. Ciudades del Milenio may indeed be descriptively likened to concrete blocks in the jungle, with unconnected computers and understaffed schools, but—as my friends and colleagues living in Ecuador attest—they continue to be occupied and used in many ways, ones that I would be hesitant to chalk up as failures (Lyll 2020). This is what I believe Wilson misses as he exposes the grand ruse of each of these projects: the genuine hopes, sweat, and effort that so many have expended in constructing their own piece of each of these different dreams, and furthermore, the possibility for these dreams to evolve and grow over time. What may not have gone as planned, or may not have even had a coherent plan to begin with, now has a life of its own—not all of which fits within Wilson's narrative.

To be clear, I am not defending the Citizens' Revolution, nor insisting on success in places of profound structural inequality in the face of ongoing extraction. Rather, my point is that utopias need not materialise as planned in order to still be significant in a host of other ways for people who live in the Amazon. Fantasy and failure overlap to produce something in between; the reverberations of the Citizens' Revolution and the growth and fall of oil rents in the past decades are more complex than they first appear. Utopian dreams matter in a multitude of ways.

In the Amazon, on the main road way out of Shushufindi heading towards Jivino Verde, there is a billboard on the side of the road in front of an active oil well. The sign reads "El Refugio: Un paraíso para vivir" ("The refuge: A paradise to live in"). I have always loved this sign because of the sincerity and natural zeal it illustrates about how the Oriente was built—by settlers and speculators alike—and the ways it continues to be inhabited and



reinvented by following generations. The sign encapsulates both the grand illusions and rusted failures of settler colonisation in Amazonia, while just behind it are the many lives that go on both in spite of, and because of, oil. For many, this remains a place not just of paradise lost, but also of paradise found. Wilson would do well to remember that.

References

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