



**INDIGENOUS STRUGGLE AT  
THE HEART OF BRAZIL**

State Policy,

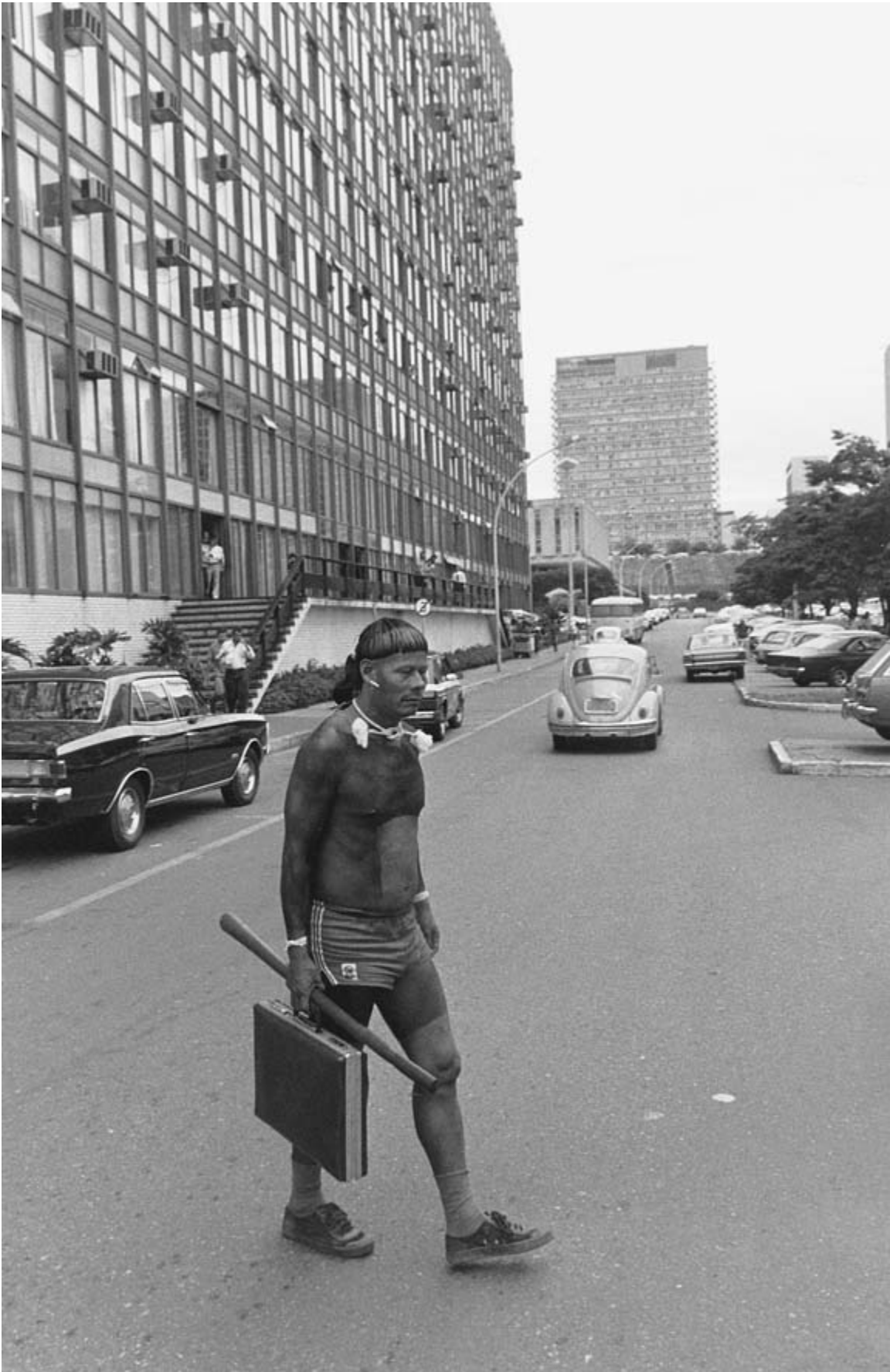
Frontier Expansion, and

the Xavante Indians,

1937–1988

Seth Garfield

*Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil*



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*To Jack & Lyla Garfield and Vivian Flanzer*



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## Introduction

### *Indians and the Nation-State in Brazil*

On the night of July 17, 1994, I joined hands with Xavante Indians in their village of Parabubure in central Brazil as they celebrated a festive occasion with song and dance. Ringed in a circle, the Indians stomped the earth at the center of the village in graceful rhythm, chanting sonorously in their Gê tongue. As men pounded their feet in one step and women in another, the gendered spheres of Xavante society were ritually enacted. The remoteness of Parabubure from Brazilian settlements shrouded the ceremony in eerie seclusion, the starlit Mato Grosso sky offering the only illumination. Had their forebears been resurrected for an instant and accompanied the performance, they might have thought that little had changed, that the Xavante remained undisputed masters of their territory, faithful preservers of ancestral custom.

But they would have been deceived. Whereas the Xavante once danced on land that extended “to where the earth touches the sky,” they now trod on the confines of a reservation, demarcated by the Brazilian government a decade and a half earlier. Decrepit buildings, the administrative skeletons of a defunct cattle agribusiness, marred the natural tapestry of sprawling shrub, the familiar backdrop for communal ritual. Worn-out clothing draped muscular bodies once bared publicly with neither reproach nor shame. Moreover, the Xavante were not honoring an ancient tradition nor performing a long-standing rite. They were commemorating Brazil’s victory in the World Cup.

Earlier in the day, the Xavante were not celebrating much at all. They were struggling, like other historical actors, to make the most of their circumstances. As their village lacked electricity, the Indians had hoped to view the final soccer match on the public television in the central plaza of Campinópolis, the nearest town, which was a two-hour drive away. On the dirt road to town, the Indians would pass a succession of cattle ranches whose fenced-off pasture land once served as hunting ground for wild pig, anteater, deer, and peccary. With shattered pride but determination,

the progeny of a onetime warrior nation could take their rightful place in the Campinópolis square, brooking the racism and condescension of ranchers and townspeople.

Cirilo, the Xavante driver, planned to chauffeur many of the eighty or so members of his community in the truck that the Fundação Nacional do Índio (National Indian Foundation, FUNAI) had provided some time ago. He regularly transported fellow villagers to town to buy foodstuffs, clothes, and basic household goods, as well as to receive medical treatment and social security payments. But with each attempt by Cirilo to rev the engine, frustration mounted as the Indians sensed that the trip would be canceled.

The Xavante might have radioed FUNAI regional headquarters to send a mechanic. Based on long experience, though, they knew that state assistance would not be forthcoming for days or even weeks. Besides, the radio was broken as well, informed Carlos, a Xavante who headed the FUNAI post in the village and earned his pay as an agency employee. For the final match of the World Cup, a portable radio would have to suffice, and we all huddled around to await the momentous showdown between Brazil and Italy. The nation's triumph on the soccer field electrified the indigenous community. During that nighttime revelry, their cynicism (and that of other Brazilians) regarding state capacity and national potential appeared to dissipate.

Less than half a century earlier, the Xavante were as much in the dark as the countryside around them that night regarding soccer, trucks, radios, researchers, reservations, the Indian bureau, and nationalism. In short, they knew little about Brazil, whose victory they now cheered. Nor did they have very much interest, for that matter. Had my grandfather ventured off in his youth to a Xavante village to learn about the interplay between state policy and indigenous political culture, he might have witnessed a more "traditional" lifestyle. He also likely would not have lived to tell the tale.

From the second half of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the Xavante defended an enormous stretch of territory in northeastern Mato Grosso against Indian and non-Indian alike. Male warriors bludgeoned interlopers to death, strewing their naked corpses as testaments to Xavante supremacy, xenophobia, and masculine prowess. A history of resistance to Portuguese and Brazilian expansionism and defense of sociopolitical autonomy fueled Xavante belligerence.

## The Xavante: A Brief Historical Overview

According to Xavante oral histories, the first contact with non-Indians occurred far from their present home in central Brazil, in a region situated “near the sea.” The earliest documentary reference to the Xavante, a map drawn by Francisco Tossi Colombina in 1751, placed the Indians’ domain between the Araguaia and Tocantins Rivers in what was then the northern region of the captaincy of Goiás, today the state of Tocantins.<sup>1</sup> Along with the Xavante, Goiás was home to numerous indigenous groups, such as the Kayapó, Karajá, Krahô, and Canoeiro.

Like other areas of central Brazil under Portuguese colonial rule, the captaincy of Goiás experienced a boom during the 1720s with the discovery of gold by slaving expeditions (*bandeiras*) from São Paulo.<sup>2</sup> As ranchers drove livestock from the northeastern *sertão* to provision the growing mining centers, northern Goiás was also transformed into a cattle-grazing region. The *goiano* frontier, as Mary Karasch has shown, consisted of a multiethnic population: Luso-Portuguese adventurers and priests, men and women of African ancestry both enslaved and free, and assimilated Indians as well as Tupi speakers who had fled Portuguese exploitation on the coast. Census data from the late eighteenth century indicate that Luso-Brazilian whites comprised only 17.4 percent of the population of Goiás. White females, and free women in general, were particularly scarce.<sup>3</sup>

The Portuguese crown endeavored to protect natives from settler depredation, to create sedentary laborers and loyal Christian vassals, and to safeguard gold extraction from indigenous sabotage. Royal legislation, inspired by Jesuit campaigns, barred Indian enslavement in 1655, recognized indigenous rights to land in 1680 (as “the original and natural lords of it”), and regulated the allocation and remuneration of native labor. Settler opposition, indigenous offensives, and divided loyalties of the crown, however, stifled royal efforts to ensure humane treatment of Indians. Colonists, dependent on coerced native labor for their livelihood as well as for defense against hostile indigenous groups, revolted against Jesuit enforcement of protective legislation. In retreat, the crown would hastily reintroduce legalized Indian slavery under the terms of “rescuing” Indian prisoners of intertribal warfare condemned to death, or “just wars,” in which an “infallible” threat to Portuguese rule existed. In fact, slaving raids would proceed indiscriminately.<sup>4</sup>

On the eighteenth-century goiano frontier conflict raged as bandeirantes plundered indigenous villages in search of slaves and gold. Competition for female labor and sexual companionship was a constant source of violence, with Luso-Brazilian raids capturing indigenous women and children to serve as slaves or retainers.<sup>5</sup> The Xavante sought to repel settlers, on four different occasions destroying the mining camp of Pontal, founded in 1738 within their territory. In 1762, Captain General João Manoel de Mello organized a retaliatory mission comprised of five hundred men, and two decades later the Captain General received royal authorization to wage “offensive war” against the Xavante.<sup>6</sup>

During the decade of the 1770s, as part of the Pombaline reforms aimed at revitalizing a sagging colonial economy, the Portuguese crown sought to promote trade on the Araguaia River and to concentrate local indigenous groups in official villages, or *aldeias*, where they could supply labor and provision food to settlers and riverine travelers.<sup>7</sup> By 1788, Captain General Tristão da Cunha had resettled two thousand Xavante at the aldeia of Pedro III or Carretão, survivors of bandeira raids and settler attacks. Smaller contingents of Xavante were congregated at other settlements, although many never submitted to the aldeias.

The aldeias, administered by military officials and tended to by missionaries, failed to convert the Xavante into agricultural laborers and loyal vassals. Cunha Mattos, a visitor to Carretão in 1823, noted: “The Indians who live here number 200 instead of the 5,000 who were once here. There is an indigenous commander (*capitão-mor*) and almost all of his subjects belong to the Xavante nation and a few Caiapós. . . . These Indians are peaceful, speak Portuguese poorly, are baptized, lazy, drunkard, and are presently useless to the whole world.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, several factors sapped the aldeias, rendering the Indians “useless to the whole world.” Epidemics such as smallpox and measles decimated the settlements and prompted survivors to flee. Funding for the aldeias, never bountiful, dried up with the region’s economic downturn after the decline of the mines in the 1780s.<sup>9</sup> The Indians, physically abused with chains and whips, abandoned the aldeias and resumed violent attacks—armed with knowledge of European weaponry and greater familiarity with settlers’ ways.<sup>10</sup> The Xavante’s travails mirrored those of other indigenous groups under Portuguese colonial rule: between 1500 and 1800 the native Brazilian population of at least two and a half million was reduced by probably three quarters.<sup>11</sup>

In 1811, the royal government in Rio de Janeiro authorized another “just war” against the Xavante, Karajá, Apinayé, and Canoeiro Indians. The following year, Xavante and Karajá joined forces to destroy the presidio of Santa Maria do Araguaia.<sup>12</sup> By 1849, there were only seventy or eighty Xavante remaining at Carretão.<sup>13</sup> The first official effort to “civilize” the Xavante had collapsed.

Nonetheless, the havoc wreaked by warfare, disease, enslavement, and forced migration or tense coexistence reconfigured Xavante society. A definitive split occurred within the group sometime during the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> One contingent, which came to be known as the Xerente, settled in the vicinity of the Tocantins River (in the present-day state of Tocantins) and maintained “peaceful” contact with outsiders. Those rejecting rapprochement, who came to be known as the Xavante, migrated westward toward the Araguaia River. The river, an important waterway for north-south trade, was viewed by settlers in Goiás as the boundary line between “civilization” to the east and the “wilderness” of Mato Grosso to the west.<sup>15</sup> Retreating from settler advance, the Xavante crossed the Araguaia to Mato Grosso sometime before 1862.<sup>16</sup>

Like other Gê social structures, the Xavante’s capacity for fission and fusion may have originated in the pre-Columbian period from the necessity to mobilize for war against the Tupi-speaking populations on the Atlantic coast in order to occupy these more favored regions. Since the Portuguese conquest, this social structure proved much more adaptable in resisting the impacts of colonialism, chronic warfare, and epidemic than that of the more sedentary coastal populations.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the next three-quarters of a century, the Xavante found refuge in the *cerrado*, or tropical savannah, of northeastern Mato Grosso. Expelling Karajá and Bororo Indians, the Xavante carved out an extensive domain. The unity that marked their foray into Mato Grosso soon dissipated, more the product of expedience than custom. Prizing political autonomy and access to natural resources, groups splintered off to stake their territorial claim.

As capital accumulation in Mato Grosso was clustered primarily in the southern and western portions of the state—maté near the Paraguayan border, rubber in the Guaporé valley, and cattle in the Pantanal—the Xavante remained relatively unfettered in their pursuits.<sup>18</sup> But in the first decades of the twentieth century, as settlers trickled across the Goiás border or south from Pará into the Xavante area in search of cattle pasture and farmland, violent conflicts erupted with growing frequency. In the early

1940s, the Brazilian state, committed to settling and developing the nation's western frontier, undertook a concerted effort to establish peaceful contact with the Xavante and to restructure their way of life. Over the next half-century, as this book documents, the Indians' political economy and cultural identity would be dramatically altered—as would the course of Brazilian state formation.

As in the past, the Xavante continue to hunt and gather, albeit on less expansive territory but more diversified treks. In 1990, the erstwhile lords of the Mato Grosso cerrado were divided among six reservations, with a population numbering approximately six thousand. The Indians now besiege bureaucrats, politicians, missionaries, and visitors with requests for trucks, tractors, satellite dishes, and monetary handouts. Their cultural benchmarks, scripts, and audiences have likewise broadened. Xavante songs are chanted in their villages, but are also marketed on compact discs sold at Brazilian music stores. Oral traditions are recounted by elders to youths in the Xavante language, and published in indigenous-authored books in Portuguese. Today the Xavante revere not only their ancestors but Brazilian soccer heroes as well.

### Revisiting the History of Indigenous-State Relations in Brazil

This book raises several questions regarding the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the Brazilian nation-state. How did the processes of state formation and western frontier expansion in twentieth-century Brazil unleash such dramatic change among an indigenous people? And how did indigenous people such as the Xavante strive to mediate such change? How, despite the chronicle of their death foretold, have Xavante adapted to dominant society while honoring ancestral customs? What has been the nature of indigenous struggle at the geographic, cultural, and political heart of Brazil?

My study looks at the political, legal, and ideological interventions by different forms of the Brazilian capitalist state to subjugate and reconstitute an indigenous people. It analyzes the evolving material and cultural factors bearing on the subordination of the Xavante and the protocol and symbols through which social relations of power have been articulated and experienced. While examining state formation in twentieth-century Brazil, capital accumulation on the frontier, and social constructions of

ethnicity, this book chronicles patterns of Xavante sociocultural adaptation and political mobilization. It probes how dominant signs and material practices were contested and embraced, undermined and amended by the indigenes.

The incorporation of indigenous populations and territories into the nation-state was fundamental to the growth of Brazil's regional and national economies and its emergence as a continental power. Indigenous peoples, moreover, have had great symbolic importance in the construction of Brazilian national identity. And Brazil's foreign relations, much to the government's chagrin, have been rocked by accusations of mistreatment of native peoples. Yet, though anthropologists and sociologists have produced illuminating studies of indigenous-state relations in Brazil, historical research remains embryonic.<sup>19</sup> The marginalization of Indians within Brazilian historical narratives subsequent to the early colonial period stems from several sources. The indigenous no-show or typecasting in Brazil's national roll call conforms to the broader hemispheric tradition in which Native Americans have been depicted as folkloric curiosities rather than ongoing producers and products of historical outcomes.<sup>20</sup> The shadow of social Darwinism and positivism, which preached the imminent, inevitable, or actual demise of indigenous peoples, has extended farther than admitted. But the lacuna derives from trends more specific to Brazilian historiography as well. The myth of racial democracy, celebrating interracial mixture in smoothing the nation's sociocultural formation—although debunked by researchers—undoubtedly has managed to obscure indigenous realities (as it has elsewhere in Latin America).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, for the postcolonial period, historical research has overwhelmingly focused on Brazil's southeastern and northeastern regions, due to their preponderant political, economic, demographic, and intellectual importance in shaping national development. The central western and northern regions—in 1990, home to more than half of the nation's small native population of approximately 235,000—have been given short shrift, rendering indigenous history less visible.<sup>22</sup> The political projects, research agendas, and cultural blinders that stripped Brazilian history of Indians also have stripped Brazilian Indians of history in distorting, if not overlooking, analysis of indigenous socioeconomic engagement.

In recent years, historians have begun to retrieve the Brazilian indigenous experience, revisiting the archives to reinsert the disappeared into

regional and national historical narratives.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, these inroads trail recent contributions to Spanish American historiography, which have stressed the intricate and conflictual relations between indigenous peoples and the state.<sup>24</sup> This book seeks to bring Brazil's blurred indigenous past further into focus.

### Of State Formation, Frontier Expansion, Race and Ethnicity

Several narrative strands thread this study. The dominant one explores how the Brazilian state since the Estado Novo dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1937–1945) crafted a political project and cultural discourse to exercise dominion over indigenous groups and their territories. Brazilian state officials had long pondered the daunting challenge of consolidating rule over far-flung regions, and the diverse, multiethnic populations that were to constitute “the nation.” As a dynamo of state consolidation, the Estado Novo—marked by political centralization, pronounced intervention in civil society, inward-oriented economic growth, and nationalist bent—signified an important watershed in relations between the state and indigenous peoples and between the political center and periphery. The Vargas regime, extending its determined if weak arm to the Mato Grosso backlands to promote capital accumulation, colonization, and national integration, intensified the process of western expansion that would transform Xavante lifestyles.

Indeed, the “development” of the western and Amazonian hinterland would remain a political project of potent nationalist symbol long after the Estado Novo. From the construction of a new capital, Brasília, smack in the central western *planalto* under the administration of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–1961), to the pharaonic roadbuilding and colonization projects of the military governments (1964–1985) in Amazonia, images of the western frontier and its populations were indelibly stamped on the nation's political and cultural consciousness. So, too, the west's natural resources remained inextricably linked to bureaucratic planners and investor portfolios.

The Brazilian frontier was demarcated neither by geographic line nor cultural boundary, enveloped by process neither unilateral nor unilinear. Rather, the frontier was splotted by zones of multiple, intermittent, and

complex interpenetrations among social groups endowed with unequal power in contest over territorial space, resource allotment, and cultural primacy.<sup>25</sup> Although constructed in binary terms as an ideological foil for core areas (“civilization” vs. “barbarism”), the frontier may be better conceptualized in terms of networks of social linkages and understandings, a large proportion of whose relations, experiences, and meanings transcend bounded notions of place.<sup>26</sup> Critically, frontier regions have been marked by the state’s tenuous ability to exercise hegemony through mechanisms of consensus and consent and to monopolize the use of violence. Political disarticulation of the bourgeoisie, lopsided patterns of capital accumulation, environmental barriers, technological constraints, and sociocultural resistance traditionally have accounted for such fragmentation. (It should be noted that Brazilians refer to the vast interior of the country as the *sertão* or *interior* rather than the Portuguese cognate *fronteira*, which connotes a boundary line or border.)

Brazilian frontier expansion is a historically specific process of occupation (and contestation) of lands and their integration into the national economy.<sup>27</sup> Since the 1930s, as Brazil experienced rapid industrialization, urbanization, and labor surplus, the frontier expanded in response to capital accumulation and demands within the national economy. As the Brazilian economy deepened in industrial and financial centers, it widened through the accumulation and appropriation of frontier surplus and the integration of “unexplored” regions. Frontier land served to expand production of agricultural staples for a growing urban population and industrial economy; surplus labor, denied access to land under a monopolistic system of tenure and displaced by mechanization, moved onto the frontier to meet this demand. (This trend, then, is not reducible to earlier models of export-oriented or “moving” frontiers, whose economic activities were directed to the world market.)<sup>28</sup>

Joe Foweraker rightly notes the central role of the Brazilian state in ensuring accumulation on the twentieth-century frontier and its reproduction of capitalist social relations through the use of legal mechanisms, bureaucratic agencies, and violence.<sup>29</sup> Yet institutions of state are also cultural forms whose activities, routines, and rituals serve to constitute and regulate social identities.<sup>30</sup> In analyzing efforts employed by Brazilian state officials and elites to establish hegemony over indigenous peoples, we may touch briefly here on the structural and ideological components

of nation building: the cult of nationalist developmentalism, the reification of the state, and the construction of “Indianness.”<sup>31</sup>

Since the Vargas era, the Brazilian state defined and legitimized its link to the “nation” by overseeing a developmental project aimed at transforming a neocolonial agro-export economy into an industrial power. As changes in the international capitalist economy had rendered the process of Latin American industrialization distinct from that of the North Atlantic, state planning and leadership were upheld as indispensable in managing basic industries and infrastructure, regulating imports, and controlling wages to nurture the domestic private sector.<sup>32</sup> The overall growth of state power in the period under study is impressive. The developmental policy of import-substitution industrialization, which engendered a long period of economic growth and structural transformation from the 1930s to the late 1970s, entailed heavy state involvement in economic planning, regulation, and financing. Frontier expansion was championed by state officials as a means to supply staple foods for the growing urban population by expanding agricultural production, as well as a means to rectify regional imbalance, social inequality, and national defense.

Brazilian state-led developmentalism also served, to adapt Partha Chatterjee’s reflections on postcolonial India, as an effective tool for containing and resolving class conflict in a large and heterogeneous country and controlling dispersed power relations to further capital accumulation. Corporatist structures linking workers to the state and governmentally authorized forms of group representation and consultation served to shape and give meaning to the very notion of “politics.”<sup>33</sup> Development was conjured as a linear progression premised on a collective will, transcending regional and particular interest and benefiting all members of the “nation.”<sup>34</sup> State officials presented Brazilian nationality as a constituted entity that was threatened by “feudal” modes of production and ethnic separatism; in fact, the very emergence of that national identity was contingent on the reproduction of capitalist social relations and the elimination of cultural differences.<sup>35</sup>

As Eric Hobsbawm succinctly asserts, “Nations do not make states and nationalisms, but the other way around.”<sup>36</sup> The recasting of the Brazilian “nation” from an amorphous social mass represented one of the long-term successes of state officials. Still another enduring legacy of Vargas

was his promotion of the *idea* of the state as a consolidated and unified entity. For the image of the nationalist state masked more than the actualities of class power in Brazil:<sup>37</sup> as Philip Abrams has noted, the state itself serves as a mask, a message of domination whose unified symbol camouflages profound division and lack of cohesiveness within the political realm.<sup>38</sup>

The cult of statism and nationalist development converged in policy making and pronouncements toward indigenous people. To promote accumulation, the developmentalist state constituted objects of planning as objects of knowledge, mapping out the physical resources, capabilities, and propensities of its economic agents.<sup>39</sup> State planners sought to define and regulate indigenous territorial boundaries, modes of production, and civic capacity. Yet, as James Scott points out, state “maps,” in attempting to render societies more manipulable, simplify and misrepresent complex local social practices, depicting only those aspects that interest official observers and monitors from the center.<sup>40</sup> Thus, land that the Xavante used as hunting, foraging, and agricultural grounds was surveyed by planners in terms of cash crop and livestock potential. Land providing cultural sustenance and historical reference was pinpointed by military strategists as national security zones or as safety valves for the nation’s dispossessed. Intricate modes of production and kin networks structuring communities were disregarded or oversimplified by officials intent on “rationalizing” indigenous production and organization.

Enjoining indigenous peoples to surrender territorial control and political autonomy in the “national” interest, state planners affirmed exclusive know-how and capacity to engender *better* Indians: sedentary agriculturists, disciplined rural laborers, market consumers, and patriotic citizens. The Brazilian state, like its mid-twentieth-century hemispheric counterparts, claimed mastery of indigenous uplift through noncoercive and enlightened methods—methods “respectful” of indigenous cultures yet adequately propulsive of a transformational and nonreturnable journey into the socioeconomic mainstream. As a linchpin in this agenda of domination, elites employed biologically and culturally deterministic notions of “Indianness” to legitimize power and naturalize social inequalities.

Long before the state reached the Xavante’s doorstep, ideologues sidelined indigenous peoples on a field of power demarcating social entitle-

ment, status, and identity. To a modernizing state promoting capital accumulation and national homogenization, indigenous territorial dominion and cultural difference was anathema. Yet, for the nationalist authoritarian Estado Novo—coincident with statist, chauvinist, and nativist regimes worldwide—indigenous people also held great symbolism as primordial citizens and markers of national exceptionalism. Indians thus were classified as raw material rather than finished products of nation building: noble savages and/or mental deficientes who required “protection” and refashioning by the state; social isolates who would biologically and culturally fuse with other Brazilians.

Numerous contradictions fractured these images. As progenitors of Brazilian nationality, Indians were ceremoniously offered a seat of honor in the national pantheon; yet, as dim-witted children, they were reprimanded. As cultural gems, Indians represented an asset to nation building; yet, as idlers and resisters, Indians constituted a drag. As past and future contributors to the process of *mestiçagem* (or racial mixture) in Brazil, Indians stood as equal partners in a national project; yet, as wards of the state steered on the right track by “*civilizados*” (or whites), Indians were relegated to the back seat. Elites had essentialized indigenous peoples as an ethnic “other”: paragons of morality, valor, and generosity, or of simplemindedness, deviance, and sloth.

All collective social identity, whether indigenous or nonindigenous, is founded on opposition toward “others.” Ethnicity, however, as conceptualized by John Comaroff, consists of the stereotypic and hierarchical assignment of social groupings to niches within the division of labor, originating in historical processes surrounding “the *asymmetric* incorporation of structurally dissimilar groupings into a single political economy.” At the apex of this socially constructed hierarchy of opposed ethnic identities lies “race,” whose identification by ancestry or physical appearance is belied by inconclusive bases of genetic differentiation and the lack of universal apprehension of phenotypical variation.<sup>41</sup> Yet, although structural forces form the root of ethnicity, ideologies are irreducible and mutually constitutive aspects of material reality, with the capacity to reproduce and/or alter the character of that social order.<sup>42</sup> Thus, cultural constructions of Indians represented and enacted structural inequalities in Brazilian society through the signs and symbols of everyday practice and acquired relative autonomy to impact those structures.

The Vargas regime, of course, did not invent these dual images of Indians; rather, it mobilized certain variants of feelings that already existed and that could operate on the macropolitical scale to conform with a “new” nation-state.<sup>43</sup> Yet, in imposing, rewarding, or “encouraging” certain sociocultural practices and forms of expression while suppressing, marginalizing, or undermining others, Brazilian state power would serve to conscribe indigenous agency and representation.<sup>44</sup>

The implications of the state’s message were patent. Indians, as the primordial Brazilians, would (or should) embrace present-day western expansion; indigenous communitarianism would buttress the political economy of the frontier; Indian prowess would strengthen the nation; racial mixture would eliminate social conflict. The benevolent state would regenerate the innate potential of the Indian, and the innate benevolence of the Indian would regenerate national potential. Through biological mixture and cultural assimilation indigenes would further meld a *mestiço* nation. Fashioned painstakingly on an elite assembly line, Brazilian Indians had been destined for ultimate demolition. This curious fate, in fact, conforms to Gerald Sider’s insight that “the historical career of ethnic peoples can [thus] best be understood in the context of forces that give a people birth and simultaneously seek to take their lives.”<sup>45</sup>

The Janus-faced ideology articulating race, racial mixture, and nationality is not unique to Brazil. In Colombia, for example, the celebration of racial mixture glorifies the convergence of three races on neutral ground, yet the ideology of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) envisages a future in which blacks and Indians are eliminated, giving rise to a *whitened* mestizo nation.<sup>46</sup> In tracing the tangled economic and ideological webs that enmeshed an indigenous people since the Vargas regime, this study seeks to broaden our understanding of the nexus among state formation, frontier expansion, and ethnic identity in twentieth-century Brazil.

## Hegemony and Its Malcontents:

### The Brazilian State and Indigenous Engagement

State capacity and autonomy in implementing policy is not only historically variable but typically uneven across sectors, dependent on factors such as administrative-military control of territory; financial means and

staffing; the organization, interests, and advantages of socioeconomic groups; and transnational structures.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the process whereby structures and ideologies become hegemonic, or accepted as the natural, universal, and true social order, is never total.<sup>48</sup> As such, hegemony is a process that constantly has to be constructed and may be unmade, and whose resilience varies from one regime to another.<sup>49</sup>

The Brazilian developmentalist state—which historically prioritized industry over agriculture, city over countryside, and southeast over west—would be hard-pressed to execute indigenous policy and to restructure the sociopolitical dynamics and economic course of the west. As state policy for indigenous people was both ambitious and ambiguous—contacting and “protecting” hostile groups; teaching Portuguese and civic-mindedness while preserving indigenous “virtues”; inculcating new modes of production and demarcating indigenous reserves—it impinged on not only the Indians but the interests of regional oligarchs, missionaries, corporate investors, and domestic and international advocacy organizations. Consequently, various social groups mobilized to influence and reformulate policy. Struggles between national and subnational officials or among federal bureaucracies, reflective of these competing interests, further adulterated the officially prescribed dosage for indigenous integration. As this study documents, “the state” did not unilaterally nor uniformly determine the fate of indigenous communities, lands, and identities in the Brazilian west. Rather, outcomes evolved out of the conflicts and negotiations among government officials, indigenous peoples, local elites, missionaries and church leaders, peasants and squatters, journalists and intellectuals, foreign governments and human rights groups in a dynamic interplay that shifted over time from one regime to another. Whereas celebratory and revisionist analyses reify state power, I explore the contingency of Brazilian state structures to understand the course of indigenous policy.<sup>50</sup>

My lens focuses on Xavante engagement of the socioeconomic structures and cultural mechanisms that sought to redefine their political economy and identities. Xavante postcontact history—haunted by death, exile, territorial loss, and cultural violence—proves no major exception to most postconquest Native American experiences. Yet, while decrying such victimization, we need not reduce Indians to ciphers. Heeding Marshall Sahlins’s admonition against equating colonial history simply with

the history of the colonizers, we must explore how disciplines of the state are internalized and resisted.<sup>51</sup> My secondary line of inquiry, then, seeks to investigate how one indigenous group navigated paths of integration into the Brazilian nation-state, and the legacy produced for Indians, state, and society.

For too long the study of indigenous people in Latin America was reduced to a catalogue of cultural change or continuity that embodied essentialist notions of ethnicity and offered scant explanation of indigenous history. One scholarly tradition, informed by modernization and world system theory, conceptualized indigenous integration as a game of billiards in which one cultural trait or stage was consecutively knocked out by capitalist expansion, rather than as an uneven, multifaceted, and contradictory process.<sup>52</sup> Of course, many indigenous peoples and their cultures *have* perished in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America—as the result of genocide, epidemic, territorial usurpation, and social assimilation.<sup>53</sup> Yet recent scholarship has illuminated how indigenous engagement with dominant society has engendered varied historical outcomes.<sup>54</sup>

A countervailing approach has viewed subaltern politics as an “autonomous” domain, a cultural cocoon that has allowed for, in Ranajit Guha’s words, “dominance without hegemony.”<sup>55</sup> Among Latin Americanists, such a concept is best embodied in the notion of “the Andean” (*lo andino*), whereby Andean peoples’ histories are gauged and validated by supposed continuities with precolonial Inca rule and resistance to Westernization.<sup>56</sup> Although such insight underscores the importance of endogenous beliefs and practices in resisting hegemonic control, it strait-jackets indigenous cultural authenticity in the mantle of continuity and restricts postcontact history to an exercise in negation. Indeed, in obscuring the creative and contradictory processes whereby dominant symbols and meanings are filtered, absorbed, and reworked by indigenous peoples, such a methodological approach impoverishes our understanding of the history of indigenous-state relations.<sup>57</sup>

Ethnic cultures, born of resistance and adaptation to domination, must be seen as transformative and relational rather than timeless, capsulized essences.<sup>58</sup> I do not imply here that indigenous peoples lacked group consciousness or identities based on sociocultural difference prior to incorporation into Brazilian society; rather, such identities changed as the so-

cial and material boundaries marking this opposition shifted in the course of economic and political processes.<sup>59</sup> For example, it meant one thing to be Xavante living on the sparsely populated Mato Grosso frontier in the early 1940s using sheer force to defend extensive territory and entertaining the overtures of a wobbly central government bent on rearranging matters. It meant quite another to be Xavante in the late 1970s, fenced in by whites, beholden to state power, swept up in swirling national and international debate over the rights of Brazilian Indians, and engulfed by the mass media. Indeed, what must be probed is the violent and convoluted process whereby the Xavante, stripped of autonomy, *learned* and articulated that their ethnicity was a political marker that restricted or accorded them rights and obligations as indigenous peoples and Brazilian citizens. For just as state formation hinders, it enables, with capitalist political and cultural forms restricting certain capacities while developing others.<sup>60</sup>

In schools, civic ceremonies, and public discourse, government officials and missionaries conveyed to Xavante notions of state power, indigenous rights, and political representation. These ideological weapons were not furnished ready-made to the Indians; rather, the Xavante adapted them from a dizzying montage assembled by dominant actors to showcase normative forms of behavior and identity. Thus, we must explore how indigenous tactics of resistance to external domination derive from the very institutions and doctrines that the colonizers imposed to ensure subordination.<sup>61</sup> Withstanding the sociocultural avalanche of state power, the Xavante selected, remolded, and hurled back fallen debris in their defense. Xavante leaders stormed the political arena, an elite bastion, reinforcing yet realigning the framework of Brazilian law. Portuguese, a vessel of cultural-linguistic subjugation, was reworked by the indigenes into a language of protest. “Indianness,” a subordinative classification, was refitted by the Xavante into a social identity and organizational medium for mobilization.

Of course, the Xavante also harnessed endogenous social patterns and historical experiences for battle: a political culture that enshrined aggressiveness and daring in its leadership, communal organization amenable to strategic dispersal, and a collective memory of episodes of violent confrontation as well as “peaceful” engagement with Brazilian society. Parlaying “traditions” into statements of political dissent and entitlement,

Xavante communities sought to temper and contour patterns of socio-economic domination. The indigenous past, then, would serve as a way to mediate a culturally specific mode of change.<sup>62</sup>

In their quest for greater autonomy *and* access to Brazilian accoutrements of power, Xavante villages pursued polyvalent strategies: deferring to agents of dominant society while cherishing—or discarding—alternative visions; gauging the strengths and weaknesses of the state (which evolved with *its* stages of “integration”); forging cross-cultural alliances for political expediency; revealing pent-up grievances or “hidden transcripts” only at propitious moments.<sup>63</sup> These tactics engaged elites on the very legal, political, and cultural grid that had been plotted for indigenous subordination.

### The Research Methodology and Agenda

As this text examines the relationship between Brazilian state formation and indigenous political engagement, certain caveats must be set forth. In examining state policy toward indigenous peoples, this work does not offer a traditional political history focusing on parties, congressional debates, and judicial proceedings, nor an institutional history of the Indian service.<sup>64</sup> Rather, it seeks a broader picture of the material and cultural interface between indigenous policy and indigenous politics. Though critical of Brazilian state policy toward indigenous peoples, this work is not intended as a blanket indictment of state power and planning nor as an apologia of neoliberalism. It critiques, following James Scott, state hegemonic projects that disregarded the values, aspirations, and objections of indigenous peoples and marginalized native know-how and input in the process of frontier expansion and nation building.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, this work does not offer a “thick” ethnography or detailed ethnohistory of the Xavante, nor does the analysis of Xavante interaction with outsiders exhaust all facets of indigenous consciousness and representation, whether historical, mythical, or a combination thereof.<sup>66</sup> It does endeavor, in tracing the larger material and cultural forces impacting on the Xavante, to document experiential nuance within and among communities.

My focus on the Xavante as a case study for analyzing the Brazilian

state's indigenous policy stems from several factors. In many ways, the Xavante epitomized "the Indian" spotlighted by twentieth-century Brazilian government officials and intellectuals and conjured in the popular imagination: truculent, nomadic, "uncorrupted," and Amazonian. Moreover, Xavante adaptation to and subversion of dominant political institutions and cultural norms reveal an indigenous people's strategic engagement of Brazilian society. The Brazilian indigenous population is estimated at no more than 0.2 percent of the national total of more than 160 million. Although numerically small, the Xavante constitute one of the larger indigenous groups in Brazil and the largest in Mato Grosso. Of the 206 different indigenous peoples in Brazil speaking approximately 170 distinct languages, nearly half have only 200 to 500 members; only ten groups, including the Xavante, have a population exceeding 5,000.<sup>67</sup> My specific findings on the Xavante do not encapsulate the trajectory of all Brazilian indigenes, whose variegated patterns of socioeconomic integration, cultural practice, geographic distribution, and historical experience defy pigeonholes. My research is intended to provide a comparative reference point for historical inquiries into Indian-state relations in twentieth-century Brazil and Spanish America and broader questions of ethnicity and postcolonial nation building.

This book illuminates not only the implications of Brazilian state policy for indigenous groups but the implications of indigenous groups for state policy. For although skewed by sharp imbalance, power dynamics between Indians and the Brazilian state must be viewed in dialectic terms. The historical foundations of this relationship are explored in chapter 1, which examines the construction of the Indian under the *Estado Novo* (1937–1945). As a vestige of primordial Brazil—a living archaeological relic—the Indian stood as a valuable symbol for a state whose political legitimacy rested on its nationalist developmental project. Indigenous people and the western hinterland epitomized "Brazilianness": redemption of the nation from a traditionally subordinate role in the Atlantic world as agro-exporter and industrial and cultural importer. Indians were consecrated as a precious national resource who had inestimably enriched the Brazilian sociocultural makeup since the arrival of the Portuguese. Gendered variations on the theme featured the intrepid Indian man who had helped the Portuguese tame the natural environment, and the sexually accommodating Indian woman who lovingly begat the *mestiço* popula-

tion. This demigod could still be found uncorrupted in the pristine west, habitat of the nation's "authentic" Indians. The celebration of the Indian further served to deflect racist aspersions cast from the North Atlantic that impugned the potential of a nation with a large nonwhite population.

Yet, simultaneously, Brazilian state officials depicted indigenes as slackers and incompetents who required discipline to learn the meaning of "work," the importance of "rational" resource management, and the evils of "nomadism." The noble savage, elites charged, was socially underdeveloped and economically unproductive; for their betterment, Indians required state oversight to manage their land and resources and to regiment their labor. In the context of western frontier expansion, state discourse and policy, which defined Indians as both "others and brothers," could naturalize arrogation of indigenous territory and socioeconomic subordination.<sup>68</sup>

Chapter 2 looks at state efforts to "pacify," or peacefully contact, the Xavante to regiment the process of accumulation and settlement on the central western frontier. State officials would be vexed by violent resistance from the Indians, opposition from homesteaders, and competition from missionaries. The state's triumphs were piecemeal and fragmentary and served to provoke a schism between government officials and elite sectors who advocated integration and those who advocated preservation of uncontacted (or recently contacted) indigenous groups.

Chapter 3 looks at the shortcomings of state policy toward the Xavante in the early postcontact period. It explores the political economy and social structure of the Xavante, which had been systematically devalued or overlooked by state planners in their transformative mission. The Indians' mixed subsistence economy, based on hunting, gathering, and agriculture, had been adapted to a forbidding natural environment, and village politics was marked by factionalism. State officials, bent on stamping out nomadism and harnessing indigenous labor, sought to co-opt Xavante leaders with consumer goods; indigenous leaders, however, viewed access to state largesse as a mechanism to achieve factional supremacy rather than a recompense for abandoning foraging. The disjuncture between state and indigenous expectations, and between state objectives and capabilities, exploded in internecine strife on the Mato Grosso frontier.

The federal government's challenge in reserving territory for the Xa-

vante, faced with stiff opposition from Mato Grosso elites, is explored in chapter 4. Land politics in Mato Grosso, marked by violence, fraud, and clientelism, paved the way for the commodification of Xavante territory and the assault on their communities. The federal Indian bureau, hobbled by juridical, administrative, and fiscal constraints as well as patronage and corruption, offered scant defense. Indeed, the chapter explores how Mato Grosso land policies served as a site of both contest and compromise among state and subnational governments that undergirded the Brazilian postwar democratic system (1946–1964).

Chapter 5 probes the difficulties Xavante communities experienced with forced subordination to dominant society. At government posts and religious missions, Indians were pressured to modify their political economy, social norms, and cultural mores. Xavante communities would demonstrate disparate responses to outside intervention, responses that were also fractured by age and gender. While maintaining sociocultural differences, they demonstrated an eagerness to master the political and economic structures and symbolic codes that served to subjugate their communities. From this apprenticeship, Xavante would assay the political value of their ethnic culture as a banner of entitlement, and would acquire the linguistic skill and rhetorical weaponry to brandish these claims with measured success.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine the dramatic intensification of state power, capital accumulation, infrastructural and demographic growth, and environmental destruction in Amazonia precipitated by two decades of authoritarian rule after 1964. To induce corporate capital to the Amazon, the military government lavished investors with generous fiscal incentives and tax breaks and expanded transportation and communication networks. Military officials viewed the economic development, colonization, and integration of northern Mato Grosso and other areas of Legal Amazonia as imperatives of national security. Indigenous policy would be targeted by state officials—endowed with far greater capacities under military dictatorship—avid to promote economic development, agricultural modernization, and supremacy over regional oligarchs.

Although the military endeavored to corral Indians on small reserves, the Xavante mobilized to challenge the territorial and political confines imposed by an authoritarian government. To recover usurped territory the Xavante engaged in persistent “lobbying” of state officials and out-