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Encounter in Amazônia

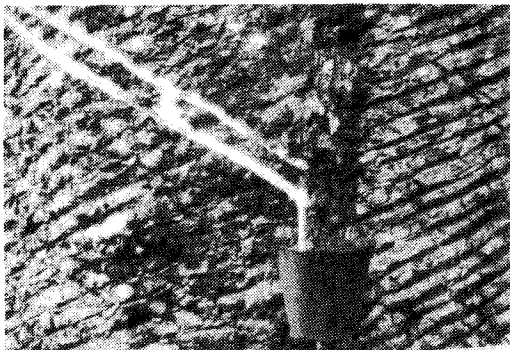
April, 1989

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Seu Miguel invited me to take the knife and make a cut in the tall and ancient seringueira. The bark of the rubber tree was criss-crossed by a matrix of parallel slashes, the scars of over 60 years of continuous tapping. "Won't it hurt the tree?" I asked rather timidly. Seu Miguel laughed at my reticence, and gaining courage, I took the knife and slowly and firmly cut a shallow, parallel line immediately below the cut Seu Miguel had just made. Within seconds milky drops were forming, and as I and the other gringos watched in awe, the latex began to drip down into the tin cup Seu Miguel had fastened to the tree.

We felt almost religious as we gathered around the tree, surrounded by dripping green forest, spattered with mud from the path the March rains had made nearly impassable. To arrive at this seringueira we had walked 40 minutes through the forest after having driven for three hours dodging floods and potholes on the only road (if it can be called that) that connects Rio Branco, the capital of the state of Acre in western Amazônia, to the rest of Brazil. With me were a Dutch couple, a young German journalist, an Italian union consultant, and our guide, Sebastião, a young leader of the Union of Rural Workers of Rio Branco. A parcel of youngsters danced around us, grandchildren of Seu Miguel, whose family had tapped those rubber trees for over 30 years. The children were as fascinated by us as we were by the dripping latex, which turned into coarse, elastic grains as we rubbed it between our fingers. I would have thought our reverence was nothing more than gringo romanticism had I not heard the identical emotion expressed in a poem written by a local rubber tapper, a variation on the Our Father:



Seringueira, who is in the jungle,
Multiplied be your days.
Let your milk come,
Let our rubber be made,
Here on the press, as in the cashbox.
Give us this day and every day
For the sustenance of our children
Pardon our ingratitude,
As we confront the evils of the boss.
Help us to liberate ourselves
From the claws of the middleman. Amen.

Ann Mische is an Institute Fellow studying youth and educational movements in Brazil.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

In this prayer one finds not only the devotion of the seringueiros (rubber tappers)* to the trees they tap, but also the difficulties they face in the production and sale of their rubber. A discussion of the growing resistance of the seringueiros to the exploitation of themselves and of the forest had brought us to the woods that day. Our goal was to understand the "reality" (as outsiders say rather presumptuously) of what we had heard so much talk about during the past week of discussions between rubber tappers, Indians, agricultural workers, union leaders, and observers from over a hundred governmental, national and international organizations. The events that had united such a mixed crew in that corner of Amazônia were two simultaneous conferences in Rio Branco from March 25 to 31, the II National Encounter of Seringueiros and the I Encounter of Peoples of the Forest.

The person who had attracted such a heavy turnout of outsiders to the encounter was auspiciously not there. An empty chair was placed on the platform during the opening ceremonies to invoke the presence of Francisco Mendes Filho, union leader and ecologist whose assassination last December aroused international attention. Chico Mendes, as he is known here, would have presided over the encounter had he survived three months longer. Although Chico himself was a seringueiro of simple origins, he was recognized internationally for his charismatic leadership in organizing local forest workers to prevent deforestation by the latifundiarios (large landholders) who are buying up Amazônia. He had served as a consultant to the World Bank and to the U.S. Senate on investment in the Amazons, and was developing a project with the Inter-American Development Bank for the non-destructive exploitation of forest resources by the local population. In 1987 he received the Global 500 award from the United Nations, as well as the environmental medal of the Better World Society. But in Brazil he was little known outside of environmental and labor circles, until his assassination on December 22, 1988, in the town of Xapuri, in Acre, where he was the president of the Union of Rural Workers. His probable assassin was a family of local farmers whose land had been expropriated to create a rubber-tapping reserve. Suddenly Chico Mendes became headline news in Brazil and in the world, arriving as far as the front page and a leading editorial of the New York Times.

The disconcerting result of the hoopla about Chico Mendes was that at this encounter of seringueiros and Indians there were more outside observers (274) than seringueiros (169) and Indians (67). The contrast at times was comical. The floor of the covered gymnasium of Rio Branco was occupied by rows of rustic delegates from the seringais and roçadas (subsistence farms) of five states in the Amazon region. Many of them had traveled days on foot and by boat to arrive, somewhat abashed, in the capital city. One of the delegates told me in tones of awe that he had never ridden in a bus before. The bleachers above them were filled with eager and mostly pale-faced observers, representing environmental groups, labor unions, political parties, government agencies, research organizations, student associations, newspapers and television. They were armed with cameras and notebooks and could be distinguished by the clothes they wore and often by the languages they spoke from those they had come to observe. Among the international organizations represented were OXFAM, the Better World Society, Greenpeace International, and numerous European environmental leagues. And the biggest star presence of international journalism was Alexander Cockburn of the Wall Street Journal.

Some of the delegates expressed irritation at all the attention. After all, the observation was rather one-sided, a bit like being in a zoo; "they

*To clarify the terminology: seringueira - rubber tree; seringueiro - rubber tapper; seringal - rubber plantation; seringalista -owner of rubber plantation.

come here and ask us all these questions, but we don't know anything about them!" The observers were asked to withdraw during the small group discussions about the living and working conditions in the forest, so as not to embarrass the often poorly educated delegates from saying what was on their minds. And the delegates had important work to do: discuss strategies to prevent deforestation, pressure the government to establish indigenous and extractive reserves, strengthen the unification of seringueiros and Indians through the newly formed Alliance of Peoples of the Forest, and elect the new leadership of the National Council of Seringueiros.

But why was there so much interest in an encounter of rural workers in a corner of Amazônia? Chico Mendes aside, what one saw in Rio Branco was a convergence of some of the hottest themes on the world scene. Where else would one hear debated in one place the questions of ecology, of land control, of Indians, of rural violence, of agro-business and the Third World debt? Where else would one find such a good story for the "tropical chic" that is sweeping Europe and the United States, where George Bush joins hands with Sting, the Grateful Dead and Time Magazine to protest the destruction of the Amazons? And where else would one find in real-life all the drama of a good Western: local hero mobilizes population to confront the bulldozers, and is shot down by a gang of pistoleiros who terrorize a small rural town? The script is so good that the current competitors for rights to a film about the life of Chico Mendes include Robert Redford, Costa-Gravas and Ted Turner. But behind the glitter one finds a serious and unresolved question. The development of Amazônia has begun (and has, in fact, been going on since the 1850's.) Who, now, will control that development, using what technologies, and for the benefit of whom? This is a social and a political question as well as an ecological one, and involves high stakes for various opposing interests.

Since the ecological side has been amply dramatized by others, I would like to use this newsletter to discuss the human conflicts that more often get left to the side in discussions of Amazônia. As I worked my way into the material the immense richness of the social moment in Acre threatened to turn this newsletter into a book. To avoid this, I've divided the topic into two parts. In this newsletter I discuss the history of the region and the development of the movement spearheaded by Chico Mendes. In my next, I will discuss the current day challenges confronted by the movement, the dynamic of the March encounter in Rio Branco, and the national and international debate on the ascendant question, "Who Controls Amazônia?"



Seu Miguel taps the rubber tree
as his grandchildren watch.

* * *

"Why was Chico Mendes the first ecologist killed in Brazil? Because he was, before anything else, a union leader who fought for the posse of land, and this is the principal problem in Brazil. If you talk about ecology, it's fine, people listen and applaud. But if you also defend the posse of land, even if it is to preserve the forest, the thing changes shape." - Julio Barbosa, newly elected president of the National Council of Seringueiros.

"Our alliance is not romantic. It has to do with our physical and economic survival. We depend on the forest." Jaime da Silva Araújo, representing the Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest at the Berlin "counter-congress" on ecology and the Third World debt, parallel to the meeting of the IMF and World Bank last September.

"For the seringueiros, the land is worth nothing without the forest and its riches. For this motive we question private property head-on, proposing the social use of land and the forest, which, finally, are the good of all Brazilians." Opening document of the II National Encounter of Seringueiros.

In its customary shortsightedness, the Brazilian and the international press has sought to turn Chico Mendes into an ecologist. Chico himself was accustomed to say that he became an ecologist by necessity; he began his fight as a labor organizer who sought to combat the century-long system of exploitation that had kept the seringueiros in a state of near slavery and that he himself had personally experienced from the age of nine. But when he gained the political maturity to begin the struggle for the "liberation" of the seringueiros, the entire Amazônian region was in a process of violent transformation. The traditional system of the rubber barons was in decline and the government was financing the rapid development (read, devastation) of the forest by the newly arriving latifundiarios. The scope of the struggle expanded before the eyes of the seringueiros; suddenly it was not simply their own livelihood and right to autonomous production that they needed to protect, but the forest itself. From the labor disputes of poor and mostly illiterate forest workers has developed one of the current moment's most innovative and politically defiant proposals for land reform and for ecologically-sound economic development. It is so politically defiant that its principal articulator did not survive to see its implementation.

What makes the proposal interesting is its attempt to dissolve some of the principal dichotomies that have plagued the debate about Amazônia. Recently, for example, President José Sarney has been protesting in suspiciously loud terms about the supposed foreign conspiracy for the internationalization of the Amazons, as demonstrated, he says, by the proposals to convert the external debt into conservation programs controlled by civil society. The slogan "Amazônia é nossa" (Amazônia is ours) harks back to the nationalistic "o petróleo é nosso" of the 1940's and 50's. But the slogan rings false for the bothersome fact that for decades the government has encouraged, even financed, the entrance of multi-nationals into the region. Is the problem really national vs. international control? The movement of seringueiros questions this oversimplification. Likewise, the movement rejects the traditional opposition between conservation and development, as well as the division between ecology and the labor movement. And on a cultural level, the newly formed Alliance of Peoples of the Forest seeks to overcome the regional antagonism between seringueiros and Indians, who, having long fought each other over forest use, now realize that their common survival depends on joint resistance.

A closer examination of these four false dichotomies provides a tool for understanding the history of the movement that led to the congress in Rio Branco.

#1: Indians vs. Seringueiros

"Years ago, we were massacred and our blood descended the river and our forest was burned. And the seringueiro, the bosses set him against the Indian. The losers were the seringueiros and Indians, the winners were the bosses. And now I want to state very clearly that our struggle is together. We can't fight anymore, but must conquer our struggle for better conditions of living." Indian delegate to the Encounter.*

To understand the roots and the multiple layers of the struggle of the seringueiros, we have to take a historical look back. The technology of rubber extraction demonstrated by Seu Miguel has not changed much since the beginning of the rubber industry in the 1860's. The seringueiros live with their families deep in the Amazon forest and walk hours each dawn through the seringal to milk the rubber trees, collecting the latex which they transform into rubber on primitive smoke presses. Their way of life got its start with the world demand for rubber of the industrial revolution, which led the Brazilian rubber barons, or seringalistas, to recruit thousands of poor workers from the Northeastern states of Ceará, Pará, Maranhão. Thinking they were heading toward gold mines, the would-be seringueiros carved their way into the virgin jungles, conducting round-ups and mass killings of the indigenous communities who resisted the invasion. A historical enmity was thus established between the two groups, which have hated, but learned from, each other until the 1980's. Once in the jungle the return was nearly impossible, and confronting primitive conditions, jungle diseases, long distances and a system of debt-slavery to the rubber barons, the seringueiros began the extraction of "black gold".

One can see in the original structure of production on the rubber plantations the roots of the innovative proposals for land reform emerging now among the seringueiros. First, the English term "rubber plantation" is a misleading translation of the Portuguese "seringal" because it is only recently that one finds areas of trees that have actually been planted. The seringueiras were already there when the seringueiros arrived; the human addition consisted simply in harvesting and processing the product. When a rubber baron arrived with his Northeastern recruits, the first job was to carve out a location for the barracão, or "big shack", which centralized the economic activity of the seringal. All the tappers in the area were forced to sell their rubber at the barracão, from which they received, on credit, food and supplies. They lived in continuous debt to the seringalista, who forbade them to plant their own food, since this would lessen their dependence and steal time from rubber production. The few planting techniques they did learn were adopted from the Indians, who had long developed agricultural methods in harmony with the growth patterns of the forest.

Each seringal would be divided into 100 to 200 "locations", areas of 300 to 1200 hectares (a hectare is about 2.5 acres) that would be worked by a single seringueiro or by several families, which established their simple shacks hours of walking distance from the neighboring location. These "locations" were not perceived as lots of land, but rather of blocks of trees

* The quotes from seringueiro and Indian delegates are taken from tapes recorded by the CPV (Vergueiro Center for Research and Documentation), a São Paulo organization I accompanied and assisted in Rio Branco.

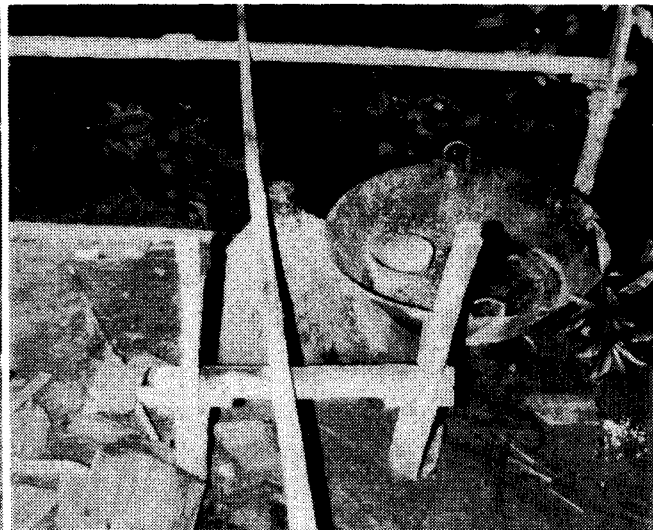
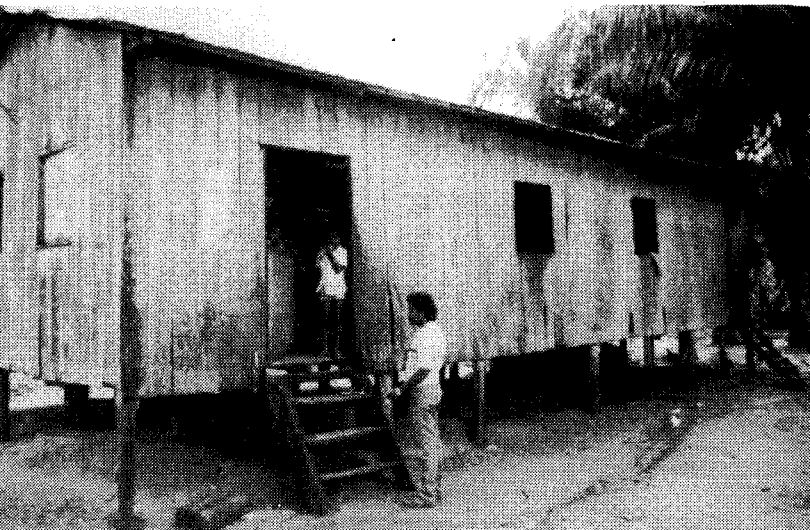
to be tapped, without fences or marked divisions. The very nature of the forest worked against the notion of land as property to be owned, since it was not the land, but the trees, that were necessary for production. Similarly, the land reform proposals of the seringueiros do not, unlike most proposals, call for the division of the land into many small individual lots, but rather into large reserves to be exploited by means of cooperatives. Here again, the seringueiros have learned from the Indians; the indigenous conception of land as incapable of being owned reinforces the proposal of cooperative reserves.

Although Brazil's rubber boom died down after 1912, when the British broke Brazil's monopoly by sneaking seedlings to Southeast Asia, the system of debt-slavery persisted until the 1970's, and in some regions still exists. The rubber tappers were prevented with violence from selling their rubber to other seringalistas, or to the marreteiros, independent traders who began to emerge. A typical punishment for a seringueiro caught selling his rubber elsewhere was to tie the rubber to him and set it on fire. During World War II a new wave of "soldiers of rubber" was recruited from the Northeast to help meet the increased wartime rubber demand, reinforcing the power of the seringalistas. Only in the early 1970's did the system of the barracão enter into decadence, with the arrival of the fazendeiros, the landholders from the South who began buying up the supposedly unoccupied expanses of Amazônia.

In the late 1960's the military government began a policy of opening Amazônia to economic development, mounting a system of generous subsidies for investment in the region, including tax breaks, low interest loans, colonization programs and financing for agricultural and cattle projects. The subsidies were coordinated by the federal agency SUDAM (Superintendency for Development in Amazônia). The huge financial benefits, especially those to be gained by speculating with the money from loans and subsidies on the overnight market, attracted purchases of land by businesses and multi-nationals that had little interest in the land or its productivity, but rather in the financial manipulations it made possible. At the same time, the opening of farmland attracted landless farmworkers from the south, where government support for export-based monoculture has paralysed land reform efforts and rural violence is on the upswing. Amazônia has been called the "escape valve of the landless". The result has been an epidemic of deforestations and burnings, as the new owners and/or squatters try to establish posse in the most visible way possible. The worst destruction has taken place in the state of Rondônia, to the south of Acre, where 17% of the state's rich jungle area has been deforested. In 1987, official figures report that 20 million hectares, or 204.06 square kilometers, were burned in Amazônia, creating a smoke haze that closed the airports of three state capitals, including Rio Branco.

From prisoners to posseiros

The arrival of fazendeiros in Amazônia has affected the seringueiros in two ways. First, it weakened the historical control of the seringalistas, making possible an increasing movement for the autonomy and the organization of the rubber tappers. Once again, the nature of work in the forest contributed to the phenomenon; the seringalistas moved out, but the seringueiros remained, continuing to tap the rubber trees as always. A legal change of ownership made little difference, since they had never been owners. They only change was that now instead of being near prisoners, they were suddenly considered posseiros (squatters) on the land of those who had little interest in the commercialization of rubber. Many of the new owners adopted the traditional system of charging renda (a type of land-rent, paid on quotas of rubber) for the right to tap the trees. A seringueiro at the Encounter in Rio Branco described this type of exploitation by a newly arrived company:



1.The house of Seu Miguel, also serving as community store and union office.
2.The tools for smoking rubber. The latex is dripped over the bar, which is rotated slowly over the smoke until the rubber hardens.

Paranacre is a company that charges renda. We have to pay 50 kg of rubber for each rubber trail. We don't want to pay renda anymore, and they say they won't let seringueiros or Indians work on the locations if they don't pay. They are throwing people off the land. And no one sells rubber there. It's all done on credit. A person makes a purchase and remains owing, not in money, but in rubber. If you can't pay in the given term, they charge interest in rubber. Or else they leave the rubber at the old price and charge the merchandise at the new price, and you can't buy anything.

In this account one sees a new owner adopting many of the same forms of exploitation as the old rubber barons, although clearly without the same insistence on keeping the seringueiros on the land. As a result of the disinterest of the new arrivals in rubber production, the system of commercialization began to change. The independent traders, who had long been violently expelled by the bosses of the seringals, began gaining in power. From 1970 to 1975 Chico Mendes began seeing the traders as a way to break the dominion of the seringalistas and work toward the autonomy of the seringueiros. He began making long treks through the forest to convince the tappers to resist the bosses and sell to the middlemen.

But as the rubber barons sold out, the traders began to exploit their commercial monopoly, creating a tyranny of prices that the isolated and mostly illiterate seringueiros had little means of resisting. The ^{traders} imposed a new form of domination, which Chico recognized required a new form of organization. In the past years Chico waged an offensive against his former allies by organizing cooperatives as alternative forms of production and commercialization. He also helped articulate the movement against the payment of renda to old or new owners. What one sees today is a multi-layered situation in which some seringueiros are still living under debt-slavery to the seringalistas, others are "free" but exploited by the traders or the new arrivals, and others are struggling with the first embryonic experiences of cooperatives.

Forced off the land

The second effect on the seringueiros has been the immediate threat deforestation poses to their way of life. Their struggles for commercial autonomy were meaningless without the right to remain in the forest. In

the 1970's thousands of seringueiros were forced off the land to make way for cattle ranches or monoculture plantations. Since land titles in the region have long been subject to fraud and disputes, the methods of expulsion were more often violent than legal. The jagunços, armed gangs maintained by the landholders, burned the shacks and crops of the seringueiros or forced them at gunpoint to sign renunciations of the right to the land they had worked all of their lives. The seringueiros told of various methods of expulsion:

The groups from the South bought the land from the Senator. People say he sold illegally, and I believe he did. The land wasn't his. All of the area had locations of seringueiros. The groups from the south continued oppressing the seringueiros, throwing them off the land.

The farmers in the region are beginning to kill the trails of rubber trees. This is the means they have found to expel the seringueiros without disturbing the peace. They go exploiting the wood slowly, killing the trees, and the seringueiros go leaving slowly, and the farmers remain with the land.

In an interview four months before his assassination, Chico Mendes estimated that between 1970 and 1975 ten thousand families were expelled. Six thousand of went to try rubber tapping in Bolivia, while the rest moved to the periferias of the cities, where they "formed a misery belt. Today in the capital of Acre one sees only misery, prostitution, drug traffic, because the people are desperate. Why in the city are there so many marginalized groups? The people were led there not by conviction, but by circumstance."

Granary of humanity?

The latifundiarios justify the deforestation with the argument that the movement to preserve the Amazons is holding up progress and prejudicing the economy of the country. They see the economic "destiny" of the state as lying in cattle-raising and highly mechanized cereal production. "We will be the granary of food production for humanity," the president of Acre's branch of the UDR (Democratic Ruralist Union), Dirceu Zamora, told the press when I was there in March. The UDR is the ascendant right-wing organization founded in 1985 to defend the interests of rural landholders. The organization has been accused of responsibility for the assassination of Chico Mendes and most other rural violence in Brazil, charges it denies. Zamora's comment about the forest workers was laughable in its moralistic pretensions; "We have to fight to remove the seringueiros and Indians from misery. These people must be transformed into farm workers".

Ecologists tell a different story about the agricultural potential of Amazônia. Once the protective tree canopy is removed, the soil of the Amazon region quickly loses its nutrients and within a few years is completely unproductive. The irrationality ^{of agricultural proposals} reinforces the suspicion that it is not the land's productivity that interests its new owners, but the immense fortunes being made in speculation. And these considerations don't yet address the wider effects of forest burning on the planet's eco-system, or the loss of species and eco-systems existent in no other place on the planet, many of which have not yet been studied. The seringueira itself is a species that only grows naturally in Amazonia, although it has now been implanted in other parts of the world.

In 1986 the federal government, under strong pressure from the World Bank to implement environmental protection policies, prohibited by law the cutting of seringueiras or castanheiras (Brazil-nut trees, another important commercial product of the region.) According to the rubber tappers, the legislation has been completely disrespected by the fazendeiros, encouraged by

the complete absence of inspection or enforcement procedures by the IBDF (Brazilian Institute of Forest Development), the federal agency that administrates deforestation projects. And the state government of Acre has given equally contradictory messages. Chico Mendes complained about the ambivalence of the governor's ecological discourse: "One can't understand how the government can be ecological, can defend ecology, but at the same time send armed police to protect deforestation in areas covered with seringueiras."

The greater evil

With the threat to the forest, the principle of the greater evil broke down the century-long hostility between seringueiros and Indians. In 1982 Chico Mendes began seeking out indigenous leadership to discuss the need to join forces to resist the invasions and deforestations that were threatening the life-styles of both groups. It became clear that the struggle for the demarcation of indigenous lands and for the establishing of "extractive reserves" (see p.13) were based on the same principles of communal, non-predatory forest culture. Many Indians, in fact, worked as seringueiros tapping the rubber trees, while the seringueiros had adopted the agricultural techniques of the Indians. Since the Indians had been fighting for land demarcation since the 1970's, their struggle was more advanced in some aspects. The lands to be marked were already designated, and their agricultural production was much better established. The seringueiros, on the other hand, had stronger political connections with the labor movement, the political parties, and other sources of civil lobbying pressure. In the state legislative elections of 1982 Chico articulated the candidacy of an indigenous leader and himself as state representatives. Both lost, but the foundations were set for the Alliance of the People of the Forest.

Once the leaders were convinced of the need to join forces, they began a process of re-educating the bases, to break down the prejudice and hostility among the two populations. Seringueiros were invited to assemblies of Indians, and Indians attended assemblies of seringueiros. In this way they began to understand the culture of the other, and to perceive that both had been victims of the seringalistas, who had gained high profits by setting one against the other. While the tension has not been entirely resolved, especially in the more remote areas, the process of valorization of the culture and struggles of the other has begun. As commented by Ailton Krenak, coordinator of the Union of Indigenous Nations (UNI), "The seringueiros were enemies of the Indians without even knowing the thought of the indigenous nations. The most generous aspect of the Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest is that it brings together people that a century ago killed each other." Or as stated enthusiastically by a seringueiro at the encounter in Rio Branco:

Companheiros, one of the best things I did was come here to learn with these Indians. I consider them to be educated people. He who has education doesn't destroy what is foreign to him. If I had to go to Brasília to learn to be a thief and a gangster, first I'd look for an Indian village to learn to respect the rights of these companheiros.

#2: Ecology vs. Unions

"In the union we are fighting to concienticize our companheiros so that there won't be any more deforestation. We have a program of conserving the environment. We have seen many things - expulsion, invasion, violence. They killed a companheiro from the labor movement. The president and secretary of the union are threatened with death." Seringueiro delegate to the Encounter.

The growth of a local labor movement into an internationally known ecological voice has passed through several stages. The first began in 1968 with the efforts of Chico Mendes to convince the seringueiros to sell their rubber to the independent traders. As Chico said, "our first struggle was to say "No, the producers are we who worked. We have the right to sell to whom we want." The work had results, but was tiring and difficult, carried out alone in the closed atmosphere of the military years and subject to resistance from the very workers he hoped to engage in a struggle for liberation: "There was always some seringueiro, poor thing, without consciousness, who ran and told the boss, and because of this I passed some tight moments."

In 1975, the first unions emerged in the region. Chico involved himself in the foundation of the Union of Rural Workers of Brasileia, a city to the south of Rio Branco. He perceived that these early unions, promoted by the Work Ministry of the military government, were conciliatory and non-questioning of the system, a typical product of state-sponsored unionism consolidated by Getulio Vargas*. Nonetheless, he quickly assumed a leadership role, and under his direction and that of a similarly charismatic figure, Wilson Pinheiros, the union assumed a more combative stance. The seringueiros began to enter into direct confrontation with the rubber bosses and the fazendeiros who, by exploitation or expulsion, threatened their survival.

Forest stand-offs

The first movement of direct resistance took place in 1976 with the invention of a strategy that remains the movement's cornerstone, the empate, which roughly translates as "draw" or "stand-off". The empate is a collective, non-violent method of impeding deforestation in areas worked by seringueiros. A group of 100 to 200 people, including women and children, gather at the site of the tree-felling and place themselves physically in front of the workers with saws and bulldozers, trying to convince them to abandon their work and join in the empate. If persuasion fails, the seringueiros join hands and form a human blockade to impede the continuation of the deforestation. Reluctant to open fire directly on women and children, the landowners most often call in the police, and many empates have ended in arrests and beatings. As Chico recounts:

I remember that about four times we were arrested, and had to lay down on the ground while they hit us, and afterwards, when we were all bloody, threw us in the truck. Inside the truck, with many people together, we began to sing the hymns of the church. We arrived at the police station, more than a hundred men, and they didn't have space to put us all. The police closed off the building, and finally had to free us.

Other times, the empates succeeded in stopping the deforestation in time for the government to verify and condemn the illegal cutting of seringueiras and castanheiras. In hard fought empate last year, the order for suspension of the deforestation arrived only after Chico mobilized his national and international contacts to put intense pressure on the governor:

The governor was warned several times, including by me. I went so far as to invite him to go and verify the area. 50 hectares of virgin forest were cut down. Thanks to international pressure, dozens, hundreds of telegrams that the governor received from national and international

* Getulio Vargas was president of Brazil from 1930 to 1945. Populist and authoritarian, he created Brazil's labor code, which ties unions to the state. The more combative labor movement today fights for union autonomy.

organizations, we succeeded in the removal of the police from the location. With this the cutting of 300 additional hectares was avoided.

In a summing up of the movement a month before his assassination, Chico reported that from 1976 to 1988, 45 empates took place, of which 15 were victorious. In these 45 movements the seringueiros experienced 400 arrests, 40 tortures, and various assassinations, but they succeeded in saving 1,200,000 hectares from destruction. As Chico said with satisfaction, the region of Xapuri was "the only region in all of Amazônia in which, during 1988, the fazendeiros only succeeded in felling 50 hectares of jungle. The prediction was for the destruction of 10 thousand hectares of virgin forest."

Assassination and revenge

In 1980 the movement entered in crisis with the assassination of Wilson Pinheiros, the pioneering leader of the union of Brasileia. In a secret assembly, local fazendeiros decided to break the growing resistance of the seringueiros by attacking their leaders. Two pistoleiros were contracted to kill Wilson Pinheiros and one other, who Chico says was probably himself. In that epoch Chico had left Brasileia to organize a union in the city of Xapuri, mid-way between Brasileia and Rio Branco. On the night Wilson was shot Chico was holding an assembly at a distant seringal and so escaped the attempt. Seven days after the assassination, when no steps had been taken by the local police to investigate the murder, a group of seringueiros ambushed a fazendeiro who was known to be involved in planning the assassination, and killed him with 30 to 40 shots. Chico, who was not involved in the ambush and has struggled to keep the movement non-violent, commented:

The workers cleaned their chests, since they believed that the death of their leader, at least in part, had been avenged. But Justice functioned this time, in a fierce form. During 24 hours dozens, hundreds of seringueiros were arrested, tortured, some had their fingernails pulled out. The Justice system functioned because it had been a reaction of the small against the big.

With the assassination the movement suffered a severe setback, because its leadership had been overly centralized in the figure of Wilson. His leadership passed to Chico Mendes, who began to rebuild the movement from Xapuri. Observing the disintegration of the union of Brasileia, Chico saw the need to decentralize the organization, by developing a well-distributed local leadership capable of surviving possible assassinations. With this objective Chico embarked on a project of strengthening the local bases of the movement. The principle obstacle was the poor educational level of most of the seringueiros and their consequent domination by the "slave mentality" cultivated by the seringalistas. "We perceived that with our companheiros having no schooling, it was difficult to put consciousness into their heads. Poor things, they had nothing. They didn't even know the letter A. How were they suddenly going to understand the process of struggle?"

The Seringueiro Project

In 1981 the union of Xapuri initiated the Projeto Seringueiro, a project in community education with the simultaneous objectives of combating illiteracy and strengthening the political consciousness of the seringueiros. The project received support and guidance from CEDI (Ecumenical Center for Documentation and Information), a São Paulo based organization that works with popular movements. Using the method of literacy training developed by Paulo Freire, the project sought to base the educational process in the reality of

living and working in the forest, within a critical view of the social processes leading to the exploitation of the workers and of the forest.

Within the Paulo Freire method* "generative" words from the life of the community are chosen to stimulate critical discussion, serving as a social and emotional catalyst for learning to read and write. In this case the first word used was MATA (forest), to begin a process of valorization of the forest and its role in the life of the seringueiros. The method then passes successively through the words MORADA (dwelling-place), BARRACAO (the "big shack" of the rubber bosses), BORRACHA (rubber), COOPERATIVA (cooperative), SINDICATO (union), ESCOLA (school), FEBRE (fever), TRABALHO (work), and RIQUEZA (wealth). These words were used to stimulate a reflection on the transformation of nature by men, the system of economic exploitation and the struggle for better working conditions, the importance of education and health care, and the wider question of wealth and poverty in society.

From the beginning these schools had a strong orientation toward community organization, connected with an integrated program of education, health care and cooperatives initiated in Xapuri in 1981. The project team tried whenever possible to train local seringueiros, committed to the movement, to work as monitors (in the Paulo Freire method one does not refer to "teachers", since everyone takes place in the process of reflection and learning). A local leader described the process of community valorization:

In our schools we have to develop material that comes from the community itself. Nothing of building a school and bringing a teacher from the university, devalorizing the wisdom of our own companheiros from the community. What good is it to bring someone whose mind is already formed, who won't have the same respect and dedication and care as the companheiros from the area. Teachers who come from the area will help us feel more happy, more like people, more like citizens. Gosh, now I'm not just a seringueiro, I'm a teacher as well!

In the eight years of its existence the project has received funds from OXFAM, the Ford Foundation, and various national organizations. In the early years the local fazendeiros tried to denounce the project to the military government as being financed by Moscow and Cuba to train a rural guerrilla force, and the classes were raided several times by security forces, until the government became convinced that the project had nothing to do with the guerrilla. Recently the state government has paid the salaries of contracted "monitors", and in 1987 the federal Ministry of Education conceded a government grant for the building of 12 schools. "The agents of the Ministry of Education were astonished with the results. They said they had never seen anything like it in all of Brazil. The city governments that receive high financing don't succeed in constructing a third of what we constructed with so little money."

The Seringueiro Project presently has 19 schools in the region of Xapuri and is in the process of building 6 others. They have also initiated a training program for sending monitors to other regions, and are developing material and methodology for use with children, since the original project was limited to adult literacy. The educational work is largely responsible for the strong implantation of the movement of seringueiros in the region of Xapuri, which has served as the vanguard for the rest of Amazônia in its resistance to deforestation as well as its experiments with cooperatives and rubber tapping reserves.

* For more about the Paulo Freire method, see his book, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

#3: Conservation vs. Development

"The extractive reserves attend the ends of environmental conservation, land regularization, and economic development. They should therefore constitute a socially just, ecologically sustainable, and economically viable manner of occupying Amazonia." Letter from Curitiba, from a 1988 seminar on the planning and implantation of extractive reserves.

In 1985 the educational work was bearing results and the local leadership in Xapuri was widening its bases. But at this point those in the movement began a process of self-questioning. "We began to worry, because we had a struggle, a resistance to deforestation, but at the same time we did not have an alternative proposal to present, a stronger argument to justify why we wanted to defend the forest." They also felt the need to expand the movement beyond its heart in Xapuri, to reach seringueiros in other parts of Amazônia and create a national awareness of the problems they confronted. Out of these preoccupations was born the National Council of Seringueiros (CNS). In October of 1985 the CNS succeeded in uniting 130 rubber tappers from the entire Amazon region in Brasília for the 1st National Encounter of Seringueiros. Also present were international observers from foreign environmental groups, who began to carry the story of Chico Mendes and the seringueiros outside of Brazil.

From this encounter emerged the idea of creating what have come to ^{be} known as "Extractive Reserves", as an alternative economic proposal for Amazônia. As Chico said, "the seringueiros understand that Amazônia cannot be turned into an untouchable sanctuary. But we also understand that there is a very urgent need to avoid the deforestation that is threatening Amazônia and endangering the life of all the people on the planet. We thought of creating an alternative for forest preservation, but an alternative at the same time economic. And so we thought of the creation of Extractive Reserves."

These reservas extrativistas would be public lands on which rubber tappers, nut collectors and other "extracters" would be granted "contracts of concession of use" by the federal government. These contracts would give them the right to work in the area, continuing and amplifying their traditional practices of harvesting the forest without destroying it. The products to be harvested include not only rubber and nuts, but also other vegetable products, edible fruits, consumable oil bases, native honey, fish, and an unknown quantity of medicinal plants, many of which have not yet been studied.

The extractive reserves are not "nature reserves" in the way first worlders think of that term. More importantly, they offer a concept of land reform far in advance of anything the government has yet thought of. The radical aspect of the proposal is its profound questioning of the concept of land as private property. By their base in the collective use of the land rather than individual posse, the reserves avoid two of the traps that have undermined many land reform projects. First, they eliminate the possibility of resale of land by struggling farmers and the re-accumulation of large landholdings. Second, by their organization in cooperatives they create conditions for more efficient processes of production and commercialization, making the reserves more economically sustainable than would be the case of many small individual enterprises.

Local control

According to the idealizers of the proposal, the implantation of extractive reserves should be based on the principle of auto-gestão (self-gestation). This means that the local population should be involved in the planning

and the development of the reserves at every step, beginning with the choice of the location for expropriation. In September of 1988 a seminar held in Curitiba on the "Planning and Gestation of the Process of the Creation of Extractive Reserves in Amazônia," which had the presence of seringueiros, union and indigenous leaders, scientists, engineers, environmental activists and government planners, discussed the importance of local participation:

In the face of a long and instructive history of failed development plans, due to the absence of local roots, the lack of social support and the authoritarian and bureaucratic conception of planning, the seminar reaffirmed the need for social control of the proposal for the creation of Extractive Reserves, involving all of the sectors involved in its planning and implantation. This will avoid their use as a pretext for undermining land reform or feeding land speculation.

Of course, the local population can't do everything alone; the reserves require an interaction between government policy and community control. After a joint evaluation of which areas are viable for reserves, the government must carry out the expropriation and the granting of "concessions of use" to organized associations of forest workers. The state would also be responsible for infra-structure such as roads, telephones and electricity, schools and health posts, all of which are now painfully scarce on the seringals. But it would be up to the workers, and not to meddling government planners, to coordinate work locations and experiment with ways to expand production and commercialize the product by means of cooperatives. The community would also develop non-predatory subsistence agricultural projects, as well as education and health programs based in the reality and the social struggles of the community. In this way, the seringueiros dream, the reserves would turn into self-sufficient, democratically organized mini-societies that would protect the forest, improve the living conditions of the families, and reinforce the culture and lifestyle of the forest peoples.

At the same time, the reserves would serve as a fountain of research for rational modes of developing the forest. Chico Mendes had hoped to see investment by universities and government not only in bio-ecological research, but also in socio-economic studies to develop models for the human occupation of the Amazons. The research would investigate ways to intensify the non-predatory exploitation of the forest resources through expanded cooperatives, networks of commercialization, diversification of products, and other means. These research projects would have to be approved by the local community and give a "return" of their research to aid in the development of the reserve. With this sort of investment, Chico predicted that "in ten years Amazônia will be a very rich region and will have a great importance for the national economy."



Extractive Reserves - Land Reform for Amazônia



For Chico Mendes, an empty chair.

The conflict escalates

At the time of Chico's death four extractive reserves had already been approved or were in the process of approval. In 1987 the National Council of Seringueiros succeeded in interesting the Ministry of Land Reform (MIRAD) in the proposal, and legislation was signed allowing for the implantation of reserves in areas expropriated under land reform laws. With this legislation, the tension in the region escalated, especially since the dubious nature of most land titles in Acre made expropriation a real possibility. Two weeks after signing the law, the minister of Land Reform died in a none-too-clear plane accident surrounded by rumors of sabotage. The government has since resisted the implantation of reserves, preferring the traditional "colonization" projects in which small lots are distributed to arriving would-be farmers, who generally proceed to burn the trees. One seringueiro at the encounter described a confrontation with MIRAD to establish a reserve instead of a colony:

I'm a colonist, but I'm part of an interesting colonization project that has an extractive reserve within it. When the land was expropriated, MIRAD wanted to divide it up into tiny lots. The road was full of colonists on both sides. There were so many people that there was no way to turn the entire project into an extractive reserve. We agreed to divide into lots the 2000 meters on either side of the road, and behind, create an extractive reserve. We staged an empate with MIRAD until we achieved the reserve. Afterwards, we were completely abandoned, since they wanted to make lots and we didn't accept. They haven't done anything more for the reserve. We demanded a health post and a school, but they were only constructed in the colony. In the reserve nothing was done. Two years have already passed in which they have abandoned the seringueiros. But with our consciousness we are holding firm. They are oppressing the seringueiros so that we take posse and cut down the trees; or else, abandon and sell the land.

The spearhead for the implantation of extractive reserves continued to be the Union of Rural Workers of Xapuri, under the leadership of Chico Mendes. In 1988 the seringueiros staged several tumultuous and drawn-out empates to stop deforestations and pressure the government for expropriation. In May 400 seringueiros invaded the forest administration office in Rio Branco to demand that state troops be sent to stop an illegal deforestation on the Seringal Cachoeira, near Xapuri, where the workers wanted to create a reserve. An armed band of pistoleiros descended on the sit-in at dawn, severely wounding two young participants. The following month a local leader, Ivair Higinio de Alameido, was shot and killed by the pistoleiros. In July the governor finally expropriated the area and declared it an extractive reserve. The two brothers, Darli and Alvorino Alves, who claimed ownership of the land, both had a history of violent land disputes. When Chico discovered and informed the local police that there was an arrest warrant for Darli on charges of homicide in a neighboring state, Darli swore that he would only deliver himself to the police after he saw the cadaver of Chico Mendes. Receiving constant death threats and harrassment, Chico demanded protection by federal police guards, even while he continued negotiating with the Inter-American Development Bank for the expanded implantation of extractive reserves in Amazônia. On December 22 he was shot in the doorway of his house, while the federal guards sat inside waiting for dinner to be served.

Although Darli Alves turned himself in to the police in mid-January, the circumstances of the assassination and the wider circle of those implicated have not yet been clarified. The bands of pistoleiros continue to walk freely in the streets of Xapuri, and as Chico's widow, Ilza, protested when I was in Acre in March, "the assassins continue laughing in our faces." After the

initial flurry of investigation following the international outcry at Chico's death, the search has died down and the case seems destined to join the long Brazilian history of rural violence with impunity. According to the calculations of the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT) of the Catholic Church, 93 assassinations of rural workers took place in 1988, amidst 621 land conflicts. The tension has increased with the virtual prohibition of land reform by the new constitution.

* * *

Before his death, Chico managed to do ^{two} things to ensure that the movement would survive the assassination he knew was imminent. First, he fought for international recognition of the struggle of the seringueiros. His insistence that the ecological struggle was intimately linked to land reform and worker organization forced the mostly middle class, politically reticent ecological movement in Brazil to go through an important re-evaluation. At the same time, the idea of the extractive reserves began to catch the imagination of environmentalists around the world. The ecological movement, and in particular the European Green movement, lobbied the World Bank to impose environmental conditions on its loans to Brazil for the development of Amazônia. Such attention, in turn, led to President Sarney's denunciations of the international plot to destroy Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazons. In my next newsletter I will discuss in more detail the confusion involved in the fourth false dichotomy of the Amazon conflict: international vs. national control.

The second front of Chico's struggle consisted of the seringueiros and Indians of "the bases", for whose education and political consciousness he had fought so hard. He had learned from the assassination of Wilson Pinheiros that the movement could not rest on his shoulders alone. The test of his charisma was in his refusal to become the "grande líder", and his ability to nourish and strengthen the autonomous political capacity of his companheiros. When he was killed he had succeeded in implanting a strong and widely based local organization, beginning with the unions of rural workers in each city and extending to the National Council of Seringueiros and the Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest. From its heart in Xapuri, the movement was extending its process of popular education and political organization to the rest of Amazônia. As he said a month before his assassination:

All the companheiros are involved for an ideal, and they will never turn back. It's a question of honor, a question of commitment. No one can betray the movement. This is very good, because everyone has created that love, that sense of struggle. Today, I don't feel any more that chill, that fear of dying and the movement coming to a stop. Today, if anyone of us die, the movement will continue, and perhaps with more force.

The commitment is great, but the challenges are immense. In my next letter I will discuss the difficulties faced by the movement as it moves into the post-Chico epoch of its development.



Um abraço,

Am. E. Michele

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