

Breakthrough  
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But Naess implicitly acknowledges the need for change. Further, because of its association with progressive movements in Latin America and elsewhere, the word "solidarity" suggests what critics wrongly suspect is missing in Naess' problematic—an imperative to bond with human beings.

It is worthwhile for those of us committed to basic transformations of our social and economic institutions to continue to refine and build on the alternative ethical system deep ecology proposes. Its novelty has disturbed and excited many in the First World who formerly had not seen a connection between mainstream values, our economic and social institutions, and alienation from nature. By energizing Europeans and North Americans to struggle for viable alternatives, deep ecology of the sort for which Naess argues can open a way for people's participation in the difficult, painstaking naming of a new world in which "self" implies solidarity with others, and for the recognition of the embeddedness of the human in an extraordinarily complex, interconnected, and mutually interdependent ecological system.<sup>14</sup>

1. Walter Rosenbaum, *Environmental Politics and Policy* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1985).

2. Orlando Nunez Soto, "Social Movements in the Struggle for Democracy, Revolution, and Socialism," *Rethinking Marxism* (Spring 1989). See also Roger Burbuch & Orlando Nunez, *Fire in the Americas* (London: Verso, 1987).

3. All Naess quotes unless otherwise noted: Arne Naess, "Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes," in Michael Tobias, ed., *Deep Ecology* (San Diego: Avant Books, 1984).

4. Bill Devall & Roger Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985).

5. Quoted in Kirkpatrick Sale, "Deep Ecology and its Critics," *The Nation* (May 14, 1988). Bookchin's philosophy is elaborated at length in his *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982).

6. "An Interview with Arne Naess" in Devall & Sessions, *op. cit.*

7. This and next Bookchin quotes: Murray Bookchin, "Crisis in the Ecology Movement," *Zeta Magazine* (July/Aug. 1988).

8. All Freire quotes: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1988).

9. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July/Aug. 1989).

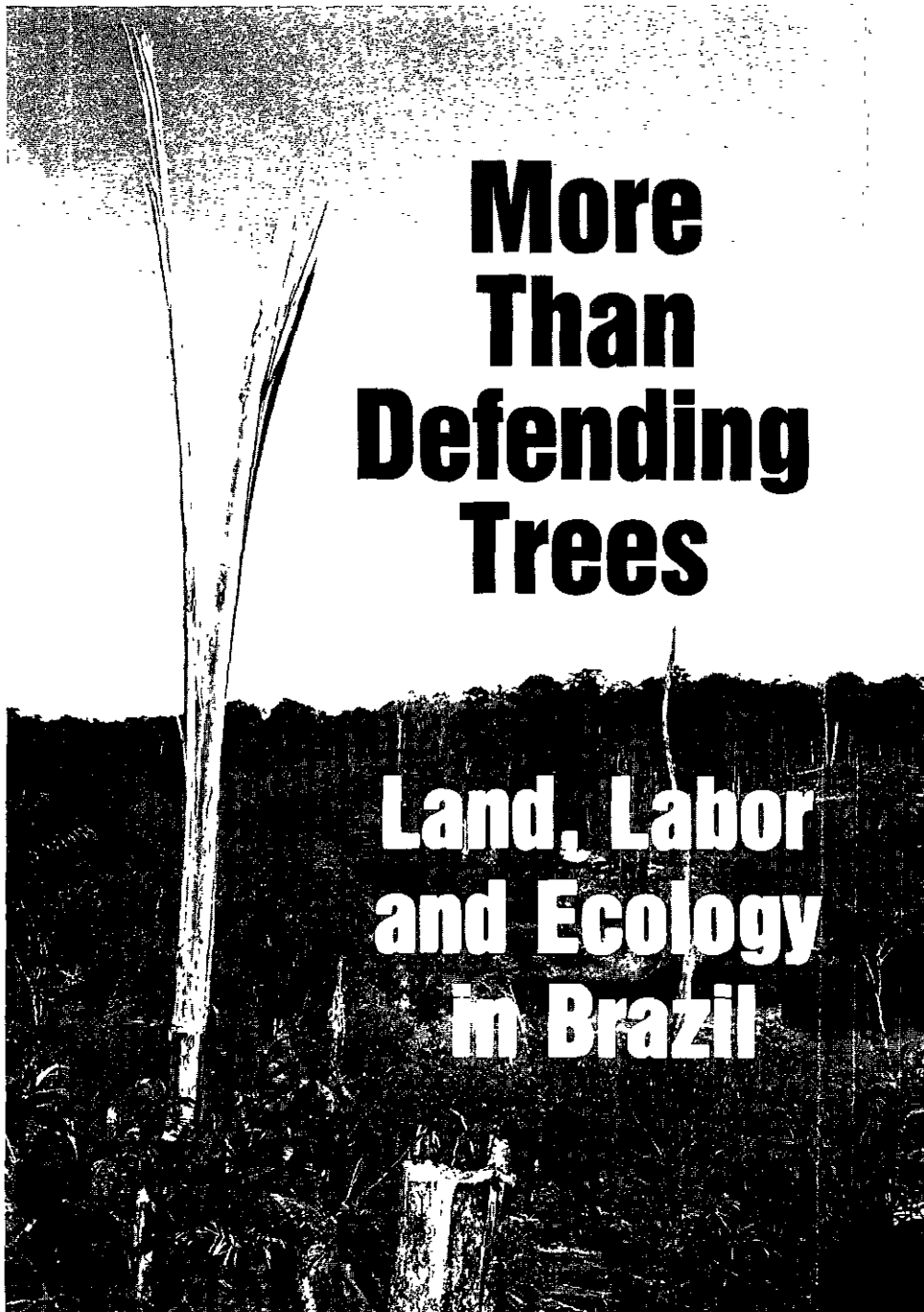
10. This and next Jameson quote: Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," *Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-86* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

11. All Menchu quotes: Rigoberta Menchu, I. Rigoberta Menchu, Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, ed. (London: Verso, 1984).

12. I am indebted to George Yudice for this insight. See his "Marginality and the Ethics of Survival" in Andrew Ross, ed., *Universal Abandon: the Politics of Postmodernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

13. Although Naess appears dissatisfied with the term "identification," he prefers it to "solidarity" because "genuine and spontaneous solidarity with others already presupposes a process of identification" (Naess, "Identification"). I do not find this reasoning persuasive.

14. My endorsement of Naess should not be taken as a general approval of everyone who stands under the deep ecology banner. In particular, it does not include those who, like Edward Abbey, discriminate or urge discrimination against certain classes of persons. See Michael Moore, "Out There Somewhere Lives Edward Abbey," *Smart* (Sept./Oct. 1989).



Deforestation in Amazonia.

# More Than Defending Trees

## Land, Labor and Ecology in Brazil

by Ann Mische

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. Gaining courage, I took the knife

and slowly, firmly cut a shallow, parallel line immediately below the last cut. Within seconds, milky drops were forming; as I and the other gringos watched in awe, the latex began to drip 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

Ann Mische, a Fellow of the U.S.-based Institute of Current World Affairs, spent two and a half years studying political and educational movements in Brazil.

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.

Around us danced the grandchildren of Seu Miguel, whose family had tapped these 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 merely gringo romanticism had I not heard the identical emotion expressed in a poem by a local rubber tapper:

*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.

The issue of the rubber tappers' growing resistance to exploitation—both of themselves and of the forest—had brought us to the woods that day in late March 1989. We were part of a large group of international observers attending the Second National Encounter of Rubber Tappers and the First Encounter of Peoples of the Forest. The agendas of these simultaneous conferences included developing strategies to prevent deforestation, pressuring the Brazilian government to establish indigenous and extractive reserves, strengthening the unification of rubber tappers and Indians through the newly formed Alliance of Peoples of the Forest, and electing the new leadership of the National Council of Rubber Tappers.

Why such international interest in an encounter of rural workers in a corner of Amazônia? The meeting in Rio Branco brought together some of the hottest themes on the world scene (and provided a good story for the "tropical chic" sweeping Europe and the United States as well). Where else could one hear debated in one place issues of ecology, land control, Indians, rural violence, agribusiness and Third World debt, with the underlying question: who will control the future development of Amazônia, with which technologies, and for whose benefit? This is a social and political question as well as an ecological one, involving high stakes for various opposing interests.

The one person primarily responsible for the heavy turnout of outsiders at the conference was conspicuous by his absence. An

empty chair invoked the presence of Chico Mendes, the union leader and ecologist whose assassination three months earlier had aroused international attention. Chico had organized forest workers to prevent deforestation by large landholders; he had been a consultant to the World Bank and the U.S. Senate on investment in the Amazon; he was developing a project with the Inter-American Development Bank for the non-destructive exploitation of forest resources by the local population; he had received international awards. But in Brazil, Chico had been little known outside environmental and labor circles until his assassination, when he became headline news.

Although the press has sought to characterize Chico Mendes as an ecologist, he began his struggle as a labor organizer fighting the century-old system that had kept the rubber tappers in a state of near-slavery, which he had personally experienced since childhood. By the time Chico gained political maturity, 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" (devastation) of the forest by the newly arriving large landowners.

Suddenly it was not simply the rubber tappers' livelihood and right to autonomous production that needed protecting, but the forest itself. From the labor disputes of poor, mostly illiterate forest workers has developed the concept of "extractive reserves," one of today's most innovative and politically defiant proposals for land reform and ecologically sound economic development. What makes this proposal interesting is its attempt to dissolve some of the principal dichotomies that have plagued the debate about Amazônia: Indians vs. rubber tappers, ecology vs. labor, conservation vs. development, national vs. international control.

#### Indians vs. Rubber Tappers

The technology of rubber extraction demonstrated by Seu Miguel has not changed much since the beginning of the rubber industry in the 1860s. The tappers live with their families deep in the Amazon forest and walk hours each dawn to milk the rubber trees, collecting the latex which they transform into rubber on primitive smoke presses. Their way of life started with the world demand for rubber of the industrial revolution, which led Brazilian rubber barons to recruit thousands of poor workers from north-eastern Brazil. Thinking they were headed toward gold mines, the workers carved their way into virgin jungle, rounding up and killing *en masse* indigenous communities resisting the invasion. A historical enmity was thus established between the two groups,

who have hated, but learned from, each other until the 1980s.

Once the workers were in the jungle, the possibility of returning home was nearly nil; confronting primitive conditions, jungle diseases, long distances and a system of debt-slavery to the rubber barons, the tappers began the extraction of "white gold." They were forced to sell their rubber to the boss, from whom they received, on credit, food and supplies. They lived in continuous debt to the boss, 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 developed agricultural methods in harmony with the growth patterns of the forest.

Although the 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 1970s and in some regions still exists. In the early '70s, landholders from the South began buying up supposedly unoccupied expanses of Amazônia. Their arrival has affected the rubber tappers in two ways. First, it has weakened the rubber barons' historical control, making possible the growing tappers' movement for autonomy and organization. Second, it has brought deforestation, which poses an immediate threat to their way of life.

When the barons moved out, the tappers remained; a legal change of ownership made little difference, since they had never been owners. The only change was that now instead of being near-prisoners, they were suddenly considered squatters on the land of people with little interest in the rubber trade. The new landholders, responsible for most of the large-scale burning of the rainforest, see Amazônia's economic "destiny" in cattle-raising and highly mechanized cereal production, becoming "the granary of humanity." Ecologists tell a different story about the agricultural potential of Amazônia. Once the protective tree canopy is removed, the soil 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 fortunes being made in speculation. It is rumored that immense mineral deposits lie beneath the soil of Amazônia; this may explain Brazilian resistance to letting either foreign governments or environmental groups call the shots.

With the threat to the forest, the century-old hostility between tappers and Indians broke down. In 1982, Chico Mendes began discussing with indigenous leaders the need to join forces. Deforestation and invasions



Tapping a *seringueira* (rubber tree).

of landholders were threatening the lifestyles of both groups. It became clear that the Indians' years-old struggle for the demarcation of indigenous lands, and the tappers' movement to establish extractive reserves, were based on the same principles of communal, non-predatory forest culture. Today the Alliance of Peoples of the Forest unites the two groups; tensions have not entirely disappeared, but each has begun to understand the culture of the other, and to realize that both were victimized by the rubber barons, who profited by setting them against each other.

### Ecology vs. Labor

The growth of a local labor movement into an internationally known ecological voice has passed through several stages. The first began in 1968, when Chico Mendes encouraged tappers to sell their rubber to independent traders, not only to the barons. In 1975, the first unions emerged in the region; Chico helped found the Union of Rural Workers of Brasileia, south of Rio Branco. These early unions, promoted by the Work Ministry of the military government, were conciliatory, non-questioning of the system, and typical of state-sponsored unionism; nonetheless, Chico quickly assumed a leading role, and under his direction and that of Wilson Pinheiros, a similarly charismatic figure, the union took a more combative stance. The rubber tappers began confronting the bosses and the landholders who, by exploitation or expulsion, threatened their survival.

The first direct resistance took place in 1976 with the invention of a strategy that remains the movement's cornerstone: the *empate*, roughly translated as "standoff," a collective, nonviolent method of impeding deforestation in which 100 to 200 men, women and children stand in front of the bulldozers and chainsaws, trying to convince

the operators to stop and join the *empate*. If persuasion fails, the tappers join hands to form a human blockade. Reluctant to open fire on women and children, the landowners often call in the police; many *empates* end in arrests and beatings. According to Chico, from 1976 to 1988, 45 *empates* took place; 15 were victorious, saving a total of 1,200,000 hectares from destruction.

In 1980 the movement encountered a crisis with the assassination of Wilson Pinheiros. Its leadership passed to Chico Mendes, who began to rebuild the movement from Xapuri. In 1981 the union initiated the *Projecto Seringueiro*, a community education program based on Paulo Freire's methods, with the simultaneous objectives of combating the tappers' illiteracy and strengthening their political consciousness. The project was strongly oriented toward community organization and connected to an integrated program of education, health care and cooperatives. Where possible, local rubber tappers were trained as "monitors" (preferred in the Freire method to "teachers," since everyone participates in the learning process).

The *Projecto Seringueiro* currently has 19 schools in Xapuri, is building 6 others, and is expanding to work with children. It is largely responsible for the strong base of the rubber tappers' movement in 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.

The rubber tappers' movement challenges the Left's traditional view of ecology as a somewhat abstract, middle-class "cause," in that it reveals clearly the integration of ecological, land and labor conflicts. The concept is simple: more than just a reserve of greenery, the forest is the base of economic production of the rubber tappers, Indians and other forest harvesters. These workers

are thus by necessity environmentalists, and ecology involves issues of land distribution, the quality and guarantee of life and work, and a much deeper challenging of the status quo. Accordingly, ongoing questions about the post-Chico Mendes political direction of the rubber tappers' movement include: Should it emphasize class confrontation, as part of the road to a socialist revolution? Should it take a more exclusively ecological line, or position itself somewhere in between? What is its relationship to political parties, labor associations, the church, national and international funding organizations, government agencies and other institutions?

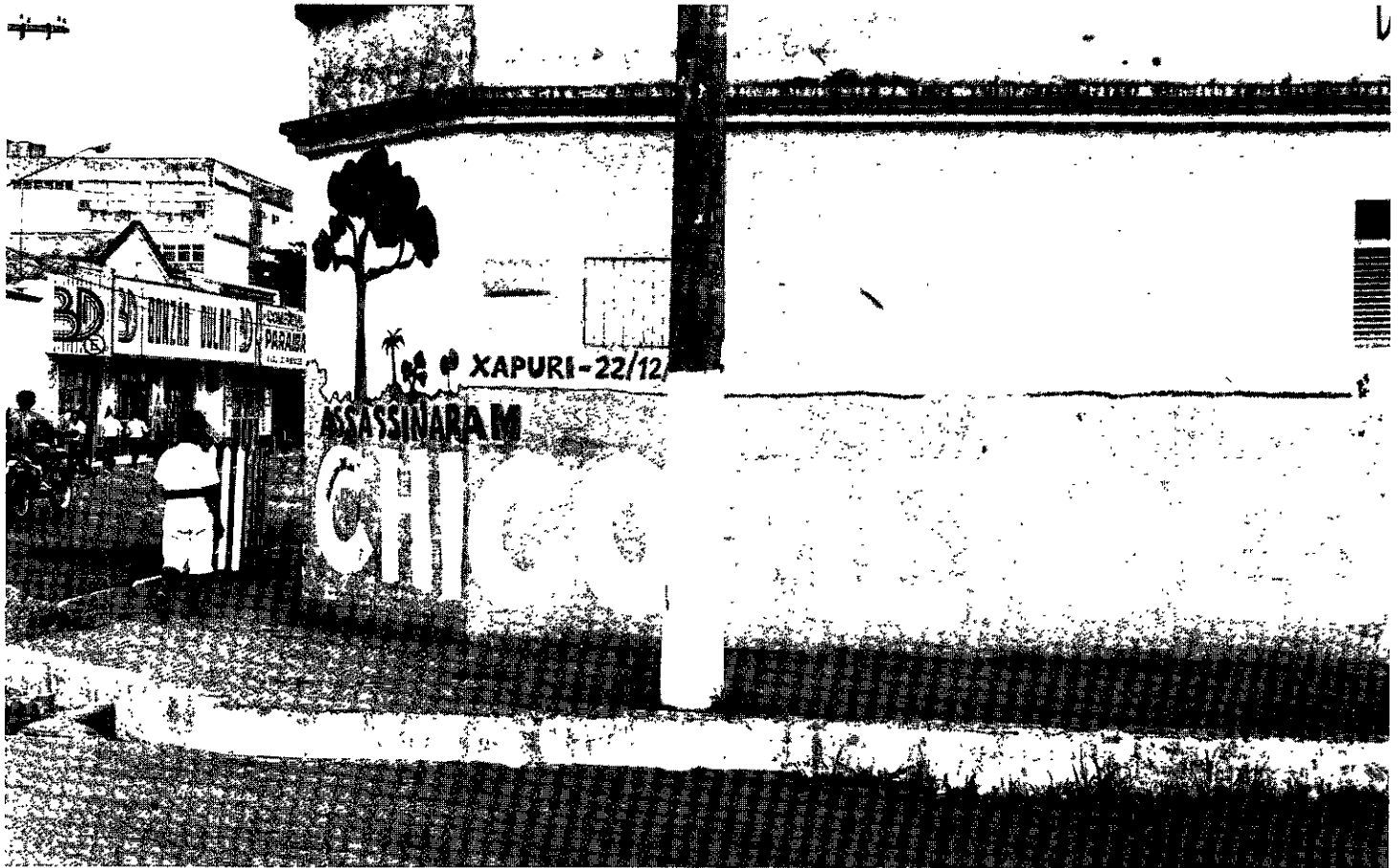
### Conservation vs. Development

In 1985, the National Council of Rubber Tappers was formed and held its first Encounter. Observers from foreign environmental groups carried the story of Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers outside Brazil. From this encounter emerged the idea of extractive reserves as an alternative economic proposal for Amazônia. As Chico said, "The tappers 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 economic alternative at the same time."

The extractive reserves are public lands on which rubber tappers, nut collectors and other "extractors" are granted contracts by the federal government, enabling them to work in the area without destroying the forest. The products to be harvested include not only rubber and Brazil nuts, but other vegetable products, fruits, edible oil bases, honey, fish, and medicinal plants.

The extractive reserves are not "nature reserves" in the way First Worlders think of the term. They offer an advanced concept of land reform, radical in its profound questioning of the concept of land as private property. Based on collective use rather than individual ownership of land, the reserves avoid two traps: they eliminate the possibility of resale of land by struggling farmers, leading to the reaccumulation of large landholdings; and, as cooperatives, they create conditions for efficient methods of production and commerce, making the reserves more economically sustainable.

Although the extractive reserves are based on the concept of local control, they require interaction between government policy and community control. The state expropriates land, grants contracts to associations of forest workers, and gives assistance for infrastructure; but it is up to the workers to coordinate work locations and experiment



Mural in Rio Branco: "They assassinated Chico Mendes, union leader and defender of life, 12/22/88. We demand punishment."

with cooperative production and sales methods. The community also develops non-predatory subsistence agricultural projects and education and health programs. The reserves thus become self-sufficient, democratically organized mini-societies that protect the forest, improve the living conditions of the families, and reinforce the culture and lifestyle of the forest peoples.

At the time of Chico's death, four extractive reserves had been approved or were being formed. Although tensions over land distribution increased greatly as a result, the idea of extractive reserves began to catch the imagination of environmentalists around the world. Today several reserves are in existence, established in collaboration with various international organizations and with the United Nations Environment Programme.

#### National vs. International Control

Over the past two years, the European Green movement in particular has lobbied the World Bank to impose environmental conditions on its loans to Brazil for the development of Amazônia. Such attention led to former President Sarney's denunciations of the international plot to destroy Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon region. Sarney implied that the main issue confronting the Amazon was that of national vs. in-

ternational control and saw "foreign conspiracies" behind debt-for-nature-swap proposals; he also launched a nationalistic campaign proclaiming *Nossa Natureza* (Our Nature). The irony, of course, is that for decades the Brazilian government has encouraged and financed the entrance of multinationals into the Amazon region.

A main point of confusion in the debate over Amazônia is thus the definition of *internationalization*. Three distinct international forces are involved: foreign governments (Sarney's pet target), multinational corporations with investments in Amazônia (the target of the Left), and the citizen-run environmental movements in Europe and the United States, who denounced the devastation of Amazônia long before it entered the conscience of the first two—and toward whom the government is not kindly disposed.

Sarney's pseudo-nationalistic hysteria aside, foreign governments are certainly open to criticism. As one Brazilian journalist wrote, "Ecology is one of the only Third World matters that today interests the First World." The interest is long in coming and not to be rejected; but it is also conveniently superficial. Sarney felt frustrated when, at a meeting with U.S. President Bush and others in Japan, nobody wanted to hear about his proposals for improved trade rela-

tions. "What are you doing about your rain-forest?" was all he heard. Even though the correct answer would have been "nearly nothing," the North, by shaking its finger at Brazil, avoids looking at how structural imbalance in the international economic system fuels predatory development patterns in the Third World.

Now civil society, in the form of the North American and (especially) European Green movements, is beginning to fill the void left by governments, extending the ecological debate to wider economic and social questions. Representatives from 150 organizations participated in the nongovernmental "counter-congress" in Berlin during the September 1988 meeting of the IMF and World Bank. The final document criticized the World Bank and IMF for supporting the exploitation and oppression maintained by "our international capitalist economic order" and declared "political and material solidarity with the social and political movements of liberation in the Third World." If these "liberation movements" have been romanticized by Western activists and, more recently, pop artists, they have at least forced the European Greens to recognize that ecology goes deeper than protecting trees.

The rubber tappers' movement has

stopped waiting for help from governments or financial institutions. From their history of head-batting with government agencies, the tappers have concluded that their only source of financial and technical assistance is civil society, both inside and outside Brazil. Hence the importance of world environmental, labor and research organizations at the encounter in Rio Branco: these organizations can hardly be accused of conspiring to take over Brazilian economic life. They have simply moved into the vacuum left by government inaction in the ecological field.

Still, the mobilization of civil society is not enough. Social movements can protest government action or inaction, formulate proposals, pressure for implementation; but they remain dependent on the state if they want to see their proposals become reality. As a citizen, Chico Mendes could take initiatives; at the time of his death he was discussing with the Inter-American Development Bank an extensive plan for the establishment of extractive reserves. But the Banks deal ultimately with governments, not citizens, and extractive reserves require the legal intervention of government to expropriate land and grant concessions for its use to cooperatives.

The Brazilian government has not seemed disposed to facilitate such projects, nor to open official channels for the participation of the Amazonian population in the region's planning. President Fernando Collor de Mello has now appointed an internationally known Brazilian ecologist, José Lutzenberger, as his Secretary of the Environment; it remains to be seen whether he will be allowed an active role in changing the direction of Brazil's environmental policy. Up to now, civil society—in this case, the rubber tappers, Indians and international organizations in solidarity—has been pitted against the state, rather than taking a constructive role within what should be a democracy.

#### Saving Trees vs. Saving People

Nonetheless, with all these endemic difficulties, ecology in Brazil is slowly coming to mean much more than just protecting trees—and not only in the rainforests. Even in a city like São Paulo, the division between ecology and popular movements appears to be breaking down. In Itaquera, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the Zona Leste of São Paulo, community organizing saved a green area of six million square meters called the Parque do Carmo in 1985. The park consists partly of recreational area and partly of native Atlantic forest growth—fast disappearing, to the dismay of ecologists. But when the state government installed a trash deposit, it was not environmentalists who mobilized to save the park, but inhabitants of the dusty, cement-block neighborhood, who considered the park essential to the



Banner at Rio Branco conference: "Chico Mendes lives."

**E** minha lei  
 É minha questão  
 Virar este mundo  
 Cravar este chão  
 Não importa saber  
 se é terrível demais  
 Quantas guerras terei que vencer  
 Por um pouco de paz  
 E amanhã  
 Se este chão que eu beijei  
 For meu leito e perdão  
 Vou saber que valeu  
 delirar e morrer de paixão  
 E assim, seja lá como for  
 Vai ter fim a infinita aflição  
 E o mundo vai ver uma flor  
 Brotar  
 Do impossível chão

**I**t is my law  
 It is my question  
 To turn this world around  
 To plant myself in this ground  
 It makes no difference knowing  
 if it's too terrible,  
 How many wars I'll have to win  
 For a little peace  
 And tomorrow  
 If this ground I have kissed  
 Were my bed and my pardon  
 I'll know it was worth it  
 to be delirious and die of passion  
 And come what may  
 There will be an end to the infinite  
 affliction  
 And the world will see a flower  
 Sprout  
 From the impossible ground

—from an adaptation by Chico Buarque & Ruy Guerra of "The Impossible Dream"  
 (English translation by Ann Mische)

quality of life. The Zona Leste, the largest and most densely populated section of São Paulo, contains only two of the city's three dozen parks.

The resulting movement organized a camp-in at the trash deposit which included members of the church base communities and the housing and health movements, already strong in the area. Over 2000 people visited the site in 18 days, after which the trash deposit was decommissioned. But a further threat soon arrived: hoping to defuse the popular movement, the governor proposed cutting down part of the park to build low-income housing projects, since housing needs in the area are acute and the *favelas* growing.

The movement stood firm, however: "We want housing and green too" read the banners. The protesters pointed to huge vacant areas of the city given over to real estate speculation, and demanded that the park be left intact. After two years of lobbying in the state legislative assembly, the movement suc-

ceeded in getting a bill passed (over the governor's veto) declaring the park an area of environmental protection. What impressed me about the movement's participants at the time was the newness of the concept of ecology for them, and their excitement that this too was a legitimate social movement of the poorer population. Improved living conditions for workers also meant access to nature and recreation—a privilege all too easily reserved for the elite.

Thus ecology is coming to mean not only "saving our green" but defending the quality of life of the working population. As legislator Roberto Gouveia of the Workers' Party wrote in defense of the bill protecting the Parque do Carmo, "the ecological fight is taking on a new direction, the recuperation of the environmental conditions of urban zones. With the consequent involvement of inhabitants in the defense and preservation of the environment, more and more significant sectors of the population are committed to the defense of life." □