

**Chico Mendes:
Environmentalism, Unionism or Visionary?**

Biorn Maybury-Lewis

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Chico Mendes was one of millions of Brazilian rural workers who, allied with agronomists, lawyers, priests, health workers, students, teachers, professors, small businesspeople, government functionaries and others, invested precious time and energy, often risking their lives, to help build the country's rural union movement.² Mendes led the effort to organize the rubber tappers in the western Brazilian Amazon state of Acre in the 1970s and 1980s. Ultimately, like many ordinary people around the world, Chico Mendes and his comrades faced the critical practical and philosophical question of our time: how best to wisely confront narrow-minded, often truculent, interests pursuing socially and environmentally catastrophic public policies?

This struggle culminated in Mendes' assassination by gunmen in the employ of Amazonian rural elites on a fateful evening in late December 1988. The struggle in which he found himself goes on in the Amazon and thousands of other places around the world wherever people are grappling with the problem of what is the appropriate attitude to take toward one another and the natural environment. Such battles, sadly, often take lethal turns.

Chico Mendes' home institution was the rural workers union in Xapurí, Acre, a small town near the Bolivian-Brazilian frontier on the far western edge of the Brazilian Amazon. Xapurí is the seat of a municipality by the same name, comprising a large

swathe of Amazonian forest. Most of the rural workers in Xapuri were, at the time of the late 20th century unionization drive, rubber tappers: extractors and sellers of natural latex from the rubber trees indigenous to the region.

Chico Mendes' murder, on December 22, 1988, still reverberates in Brazil and far beyond his beloved Amazon region. Yet those uninitiated in Brazilian history or Amazonian studies, much less in the history of the rubber tappers and the Brazilian rural workers movement, might fairly pose a number of questions. Obviously, Mendes' assassination was tragic and premature. He died relatively young, at the age of forty-four, leaving a wife, three children, many friends and comrades, with his life's work unfinished. But what is the broader significance of his death? What difference did the life of this man from a remote corner of the Amazon make to the rest of us--particularly those who are neither Brazilians nor familiar with the Amazon?

It turns out that an objective answer to these questions is far from straightforward. In the immediate aftermath of Chico Mendes' assassination, a fascinating debate began that continues today regarding the meaning of his life and death. It has real practical implications for the Amazon region, for Brazil, and for the world in which we now live.³ European, North American and Brazilian environmentalists who had allied themselves to Mendes in their efforts to do something about the deforestation of the Amazon,^{§§§} hailed him as a fellow environmentalist *par excellence*. Claiming him as one of their own, they remembered him as a man who paid with his life for his tenacious and creative defense of the rainforest.

^{§§§} A process lamentably still unfolding both in the Amazon and, now particularly, in the *cerrado* region to the south of the Amazonian biome. *Cerrado* is essentially tropical highlands, jungle territories surrounding streams, rivers and springs, interspersed with dry upland plains and savannas where (in the latter) xerophytic plants prevail. Brazil's central-west region is almost all within the *cerrado* biome.

Irritated by this interpretation, representatives of the Brazilian rural workers union movement and their allies around the world maintain that people are killed in analogous circumstances to those in contemporary Brazil, not for their efforts to protect the environment but for organizing the poor in trade unions, social movements and political parties. For Brazilian unionists, Mendes' environmentalism--though clearly of great importance--was not nearly as important as his role as a leader in the rural workers' movement of Brazil. They argue that no rural worker is killed for saving trees, but rather for having the audacity to confront powerful interests on behalf of ordinary people. The unionists and their international socialist allies maintain by and large that we must remember Mendes as another victim of class warfare.

While both of these broad interpretations of Chico Mendes' life work have significant elements of truth, neither of these ideal-types of "Mendes as environmentalist" or "Mendes as radical unionist" quite encapsulates the complexity of the man and his work. The principles embodied in this remarkable man's life reflect the central dilemmas of our times. He was more than the champion of one cause or another.

One cannot understand the crisis Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers' movement of the Brazilian Amazon faced in the late 1980s without beginning with a brief description of the Brazilian rural workers union movement as it emerged in the 1970s, during the right-wing military dictatorship that took over Brazil from 1964 to 1985. The long dictatorship had as its centerpiece its desire to eradicate, or at least keep under control, Brazil's social movements. When the dictatorship finally ended, Brazil entered a five-year period (1985 to 1990) of extraordinary tension and violence in the countryside,

as both sides--the various categories of rural workers vs. the landlords and their allies--anticipated some form of agrarian reform.⁴ They jockeyed for position either to promote or defend against it. The rubber tappers movement was directly caught up in this rising rural tension, culminating in Mendes' 1988 assassination.

The 1964-1985 military dictatorship ruled through what political scientists call a *bureaucratic-authoritarian* state. Though corruption, as in all countries, was a part of political life, the Brazilian military regime was not a "kleptocracy"--a state that simply plundered the public treasury for the enrichment of the generals who ran it. Rather, it was a military-led, expanding bureaucracy whose agenda included the elimination of progressive, sometimes quite radical, leftist social movements and guerrilla organizations (both in the urban and rural areas) and the fostering of Brazil's capitalist development trajectory. Moreover, the government intended to promote this capitalist development while keeping close control of unions and political parties, which, as the dictatorship grew more rigidly authoritarian after December 1968, were allowed only if they were state-sanctioned and subject to close state regulation: a brand of Brazilian state *corporatism*.

This was a time of extreme repression, a dark period in Brazilian history. Although the Brazilian state actors could be lethally violent--particularly in their campaigns to eradicate urban and rural guerrilla movements in the 1960s and 1970s--the Brazilian regime was not as murderous as its fellow bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the time in neighboring countries, particularly those of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. Argentine and Chilean police and military murdered many thousands. Nevertheless, the Brazilian military state lasted by far the longest: twenty-one years. Moreover, one of the

most critical features of the Brazilian dictatorship that never underwent reform was the role of the Military Police. The Military Police are the main police force, under state government control, in each of Brazil's states. Brazil continues to have among the world's worst police forces according to a range of indicators including especially extra-judicial murder rates of civilians by police: impunity is the norm. Making matters even more perplexing, extra-judicial killings of civilians by the military police have been on the *increase*, in the past decade, during the presidencies of Lula and Dilma.

The military regime began its tenure by eliminating three rural drives to organize the rural poor: the peasant league movement in Brazil's Northeast, centered in the state of Pernambuco; the incipient, Communist Party-led rural workers movement in and around the then-capital city of Rio de Janeiro, in the *Baixada Fluminense*, as well as in parts of the interiors of the states of São Paulo and Bahia; and the small family-farmer movement, known as MASTER, organized by President João Goulart's brother-in-law, Leonel Brizola, in the far southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. (Goulart was the civilian president the military unseated in its April 1, 1964 coup d'état.)

The military killed, disappeared, or forced into exile many of the leaders and rank-and-file of these three movements because it feared some kind of revolutionary success inspired by Fidel Castro's then recent victory in the Cuban Revolution. As is now well known, peasants in Cuba's Sierra Maestre played an important role in keeping Castro and his early followers alive when they were nearly annihilated at the beginning of their revolutionary struggle. The Brazilian generals were not going to allow a repeat, in their country, of the survival of any revolutionary movement in rural areas. Given that the generals embraced the Cold War mentality and policies of the time,⁵ the Brazilian

military physically eliminated the peasant and rural worker movements that had sprung up in the countryside, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco, and Rio Grande do Sul.

If one analyzes the character of the Brazilian military regime (right-wing, anti-popular, *developmentalist*, closely allied with the U.S. Cold War effort, initially fearful of Castroism), one could have logically expected the demise of rural organizing in the countryside following this early campaign of rural repression. Indeed, nothing of significance did happen in the Brazilian countryside until the late 1960s, when a guerrilla campaign against the regime, led by the Communist Party of Brazil (*Partido Comunista do Brasil*, PC do B), began to operate in north central Brazil, in the Bico de Papagaio region of the southeastern Amazon. A major counterinsurgency campaign ensued, involving regular army units and secret police, accompanied by gross violations of the human rights of the area's peasant populations. The military wiped out the PC do B forces in the first years of the 1970s along with a significant number of innocent civilians caught in the middle of the guerrilla zone.

Meanwhile, defying the logic of these closely related historical events, a new form of unionism began to emerge, once again, in the northeastern state of Pernambuco.⁶ This was no revolutionary unionism. On the contrary, the unionists essentially took advantage of state *corporatist* structures designed to encapsulate, regulate, and control unions, to lead the unions to ends other than those intended by the state. But, they did so over the course of years of careful, slow, “two steps forward, one step backward” union activity.

They embraced the military state's effort to extend some basic social welfare to rural workers beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s: dental, health, and burial

assistance, for example. Many unions were founded with the provision of such medical and dental services in mind. Indeed, the union movement leadership was divided internally among those who simply were walking hand-in-hand with the military government's effort to control the countryside; those who wanted to do somewhat more--essentially making their unions into health facilities; and a third category of leaders who wanted to use the political space the state was providing to truly organize workers. Under cover of such state-sanctioned healthcare dispensing activities, this third group of the union movement raised the consciousness of rural workers, gave them a critical perspective of the dictatorship, and left the rank-and-file poised to enter democratic politics once the military relinquished power to civilians. The military's gradual departure from power ended with the launch of the New Republic in 1985.

These latter unionists engaged in the "politics of the possible": taking over available political space and resources to use to the best of their creative ability for a variety of progressive projects (land rights struggles, wage struggles, denunciations of abuses...). At the same time, they were careful to avoid provoking state actors or rural elites to react lethally. Acre unionists associated with Chico Mendes and his predecessor, Wilson Pinheiro, took part in this progressive wing of the national rural workers' union movement beginning in the early 1970s.

The care to avoid violence did not always succeed, as literally hundreds of rural workers and their leaders were murdered, maimed, tortured and disappeared during this trying and lengthy winding down of the military dictatorship.⁷ Internal struggles within the national union organization also slowed the march of the union movement. Although the national organization, the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers

(CONTAG), was in the hands of progressive unionists from northeastern Brazil, unionists of right-wing political orientations controlled many state federations across Brazil, often supportive of the military state. These unionists either were not rural workers themselves or were workers interested in taking advantage of alliances with military state actors at the expense of their fellow workers. It was a long, hard struggle, with mixed results for those who wanted to do something in favor of the rural workers.

Much needed to be done, because the state was far from a passive actor, maintaining at the top of its agenda its desire to push ahead Brazil's capitalist development. State initiatives played important roles in accelerating a disorderly form of *developmentalism*⁸ in the countryside. Massive and costly road and railway building efforts in the interior, for example, served to strengthen landlords whose territories were "improved" by new proximity to means of transportation, as well as exporters of Brazil's valuable raw materials, particularly wood and minerals. Hydro-electric dams were built to supply power to the countryside, above all to mining and other industrial operations. The resulting dams often flooded immense areas of land where rural workers and indigenous peoples lived, with indemnities coming, if at all, only years after destitute rural workers or tribal peoples had been scattered. (The flooding of the Madeira River, beginning in March 2014, for example, is a disaster that has severely damaged property and businesses in Porto Velho, Rondônia, while cutting off the highway connection to Acre, isolating the state--it is attributed allegedly to greedy developmentalist pressures regarding the damming and channeling of the river, indicating little change in the pattern of state-sponsored dam projects in the region, despite the end of the authoritarian regime). In the 1970s and 1980s, the military government offered cheap credit and other

fiscal incentives that invariably benefited large interests rather than smallholders and small-scale homesteaders, *all* of whom were mainly situated on Brazil's vast stock of poorly regulated public lands.

These developmentalist policies had in common a clear pattern: fomenting an inexorable redistribution of land to fewer and fewer and increasingly large landowners. Already unequal, Brazil became the nation with one of the most unequal distributions of arable land in the world. Furthermore, a huge proportion of this territory was left barely used or completely unused: a scandalous circumstance in land-hungry and impoverished Brazil. Besides harming ordinary people in the countryside, these policies accelerated an extraordinary urbanization process already under way. People left the countryside for the large and medium-sized cities, creating the contemporary panorama of Brazil's urban areas: immense shantytowns with the pathologies of gangs, drug trafficking, violence, and despair so familiar to contemporary observers.

The rural workers union movement--internally divided, always closely watched, and often intimidated or attacked--had its hands full. Yet by the time the military dictatorship ended in 1985, just under 10 million workers were organized into more than 2,850 unions throughout Brazil's immense interior, and CONTAG was widely respected as a combative, if necessarily cautious and bureaucratic, organization. By the mid 1980s, there was an air of expectancy in Brazil: Would the long-overdue agrarian reform finally come about? And if so, *how* might it happen?

The "long, slow, secure" demise of the Brazilian military dictatorship came to an end with the launching of the New Republic under civilian rule in 1985. Tancredo Neves, a centrist and astute politician from Minas Gerais, was to take over from the outgoing

military, becoming president of the republic at the climax of an immensely complicated transition process. In the negotiations for the transition, Neves had made commitments to implement an ill-defined agrarian reform to defuse the pent-up frustrations of the rural masses. However, in a major tragedy for Brazil and, in particular, for rural Brazil, Neves became gravely ill and died before taking office. His vice-president-to-be, José Sarney, a politician from the state of Maranhão who had led the military's civilian elite allies, took office in Neves' stead. He had none of the deft political skills of Neves under the tense circumstances of negotiating the end of a long dictatorship that had perpetrated numerous crimes against its own people. Moreover, Sarney, a member of Maranhão's rural elite and a man of deeply conservative political inclinations, had aligned himself with the military throughout his political career. With Neves' death and Sarney's ascension to power at this critical moment, fortune, it seemed, smiled on the military.

In the confusion and uncertainty reigning in Brazil in the first year of the Sarney administration (1985-86), many observers thought that Sarney, despite his past, could not avoid some sort of serious agrarian reform in the countryside, given Tancredo Neves' prestige and his promises to do something about rural inequities. Indeed, Sarney's initial rhetoric suggested that he would go ahead with a reform. Lines were drawn.

The landlords of Brazil--truculent under the best of circumstances--held large cattle auctions to fund a war chest to buy arms for the defense of their property; or so they maintained. They founded the *União Democrática Ruralista* (UDR) under the leadership of the particularly inflammatory Ronaldo Caiado, a large-scale rancher from the central western state of Goiás. Meanwhile, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), The Movement of Landless Rural Workers, emerged in its home state

of Rio Grande do Sul at the very beginning of the New Republic. Before the emergence of the MST, only CONTAG and the officially sanctioned rural workers movement could exist without suffering immediate annihilation by the military or gunmen (*pistoleiros*) in the employ of landlords. Now, the MST, a social movement entirely independent of the state and tired of the slow but steady approach that CONTAG had painstakingly developed under the dictatorship, began to push for rapid, radical change in the more open circumstances of the New Republic. CONTAG's star began to fade, and the MST began to rise to eventually become a nationwide social movement with a radical land-reform agenda and socialist ideology.

Yet CONTAG, the MST, and the rural workers movement were under UDR assault throughout Brazil. Shots were fired. Rural workers fell. Casualties in this unequal struggle were virtually always among the poor and not among their class enemies, with impunity prevailing. The state and the Brazilian legal system invariably found ways to ignore the persecution of and crimes against rural workers.⁹ In fact, the first person, in a land conflict zone, whose murder was to be fully investigated--with indictments handed down, a trial of the accused, and the perpetrators sentenced to prison--was none other than Chico Mendes. This was in spite of the fact that lethal class warfare had raged, for decades beforehand, in the countryside. In his case, the investigation only happened--to the surprise, no doubt, of Mendes' UDR enemies--because of his worldwide fame. Mendes' internationally recognized credentials as a legitimate, thoughtful leader intent upon peaceful mobilization of his people pressured the legal system into doing its job. Caught up in these dangerous times in rural Brazil of the early New Republic, Mendes lamentably paid with his life.

What were the circumstances in Acre in the late 1970s and 1980s? By late in the 20th century, the owners of the rubber estates, who ruled the countryside from far away, in the rubber warehouses and distribution centers of Manaus and Belém, thousands of miles downstream on the Amazon River, had, in many cases, abandoned their claims to rubber estates in areas such as Xapuri in the western Amazon. Although it had had its booms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and again during World War II, as part of the Allies' efforts to maintain a reliable supply of natural rubber, the rubber business was in a protracted decline as a consequence of competition from natural latex producers overseas and, more important, the development of synthetic rubber. The rubber industry was essentially moribund by the early 1970s. Rubber workers were left to their own devices: hunting, gathering, planting subsistence plots, tapping rubber and gathering other forest products for autonomous sale.

The military state decided that as a part of its Amazon road building campaign, designed to link "land without men" (its perception of the Amazon) to "men without land" in other areas of the country, it would lay out and pave highway BR-317. The BR-317 link would link eastern Acre to BR-364, another major highway crossing Rondônia, which in turn connects the western Amazon to central Brazil and from there to the country's southeastern industrial zones. Acre was thereby directly linked, by road, to Brazil's most developed states.

To characterize the Amazon as "without men" was a palpable distortion of the truth that the military used to justify two policies. The first was its desire to defuse land conflicts in other regions of Brazil by giving workers a means to travel north and west to the Amazon to seek "unoccupied" land via the new roads. The second was to offer rural

capitalists, particularly in the cattle ranching sector, opportunities to establish large properties in areas near where roads were projected in the western Amazon. Doing so allowed them to reap the windfall profits that road building invariably brings to those whose lands lie nearby. This, the military maintained, would constitute a cornerstone of “development” in the western Amazon.

Beginning in the 1970s, these two processes precipitated the simultaneous movement of small- and large-scale interests into Rondônia and Acre. Rubber tappers in Acre--facing well-heeled southern ranchers who typically appeared with armed farm hands, foremen, and, when necessary, *pistoleiros* (professional gunmen)--were expelled by the thousands from the jungle areas where they had gone about earning their modest living. When pushed out of their traditional areas, many rubber tapper families went over the border to try their luck in Bolivia. Others crowded into the urban periphery of the Acre state capital, Rio Branco, transforming it, in a short period, from a sleepy provincial town into a bustling, medium-sized city made up mainly of shantytowns (*favelas*). Still others, usually younger, single and male, traveled to the mining camps springing up around the Amazon.

The small and large property holders entering the region not only devastated the local rubber tappers’ way of life, they destroyed indigenous peoples’ lands, infected them with diseases for which they had no immunity, and effectively ended the tribal life of innumerable Native Americans. Meanwhile, the combination of the swidden (slash and burn) agricultural techniques of smallholders and the ranchers’ formation of enormous pastures through the burning of trees followed by the planting of grass caused the

monumental deforestation that brought the Amazon to the world's attention in the late 1980s as the fires started to appear prominently in satellite photographs of the region.

In an effort to help staunch the flow of workers out of the old rubber tapping areas into Bolivia and the Rio Branco urban periphery, CONTAG--representing the national rural workers movement--came to Acre and organized the first rural workers unions and the state union federation in the 1970s. Wilson Pinheiro became the leader of the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* (STR) of Brasiléia, a municipality near Xapurí, and emerged as the de facto leader of the rubber tappers in the region.

But the devastation of the rubber tappers, indigenous peoples, and the Amazon forest continued during the last years of the 1964-1985 military dictatorship. The government intended to lengthen, improve, and pave the BR-317 highway, despite the common knowledge that this developmentalism caused havoc in the countryside. The dominant ideology was that burning the forest, farm and pasture formation, and defusing extra-regional tensions as a result of "opening up this frontier" were signs of *Progress*. It was at this time that Chico Mendes entered the rubber tappers movement, joining Wilson Pinheiro as a close ally. He worked with Pinheiro in his effort to denounce developmentalism and protect the remaining rubber tappers.

In the late 1970s, in a plot consistent with the approach large landowners throughout Brazil had established during the 1964-1985 military dictatorship, the Acre rural elites decided to take matters into their own hands regarding Wilson Pinheiro, a leader whom they felt they could no longer tolerate. They were incensed that he and the Acre rural unionists had begun to organize themselves and make known the catastrophic

consequences of the region's developmentalism. Landlords ordered and successfully carried out the murder of Wilson Pinheiro in 1980.

Enraged, the rubber tapper unionists took their violent revenge on the alleged perpetrators. In a facile display of how the Brazilian legal system is virtually never impartial in its dealings with the rural poor, the police leapt into action to find and prosecute those accused of killing Wilson Pinheiro's murderers, using torture and intimidation to push forward the investigation. It was at this moment, when Chico Mendes was under attack from the authorities and was being prosecuted himself for killing Pinheiro's murderers--a revenge killing for which he was later acquitted--that Mendes took over as the de facto leader of the rubber tappers' movement. During the remaining eight years of his life, he would traverse Acre, a state slightly smaller than Wisconsin, often on foot, organizing community by community in an effort to unionize.

To reiterate our original questions: What is the broader significance of Mendes' death? What difference did the life of this man from a remote corner of the Amazon make to the rest of us--particularly those who are neither Brazilians nor familiar with the Amazon? To answer, we must consider three parts of Mendes' legacy: his views on the role of violence in the rubber tappers' struggle; his views on development as opposed to developmentalism; and his efforts to build alliances. Together, they serve to render Chico Mendes, and the people who struggled and continue to struggle with him, into figures of importance to contemporary world history--far beyond the Amazon.

Mendes sympathized with the despair and catharsis of the rubber tappers' violent reaction against Pinheiro's murderers; indeed, he suffered with them the arbitrary investigative techniques of torture normally involved in Brazilian legal inquiries involving inter-class crimes. But he would develop with his fellows an approach to organizing themselves and dealing with the deforestation that would eschew violence: a nonviolent, confrontational technique the rubber tappers' termed the *empate*. The *empate* was an innovative method the rubber tappers used to face the rural peons in the employ of landlords who were sent to cut down trees and brush before burning the detritus and, right after, planting pastures for the ranchers in the ashes.

In an *empate*, men, women and children of rubber tapper communities would simply stand unarmed in the way of tree cutters and their equipment, blocking the destruction and personally appealing to the peons, who were working for the ranchers, as people of the same social class. While physically facing the peons, the rubber tapper families would explain to them the folly of destroying the forest, pleading with them not to ruin an entire way of life for the pittance the landlords were paying them to clear cut. It was arduous, tension-filled, tenacious work, requiring persistence and courage, day after day, week after week, at great cost to people always trying to scratch out a bare subsistence living. But it worked in some, but by no means all, cases.

As a result of the successful *empates*, the landlords' peons would withdraw, infuriating their employers. Fundamentally, it was a nonviolent, communitarian, educational and consciousness-raising approach to struggle, where all involved on both sides went away thinking that "this is different, this is special." This was something out of the ordinary for Brazil, with Mendes following humbly in the footsteps of luminaries

in the history of nonviolent resistance such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the great Mahatma Gandhi himself. This was particularly striking given the violent manner in which conflicts over resources unfolded normally in rural Brazil.

Mendes maintained that through 1985, forty-five empates had occurred, with fifteen partial victories. These guaranteed the preservation of 1.2 million hectares of forest.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Chico Mendes and his followers were under attack for questioning the basic premises of developmentalism. They were accused of wanting Brazil to remain “in the Stone Age.” Mendes’ opponents asked typically, in a denunciatory tone, in the regional media they dominated: What alternatives did the rubber tappers offer? Were Chico and the tappers against Progress?

The ideologues of modernization--ranging from World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank economists in Washington to their allies running military governments around Latin America--claimed that creating a strong capitalist economy would resolve the problems of all social classes. With a growing infrastructure of roads, dams, electrification and communication networks, along with a range of economic incentives (tax holidays, cheap credit, price subsidies for inputs) for those possessing capital, governments could foment capitalist development. Eventually, the poor too would have more jobs and better lives: a classic version of the “trickle down” theory.

In Brazil, officials of both the military government and the subsequent civilian regimes of the post-1985 New Republic defended a world order in which private capital, backed by state tax incentives, subsidies, infra-structure projects, and the security apparatus, would play the essential role in national development. They would accuse the rubber tappers’ movement of being in favor of keeping Brazil in the pre-Modern period.

They went so far as to suggest that efforts such as the rubber tappers' endangered the Brazilian nation because competitors around the world, who embraced the ideological vision favoring world capitalism, would overtake and threaten Brazil.

To understand Mendes' response to this powerful regional, national and international attack on him and his followers, it is helpful to cite his own reflections on how developmentalism had devastated his people and the countryside where they lived:

When I speak of our resistance against large-scale deforestation, I would like to keep in mind the fact that this deforestation was the result of government propaganda ... that said that we needed to bring development and progress to our region. And with all this came the opening up of the road known as highway BR-317. The moment that this highway was put into service, the rubber tappers who found themselves living alongside of it were suddenly in the areas of easiest access, and it was in the accessible areas that most of the expulsions of rubber tappers occurred. Large landowners forcibly took over the road-front areas.

Just to give you an idea: From 1970 to 1975, in the period during which the large landowners occupied the areas alongside the road and began widespread deforestation, in my municipality of Xapuri alone the fires and earth movers destroyed 180,000 rubber trees, 80,000 Brazil nut trees, and more than 1.2 million trees of other species, including wood ostensibly safeguarded by the law, and thousands of trees of medicinal value that are so important for us. Various animal species disappeared too as they were burned out. From this point on began the violent [attacks] against us.

And all this happened because of the false propaganda of development and progress. The progress of the opening of the highway only brought ruin upon us.¹¹

Mendes and his followers knew, however, that denouncing the destruction and organizing empates would not be sufficient. They had to put their minds to inventing an alternative ideological approach to Amazonian development that would halt the destruction and integrate the dwellers of the forest into the regional development process, ending, once and for all, the developmentalist trope that Progress was destined for “men

without land for land without men.” They could not afford to accept passively the accusation that they offered no alternatives to the Amazon and Brazil. For that work, Chico Mendes, as well as his fellow rubber tappers and *assessores*, turned to social scientists and non-Amazonian activists who also were deeply disturbed by trends underway in the Amazon--principally Mendes’ friend from the southern state of Paraná, the anthropologist Mary Alegretti. Together they invented the notion of the *extractive reserve*. Continuing the passage, cited above, Chico Mendes describes this process:

... There was a very serious problem. We were in a very big struggle in defense of the forest, but we did not have in our minds an alternative idea, a proposal, or an argument.

Well, someone would ask, “You are fighting to defend the forest, but what is it that you want to do with the forest?” And many times we would become a little taken aback, encountering difficulty in making a response.

At the end of 1984, beginning of 1985, an idea came up at the union of rubber tappers of Xapuri—our idea, to organize the first national meeting of rubber tappers in Brasília. Why Brasília? Because Brasília serves as the forum for decisions at the national level. And because in Brasília the authorities had, until that moment, considered Amazonia a vacuum with nobody living there. We wanted to prove [to them] and the rest of the world that Amazonia had people living there and that it was not deserted.

And so with the support of a few organizations ... including a person who played an especially important role in the setting up of this meeting, Mary Alegretti ... [we succeeded in making the arrangements for a national conference....] By and by, commissions of rubber tappers left for various parts of Amazonia to bring this news to the other comrades, our brothers. In October of 1985, with a great deal of success, we held in Brasília the First National Meeting of Rubber Tappers. Throughout all the history of the occupation of Amazonia by rubber tappers there had never occurred such an event. This was an historic meeting. We got together in Brasília 130 leaders of rubber tappers from all over Amazonia [as well as] observers from Brazil and from other countries too.

Beginning from this point we discovered the idea of creating extractive reserves in the Amazon. This would be the real agrarian reform for Amazonia that we wanted, because we rubber tappers never fought to be

the owners or property holders of land. What we want is that the state own the land while the rubber tappers maintain usufruct rights over it. And so this very good idea emerged.

After the meeting, government agencies released this idea all over Brazil and even to environmental organizations overseas.

The extractive reserve, combining state ownership and usufruct rights of the forest dwellers inhabiting it, was an original approach to the problem of Amazonian agrarian reform. For the first time a proposal emerged from as well as involving those who lived there. The rubber tappers' idea took into consideration the nature of the Amazonian ecosystem, where the "wealth" of the region is not in the soils--all too often soils are quite thin and susceptible to rapid erosion and laterization as soon as the protective forest canopy above them is removed--but in the forest canopy itself. Rubber and Brazil nuts are only the most obvious non-timber forest products that can be sustainably harvested. With further research, innumerable chemicals, medicines, oils, and other products could also be harvested while maintaining the forest in a manner approximating its "original" state. Furthermore, this approach would safeguard the rubber tappers and their families while offering them the economic means to integrate, on their own terms and at a reasonable pace, into the modernizing world around them.

Given the enormous bundles of debt, fiscal incentives, infrastructure development, and environmental destruction that the alternative version of trickle-down "progress" entailed, it would also probably be cheaper for Brazil. Mendes made it clear with the promulgation of this approach that he was not against development per se, but against developmentalism that insisted on its class bias, dismantling of the rubber tappers' communities, genocide of the indigenous people, debt to foreign banks and

environmental degradation as “the only way.” He and his allies effectively reframed the problem: No longer was it a matter of *if* but of *how* there was to be development.

Intellectual and political creativity as well as realism were the cornerstones of Mendes’ new agrarian reform proposal for the people of the Amazon. As the rubber tappers eschewed control over the land, fighting instead for control over the resources contained on the extractive reserves, they combined the need for cooperation with scientist allies around Brazil and the world (to research and discover more Amazonian secrets for potentially rational commercialization), embracing of communitarian values, promotion of entrepreneurialism, and increasingly sophisticated education for their sons and daughters to carry forward this challenging new vision. In telling fashion--since the idea applied in equal measure to the indigenous peoples of Amazonia who were guardians of enormous, untapped quantities of knowledge of the forests’ potential contributions to the world--Mendes and his new National Council of Rubber Tappers reached out to their traditional rivals or enemies. With indigenous leaders they successfully forged the Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest to pursue the newly articulated ideology and practical plan of creating extractive reserves across the Amazon.

This set of alliances constitutes the third and crucial reason why Chico Mendes did not die a martyr only for the Amazonian causes he defended, but also for like-minded peoples around the globe. While organizing the rubber tappers into effective alliances, Mendes worked as a local politician in the military government’s legal opposition party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB). Later, as the military regime waned, he was one of the national founders of the Workers Party (PT), personally allying himself with the urban union leader, eventual two-term president of Brazil, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva.

He, Lula and the PT in turn allied themselves with the cause of democratic socialism around the world. Meanwhile, Mendes' National Council of Rubber Tappers, his Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest (uniting rubber tappers with Brazil's Indians), and his increasing national stature as a man defending not only his people but also the Amazon forest, drew the attention of the international environmentalist movement that was increasingly horrified by the burning and destruction going on in the Amazon in the 1980s. Mendes of course met and began to collaborate with them also. He was to receive prestigious prizes from the Better World Society and the United Nations, recognizing his work on behalf of the environmental cause.

Although it might seem trite in the context of assassinations, massive environmental destruction, dislocation, genocide and ethnocide in which he worked, Chico Mendes embodied the adage emerging across the planet, "Think globally, act locally." He had transcended the Amazon and Brazil to become a world figure.

But in the western Amazon, regional logics of frontier conflict continued. Chico Mendes' enemies did not read the environmentalist debates in prominent newspapers of the international press. Nor were they impressed with Mendes' international prizes. On the contrary, the prizes and Mendes' growing ability to influence international bankers and U.S. senators weighing their support for the developmentalism under way in the Amazon infuriated his enemies. These same regional elites--in the landlord class, the media, the political establishment, the police and military circles--were accustomed to the reign of impunity in cases of murder of leaders from Brazil's rural lower classes.

Chico Mendes was surrounded. However much he organized and forged alliances, he was still at the mercy of the lawlessness and murderous impulses of class warfare in

Brazil's rural peripheral frontier areas, where the absence of public security, political violence and impunity remained the effective currency. Eventually, a minor landlord stalked and killed Mendes in front of his children and wife in December 1988. The murderers, from the Alves family, were condemned and served some prison time, but the legal system limited the inquiry regarding the motive for Chico Mendes' dispute with the Alves family over a piece of territory in Xapuri. The allies of these violent individuals and their family live free to this day, still retaining the power to torment rubber tappers and indigenous people and burn the forest.

There is a widely held belief--and there is little doubt that it is true--that the intellectual authors of Chico Mendes' murder were never even questioned.

Given the importance Chico Mendes attained, it is no wonder that his work has been adopted as "our work" by both the socialist and environmentalist camps. Because of his socialist utterances and writings, his socialist speeches as a city councilman, his strong unionism and status as a co-founder of the PT--all well documented--the international socialist movement claimed him as their martyr. Meanwhile, the environmentalists--many of whom remained quite conservative politically but were insisting on finding ways to conserve the environment, particularly in the unique Amazonian biome--adopted Mendes as *their* own martyr. Many of them would have been shocked at his socialist and communist friends and speeches.

What renders both these camps' claims problematic is that Mendes advocated a pre-modern lifestyle: extractivism, hunting, fishing, subsistence farming, with a post-modern twist: entrepreneurialism, communitarianism, multi-ethnicity: all within an internationalist framework. Socialists are notoriously impatient with the peasant world view, which, in many ways, could be found among the tappers. Karl Marx himself famously denigrated the "idiocy" of rural life in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Leftists, from the Lula government to the FARC guerrillas in Colombia, show little understanding of, patience with, or mercy for the tribal peoples of the Amazon or other regions of the Latin America and the pre-modern production systems involving *caboclos* (descendants of Portuguese and indigenous people) of the Amazon. In fact, anthropologists report that the circumstances of Brazil's Indians has substantially worsened under the presidencies of Lula and Dilma (self-styled social democrats) in their eagerness to promote developmentalist rural policies and make alliances with the latifundio-heavy PMDB political party, thereby maintaining their presidential coalition. Yet Chico Mendes was creating his alliance of the Peoples of the Forest with both *caboclo* rubber tappers and indigenous groups. Similarly, environmentalists around the world may love the pristine, but many are preservationist and have little understanding of or sympathy for a proposal for *managing* the environment, particularly if the managers were in a social formation easily identified as pre-industrial and were uttering rhetoric--as Mendes did--that could only be characterized as socialist.

The following schematic helps break down, albeit simplistically, the complexities of Chico Mendes the leader:

What Were Chico Mendes' Politics?

Outlook	Alliance Mendes pursued	Mendes' Posture	Allies' Posture	Mendes' role in building Institutions
Environmentalist	Allied to Brazilian and foreign environmentalists.	Environmentalist rhetoric; critique of <i>developmentalism</i> ; adoption of international environmentalist, conservationist, not preservationist, positions. Argued human role critical to save endangered biomes like the Amazon.	Many (though not all) were anti-communist, even anti-socialist; not notably progressive except on environment; largely nonviolent.	Helped found transregional and transnational coalitions denouncing deforestation and favoring more rational approaches to Amazonia.
Socialist	Allied to local, regional, national and international socialist worker movements.	Socialist rhetoric; initially tolerant of his peers' violence, though later not.	Local, regional and national socialist-oriented Acrean political forces, from the traditional Communists (in CONTAG) to the socialists (in the PT).	Founded rural workers unions in Acre and the National Council of Rubber Tappers; PT on the national level.
Pre-modern	Allied to other rubber tappers of the region and indigenous peoples.	Free peasant/ rubber tapper outlook; local, regionalist, communitarian attitudes; nonviolent, with few exceptions. Developed tactic of the <i>empate</i> .	Indians were, like rubber tappers, ethnocentric, trying to set aside traditional insularity for the sake of survival.	Alliance of Peoples of the Forest.
Post-modern amalgam: Mendes' eclectic political outlook. Reconciling intellectual and practical contradictions within the dramatic struggle of the Amazon.	Allied to all of the above.	Rooted in pre-modern society while finding places amid modernity through politics, creativity and nonviolence. Entrepreneurial, socialist defender of pre-modern social formations trying to control own modernization; developer of political actions to make conflicting ideas coherent.	Mendes' allies shared post-modern attitude, defended pre-modern societies coming into modernity <i>on their own terms and at their own pace</i> : Amazonian Indians and <i>caboclos</i> and national and international progressives.	Local, regional, national, international alliances; the first extractive reserves.

As this schematic suggests, Chico Mendes and the movement he led are not easily classified in standard socio-political categories. Mendes was neither exclusively a conservationist environmentalist nor a socialist. He certainly was not a preservationist environmentalist. Nor was he completely a nonviolent pacifist, as he sympathized, early in his political career, with the inchoate rage of his peers when they went after the murderers of Wilson Pinheiro. Nor was he simply the passive subject of his public narrative: a pre-modern rubber tapper, focused ethnocentrically on himself and his world. He was self-consciously a protagonist in his people's struggle, with sophisticated, forward looking ideas. Mendes was attempting to reconcile potentially conflicting ideas of great consequence to his people, and his efforts can serve to instruct observers dealing with analogous intellectual and practical problems around the world. He remained deeply rooted in a past social formation, so much so that he was desperate to find a way to "ease" it--as much as possible under the control of his rubber tapper peers--into the modern world. He wished to do so through an innovative, very much pragmatic approach to agrarian reform: the extractive reserve. And in this important way, he was a man of the future and of the broader world.

He, better than any of us, intuitively understood how these sometimes contradictory ideas held together in a coherent whole. Belying the crisis of paradigms that haunts the current moment in history, he fought for the tolerant, democratic society, the rural society interested in the best that urban civilization may offer, the communitarian society, the environmentalist society, the multi-ethnic society, the educated society, the demilitarized society, the entrepreneurial *and* socialist society, the pre-industrial society,

the modern society, the independent society, the egalitarian society. His was a workable amalgam, where the forest, the woman, the man, the child and the creatures might all be noble in their place, while organically linked to one another as well as their past and future.

NOTES

¹ This document draws on an earlier version, by the same author, published as the introduction to Gomercindo Rodrigues, *Walking the Forest with Chico Mendes*, Linda Rabben, trans. and ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007). Biorn Maybury-Lewis is co-founder and executive director of the Cambridge Institute for Brazilian Studies (<http://cambridgebrazil.org/>). Thanks are due to Dr. Linda Rabben and Dr. James Ito-Adler for edits and critiques of this paper, whereas any errors and omissions are the author's responsibility. Dr. Maybury-Lewis can be reached at: biornmayburylewis@CambridgeBrazil.org.

² For analysis of the emergence the rural union movement under the Brazilian dictatorship, see Biorn Maybury-Lewis, *The Politics of the Possible: The Brazilian Rural Workers' Trade Union Movement, 1964-1985* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

³ See, for example, Alexander Cockburn and Susanna Hecht, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, destroyers, and defenders of the Amazon* (London and New York: Verso, 1989); Tony Gross, org., *Fight for the Forest: Chico Mendes in His Own Words*, second ed. (London: Latin America Bureau, 1992); Edilson Martins, *Chico Mendes: um povo da floresta* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Garamond, 1998); Andrew Revkin, *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest*, third ed. (Washington, DC: Island/Shearwater, 2004); Alex Shoumatoff, *Murder in the Rain Forest: The Chico Mendes Story* (London: Fourth Estate, 1991); Márcio Souza, *O Empate Contra Chico Mendes*, second ed. (São Paulo: Marco Zero, 1990); Zuenir Ventura, *Chico Mendes Crime e Castigo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003).

⁴ See Biorn Maybury-Lewis, "The Agrarian Reform Debate in Brazil" (New York: Columbia University Institute for Latin American and Iberian Studies Working Paper No. 14, 1990).

⁵ When the Brazilian generals took power in 1964, the United States, the close and crucial supporter of the military regime and the chief ideologue of the western side of the Cold War, was escalating the war in Vietnam, had recently settled the Cuban missile crisis, was poised to invade the Dominican Republic, and was gearing up for a crucial support role in the Indonesian government's massacre of an estimated 500,000 of its citizens who were (or were alleged to be) in Communist and other left-wing political organizations.

⁶ See Maybury-Lewis (1994).

⁷ See, for example, Amnesty International, *Brazil: Authorized Violence in Rural Areas* (London: Amnesty International, September 1988); *Campanha Nacional Pela Reforma Agrária, Violência no Campo* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1985); Elias Fajardo, *Em Julgamento: A violência no campo*

(Relato das mortes analisados pelo Tribunal Nacional dos Crimes do Latifúndio) (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes/FASE/Instituto de Apóio Jurídico Popular, 1988).

⁸ On *developmentalism*, see Biorn Maybury-Lewis, “The Concept of Developmentalism as the Leitmotif of David Maybury-Lewis' Advocacy Work: A personal and intellectual history”, presented at the Special Session, “Legacies in Motion: A Consideration of the Work and Impact of David Maybury-Lewis,” 109th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (New Orleans, Louisiana: November 20, 2010); David Maybury-Lewis, *Indigenous Peoples, Ethnic Groups, and the State*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), pp. 1-44; and Jerome M. Levi and Biorn Maybury-Lewis, “Becoming Indigenous: Identity and Heterogeneity in a Global Movement,” in Gillette H. Hall and Harry Patrinos, eds. *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty, and Development* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 105-110.

⁹ See, for example, Amnesty International, *Brazil: Authorized Violence in Rural Areas* (London: Amnesty International, September 1988); *Campanha Nacional Pela Reforma Agrária, Violência no Campo* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1985); Elias Fajardo, *Em Julgamento: A violência no campo (Relato das mortes analisados pelo Tribunal Nacional dos Crimes do Latifúndio)* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes/FASE/Instituto de Apóio Jurídico Popular, 1988).

¹⁰ Maybury-Lewis (1994), p. 228.

¹¹ Maybury-Lewis (1994), pp. 225-226.