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AEM-17

More than defending trees

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Dear Peter,

It was supposed to be the marriage (at last) of the socialist class struggle with ecology and modern sexual morality. The ecologist Fernando Gabeira seemed slated to become the running mate of Lula, candidate of the PT (Worker's Party) in this year's presidential elections. Lula, or rather, Luis Ignácio da Silva, is the metal-worker turned union leader turned constitutional delegate turned presidential candidate of the PT. Fernando Gabeira is the journalist turned urban guerrilla turned political exile turned ecologist, pacifist, defender of homosexual rights and founder of Brazil's Green Party (PV), which is allied with the PT in the Frente Brasil Popular. A banner hung at a pro-Gabeira rally proclaimed, "Ver de perto, ver melhor." It translates, "see closer, see better". The pun is on the verde and vermelho, green and red, symbols of the union of ecology and socialism in the Lula-Gabeira ticket.

The marriage fell through because the two remaining parties of the Frente, the PSB (Brazilian Socialist Party) and the PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil), together with the sections of the PT linked to the church, thought Gabeira too big a risk given the prejudices of Brazilian society. Not that Gabeira himself was necessarily a homosexual; but he had brought back from exile in Europe post-modern, anti-materialist values that added to its ecological criticisms the vocal opposition to all forms of sexual, racial, and economic descrimination, support for the legalization of marijuana, and a sexual politics that declared fearlessly, "two people can do whatever they like together, as long as one respects the desires of the other."

After a tempestuous internal debate, the majority of the militancy of the PT, especially its youthful element, decided at first cautiously, then enthusiastically in favor of Gabeira. But threatened with the withdrawal of the PSB and the PCdoB, the party's leadership opted for the unknown José Paulo Bisol, of the PSDB (Brazilian Social-Democratic Party), which isn't even part of the Frente. The choice of a safe, center-leaning vice was a strong let-down among the militants of the PT, who had been excited by the promise of a dynamic, controversial campaign that would bring traditionally "untouchable" issues within the action of the left. In a party that depends on the intense energetic involvement of its militants to compensate scarce financial resources, the mood of dis-animation may prove more prejudicial to Lula's campaign than the real or imagined public prejudice against Gabeira.

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The rejection of Gabeira also shows the fragility of the negotiation between socialism and ecology that is sending tremors through the Brazilian left. Up until last December's assassination of Chico Mendes and the international attention given the movement of seringueiros (rubber tappers) in defense of the Amazon forest, ecology had been viewed as suspiciously linked with pacifism, esoteric bourgeois escapism, and because of Gabeira, with a vague wimpishness, which shows the still strong machismo of the left. In short, ecology was seen as a political cop-out. "Why should we worry about trees," a friend asked me, "when there are people dying of hunger?"

The ecological movement, on the other hand, after a long history of affirming it was non-political, was beginning to edge its way into politics, with the recent formation of the PV as evidence. But it remained much more firmly tuned into "saving our greenery" than to larger social issues, maintaining an aloofness from the PT and the classical marxist left. But Chico Mendes, who overnight became Brazil's best-known ecologist, was not a member of the Green Party, nor was he a vegetarian, nor could anyone call him a wimp. He was a union leader, militant of the PT, who grew up in the forest but didn't know the word ecology existed until the devastation of Amazônia threatened the livelihood of the rubber tappers for whose organization he had dedicated his life. He was a bona-fide trabalhador (worker) who had been "greened" by the demands of his social struggle. With his experience before their eyes, both the socialists and the environmentalists were forced to admit that ecology meant much more than defending trees.

In my last letter I discussed the history of the movement of seringueiros and the events leading to Chico Mendes' assassination. The movement challenges the left because it reveals clearly the integration of ecological, land, and labor conflicts. The concept is simple: the forest, more than just a reserve of greenery, is the base of economic production of the seringueiros, Indians, and other forest harvesters. These workers are thus by necessity environmentalists. Far from being an abstract, middle class "cause", ecology becomes a question of the quality and guarantee of life and work, of the distribution of and permanence on the land. Understood in this way, ecology also begins a much deeper questioning of the status quo. This is why, as I quoted in my last letter, Chico Mendes was the first ecologist killed in Brazil. "He was, before anything else, a union leader who fought for the posse of land, and this is the principle problem in Brazil."

In this letter I would like to continue my discussion of my March trip to Rio Branco, capital of the state of Acre in western Amazônia. I went there to attend the II National Encounter of Seringueiros and the I Encounter of the Peoples of the Forest, the first national-scale happenings of the rubber tapper movement since Chico's death. A closer look at what went on at the conference gives an insight into the ecological debate of the left. It also leads us to the question of who is controlling Amazon policy at this moment, now that the eyes of the international media have been turned so strongly in this direction.

* * *

I arrived in Acre in the ambiguous position that has often been mine in these past two years of accompanying social movements in Brazil. I was more than an outsider, and less than an insider, having been invited to make the trip by a friend who runs a São Paulo center for research and documentation of popular movements. The center had been asked to do the official documentation of the encounter (taping, photographing, news clipping) and my friend called on me to help take pictures. I jumped at the chance to see a bit of what is going on in much-debated Amazônia. And as an official

"documenter", I found myself with the priveleged position (for a pale-faced, accented outsider) of sitting in on organizational meetings and thus catching the behind-the-scenes political gossip.

The encounter had been billed as a double feature, incorporating in parallel and often joint sessions the meetings of rubber tappers and indigenous peoples from five states in the Amazon region. The two promoting organizations were the National Council of Seringueiros (CNS) and the Union of Indigenous Nations (UNI). The two groups had recently joined forces to form the Alliance of Peoples of the Forest, with the goal of overcoming the historical enmity between the two populations, now that the livelihood of both was threatened by the predatory occupation of Amazônia. While the central objective of the conference was to determine the future direction of the movement in defense of the forest, the encounter seemed in fact to have three distinct sub-conferences.

Public relations

One of the sub-conferences, if I can call it that, consisted of the public relations event occasioned by the heavy turn-out of observers from national and international organizations. As I commented in AEM-16, these observers were more numerous than the participants themselves, attracted by the global press attention given the assassination of Chico Mendes. In addition to environmental, labor, and public interest groups from Holland, Germany, Sweden, Italy, England, Greece, Canada and the United States, the conference included national celebrities such as senators and representatives from at least five political parties (PT, PSDB, PSB, PCdoB, PV), well-known singers and television actors, intellectuals and journalists such as Fernando Gabeira, and Lula of the PT, who launched his presidential campaign in Acre on the closing day of the encounter. The opening of the conference received the blessing of the Bishop of Rio Branco, Dom Moacir Grechi, of the church's progressive branch. The heavy star presence led an unsympathetic local paper to accuse the encounter of consisting of an "explicit populism" in which the seringueiros and Indians "are merely wanting to show that they have influential friends."

Opening ceremonies: Seringueiro and indigenous leaders process in traditional costume to symbolize the Alliance of Peoples of the Forest.



In reality, these outsiders had an important, but ambiguous, role within the objectives of the encounter. In order for the Alliance of Peoples of the Forest to expand its influence, it sorely needs money, political lobbyists, juridical and scientific assistance, and sympathetic public opinion. The outsiders were there to open these types of doors. But the necessity of assistance did not eliminate a certain suspicion on the part of organizers and participants, wary that would-be helpers would try to manipulate or distort the movement in accord with their own interests. Many of the leaders were worried, for example, about the strong ecological thrust to the international reporting about the work of Chico Mendes, in which the labor and land disputes were often forgotten. "Many of these organizations come with pre-established ideas and agendas, which they want us to fit into," one of the organizers told me. "We need their money, but we don't need anyone telling us what to do. The movement has to maintain its autonomy."

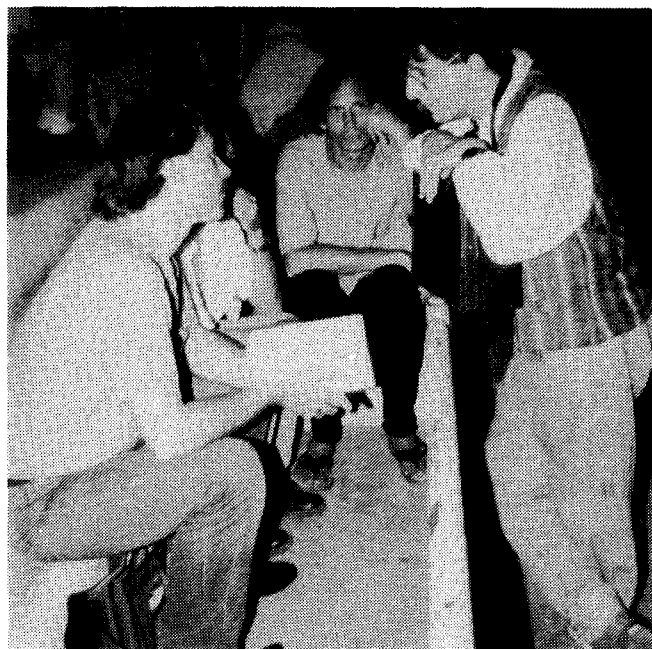
One participant expressed similar doubts in the tone of comradely exhortation that characterized the rustic speeches of the seringueiros:

The organization doesn't come from outside, companheiros, it begins in each group of seringueiros and every indigenous group. I want to say very clearly to all of the associations present from Brazil and outside of Brazil, to all of the North-americans and foreigners who are studying this until they grow old, which is the study that is going to help our struggle? Which will help us with land demarcation and extractive reserves? So many studies and still our land was not respected.

Many of the visitors shared the question asked by this seringueiro. What were they there for, and how could their "studies" be of real help? The organizers scheduled a few discussions among the observing organizations, but whether because of the diversity of the groups present, or the ambivalence of the organizers, it was hard to reach any clear conclusions. Mostly the visitors sat in the bleachers chatting among themselves or trying to grasp what was going on down below. I talked in garbled English/Portuguese/Italian to a woman from the Italian League for the Environment, who admitted feeling a bit lost. "We came to hear how we can help. But it seems they themselves don't have that very clear. We'll just have to wait and see what develops."

Popular education

If the first sub-conference was directed at the outsiders, a very different encounter was experienced by the insiders, the seringueiros and Indians who made the long trek from the interior of the forest to learn a bit more about how to fight for their rights (and what exactly it means to have "rights"). This aspect of the encounter can be called an exercise in popular education. "Popular education" is a term I've been sprinkling through my newsletters. It refers to a methodology of consciousness-raising and organization among the poorer population, rooted in the base communities of the Catholic church and the theoretical work of Paulo Freire, Carlos Rodrigues Brandão and many others. To use its language, it consists of a practice of group discussion ("dialogue") that re-values the knowledge and culture of the workers and the poorer communities, leading them to reflect on their experience of oppression and organize to change ("transform") their situation. The "Seringueiro Project" described in my last newsletter is a good example of popular education. Although the encounter in Rio Branco differed from the school set-up of literacy training, it contained the similar pedagogic goal of reinforcing the spirit and consciousness of struggle in the 236 delegates, who ranged from wide-eyed, barely literate novices to experienced union leaders, veterans of beatings and arrests.



1. Musical interval by seringueiros 2. Fernando Gabeira (right), journalist and president of Brazil's Green Party, talks with European visitors.

The politically raw nature of the participants made necessary a different dynamic than the traditional discourse battle of labor congresses. One can't keep workers accustomed to walking hours through the forest sitting in stiff chairs all day. Although large assemblies were alternated with small group discussions to give everyone a chance to speak, the unaccustomed verbal bombardment often pushed the limits of the seringueiros' endurance. To wake up snoozers and re-interest chatters, discourses were frequently interrupted for sessions of joke-telling and musical performances, with songs and humor coming from the experience of the forest. A favorite contest was to see who could tell the biggest lie, and the seringueiros stood in line to tell yarn after hilarious yarn. The songs were generally written by the participants, reflecting their culture and struggles. The theme-song of the conference became the following ode to the value of rubber tappers:

Let's give value to the seringueiro/Let's give value, this nation
Since with the work of these people/they make tires of cars and airplanes

They made sandals, made slippers/made boots that the snake can't bite
So much of rubber, I can't explain/I found a piece in my pressure cooker.

The theme of the value of rubber tappers carried over to the speeches:

When we hear talk of rubber tappers, we think that the seringueiro is only a worker who serves to work. But no one remembers that the seringueiro is the support of this nation! He sustains thousands and thousands of people, who survive by our sweat and blood. Hundreds of people gain just with our ideas! These people, this government, don't understand that without us the nation has no progress.

The first two days were spent in small group discussions about the conditions of life and work in each region. These discussions had a dual purpose. The first was to compare situations in different regions of Amazônia, since most seringueiros rarely leave their rubber-tapping locations deep in the forest. I described many of their accounts in my last letter. I was impressed by the diversity of experiences, although common themes kept arising: difficulties in the production and sale of rubber, deforestation and violent land conflicts, as well as experiments in the organization of unions, cooperatives, education and health projects.

The second methodological objective was to help even the most timid delegates overcome their reticence and express in their own voices the struggles of their particular communities. An important concept of popular education is the need for the poor to emerge from the "culture of silence" imposed by dominant society and re-affirm their own knowledge and culture. Observers were asked to absent themselves from these discussions, to avoid the tendency of participants either to remain silent in embarrassment at their poor speaking ability or else modify their discourse in accord with what they think the more educated listeners want to hear. In most cases the groups were too clumsy to reach what could be called group conclusions, but they did serve the pedagogic purpose of giving everyone a chance to speak, no matter how rambling or confused or emotional were the attempts at articulation.

Listening to their accounts, which were recorded on tape, one catches both the immediacy of their experiences and the ideological evolution of the explanations they have grasped. Some participants gave dramatic descriptions of deforestation and violence:

I'm a seringueiro. I work in the Rio Perus, on the Seringal Cachoerinha. Where we live, we are surrounded by fazendeiros (farmers). They have already cut down five thousand hectares. They have destroyed two rubber groves, soon it will be three. The nut groves are all cut down. They say they will cut down a thousand more hectares this year. And so we are planning to have an empate* so as to stop the cutting of any more trees. If they finish with the rubber trees, they finish with us.

In the area where we live we suffer many threats of violence. I have seen my brother seringueiros beaten up by some boss, and when they try to complain they are jailed, thrown in the road dead, shot by the revolver of some policeman. All this because the seringueiro does not always have the conditions to be up to date in his debts. Thank God we have the union, defending us at least in part. But the farmers have threatened to explode a bomb in the house of our union delegate. They ask the seringueiros to disoccupy the land, but we are holding firm to never leave our areas. We are in this struggle until the end, and if we need to die for the struggle, I think it is not too much.

One can see different levels of political understanding in the accounts of the following two Indian delegates. The first defines the struggle in terms of an immediate problem, the sore teeth of his companions. The second, a veteran of the fight for indigenous reserves, perceives the longer process:

I was invited to participate in this encounter with my friends here, because of this business of education and health, which is lacking in our area. I go all over looking for help, because there are a lot of Indians there with toothache.

It's a struggle that has no end. We thought if we resolved the problem of land demarcation, everything would be resolved. But it's not resolved! Today the Indians are fighting to find some organizations to help them govern their land for themselves. Help them to have health agents within their area. Help them to have teachers from the forest. The land is guaranteed, but where are the conditions to occupy that land? It seems that it is a struggle that goes on for one's whole life.

 * an empate, or "stand-off", is a strategy used to impede deforestation. Seringueiros and their families form a human barrier to block saws and bulldozers. Over 45 empates have occurred in Acre since 1976 (see AEM-16).

In other discourses one could hear more explicit, if widely-flung, criticisms of government and the economic system, with a beginning analysis of the class struggle and the socialist utopia:

My name is Manoel Conceição. I'm not good at talking, because we don't have the custom. Companheiros, we are disposed to enter this struggle with you and go until the end. Sincerely, one gets revolted at the great violence existing in our country. There are still authorities who complain that other nations want to internationalize Amazônia. But we are already sold to the foreigners, and this comes from the irresponsibility of the government we have in power! Prepare yourselves, because soon is coming another election. Is it possible that once again we will be led by handouts to put people in power who will fight against us! The power is of the people, but unfortunately when the worker arrives at the door of the palace in Brasília, the police are there to beat up or even kill the worker who goes to demand his rights!

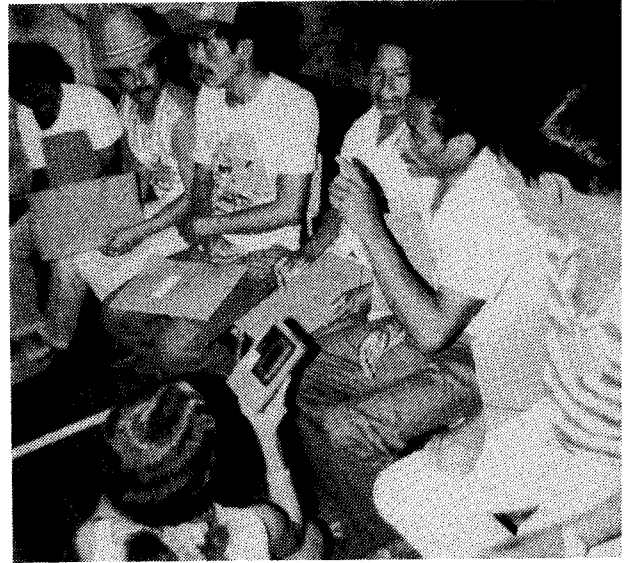
I'm from the union of rural workers in the city of Apuá, state of Pará. It is with much satisfaction that I am here together with my companheiros to discuss the question, which is all of ours, of the people of the forest, the question of the seringueiros. And to fight so that one day we liberate ourselves, that we succeed in reaching our ideal, of all of these people free, without exploited and exploiters.

The UDR* is the organization of the latifundiarios (large landholders) to impede the advance of the companheiros of the forest. Our struggle has one objective, which is of the workers: we will be the dominant class, we will one day take power. Instead of staying dominated by these fellows, persecuted, we fight to put the workers in power.

It is interesting to take a look at the ideological postures taken by these last three speakers. The first speaks in terms of going to Brasília to "demand his rights". The early steps in political consciousness often take this form; the political system in itself isn't questioned, but rather the failure of the system to do what it promised. As this speaker says, the problem is the "irresponsibility" of the government. The second discourse goes a step further, talking of the need to "liberate ourselves" to create a just society, without oppression. One can bet that this fellow received his political formation within the church, where most of the utopian imagery of popular education has its roots. The ideal is vague enough and happy enough to be safe; the lion lies down with the lamb and the conflict is resolved. With the exception of the most radical wing of liberation theology, most church pastoral workers preach "social justice" without treading into the politically dangerous concept of class struggle or the suggestion of violence. The third speaker goes beyond the limits of the church by stating clearly that the goal is the taking of power by the workers (by implication, a socialist revolution.) He has clearly had experience within the labor movement and the political parties, most likely the PT. His terms are more ideologically unified than the the patchwork quilt of the first, who spun together opinions and ideological fragments in the spontaneous fashion of political novices.

These quotes indicate the dynamic nature of popular education. Far from offering a packaged product called "political consciousness", it puts in motion a personal process of grappling with one's experience and arriving at explanations, which continue to evolve as one goes past the early euphoric stages of singing the value of seringueiros. But when one starts moving into

* The UDR (Democratic Ruralist Union) is an association formed to defend rural landholders from land reform attempts. It has gained strength since 1985. In many regions, members are accused of violence against rural workers.



In groups, seringueiro and Indian delegates talk about their difficulties with life and work in the forest.

more advanced ideological areas, things get more complicated. One starts to enter into the multiple subtle distinctions about what socialism is and how one arrives there, distinctions that form the basis of the fractioning of the left into innumerable "tendencies", something most political novices among the seringueiros would have a hard time understanding. For many, the novelty was simply discovering courage and conviction to overcome one's fear of the boss and the police and defend one's right to make a decent living.

Political dispute

Neither the public relations show nor the sessions of popular education happened spontaneously. A third subconference consisted of the backstage planning, debate, and at times, political dispute among the various organizations and people that make up the leadership of the movement. Twenty different organizations signed the list of sponsors, including ten unions or labor associations, the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT) of the Catholic church, the Pro-Indian Commission (CPI), the Center for the Defense of Human Rights, several research and professional associations and the Federal University of Acre. While the leadership of the movement contained bona-fide seringueiros who had emerged as spokesmen for their companheiros, it also drew on educators, researchers and intellectuals from the above groups. But as I said, the left is ridden by internal divisions and factions, which confronted each other in more or less clouded fashion in the backstage meetings.

What was at stake was not just the election of new leadership for the National Council of Seringueiros (CNS), but the future political direction of the movement, now that Chico Mendes was no longer there to serve as principal idealizer and spokesman. Should it, for example, strengthen the aspect of class confrontation, as part of the road to a socialist revolution? Or should it take on a more exclusively ecological line, leaving the class conflict behind? These are two extremes, but they give an idea of the range of postures that can be taken by people who consider themselves progressive. Outside of these broad ideological questions, which generally remained hidden behind more technical issues, there was a great deal of delicate maneuvering over such issues as the relationship of the movement to the political parties, the labor associations, the church, funding organizations, government agencies and other institutions.

I was not able to get a clear understanding of the subtleties of internal debate, since I only stayed for the beginning of the conference when discussion was about methodology and not resolutions. Things heated up in the last few days, when election of the new directing board of the CNS almost ended up in a dispute between two opposing chapas (slates of candidates) rather than the much preferable chapa única, which would guarantee consensus. At the last minute an accord was reached in an appeal to the importance of unity following the death of Chico Mendes, and the two chapas were negotiated into one. A potentially dangerous split was avoided, but as far as I could sense, the tension remains.

An alert about the sectarianism of the left was raised by ex-rector of the Federal University of Acre, Moacyr Fecury, a sympathizer of the movement in defense of the forest. He worried that ecological policy in Brazil is turning into the domain of the unions and the political parties. "We have to avoid at all costs that ecological policy turns into a fight of activist minorities, divided by disputes between internal factions." He qualified this by recognizing "the fundamental role of segments of the seringueiros and the union of rural workers in sensitizing public opinion on the ecological question." But he insisted that "neither union nor party are substitutes for a definitive policy for the environment in Amazônia, which should be a function of the state."

The problem, he repeated, was the government's absence from the discussion. "If today the unions, political parties, and international community have interfered in our internal problems, it is a natural consequence of the omission of government, which has pushed this question on its stomach for years." He recognized that the assassination of Chico Mendes had raised the level of discussion of Amazônia in Brazil and in the world. "But if this isn't well-capitalized on a national level, involving the government, it will end up falling in emptiness, turning fashion. It won't do to keep going to Washington to receive medals. The moment is good to involve the government, which is being goaded, obligated to assume its commitments."

* * *

Fecury's observation is well-founded; the movement in defense of Amazônia has fallen to civil society because of the government's failure to take steps of its own toward establishing a rational development policy for the region. This is something even representatives of the government admit, even while they denounce supposed foreign plots to "internationalize" Amazônia. But Fecury's alert points to a deeper question: what should be the role of civil society in the determination of national policy? Looking more closely at Fecury's terminology, are the unions, political parties, and environmental groups "interfering" in "internal problems"? Does this mean that such non-governmental groups are "external", that is, excluded from the decision-making process? Or do these entities have a legitimate role in policy-making within a country which is trying to become a democracy?

One can extend these questions to what is happening in the ecological debate at a world level. If in Brazil the government is losing ground to civil society, in Europe it appears the opposite is happening. Ecology is "turning fashion" not just among pop singers and social activists, but among government leaders, who since the beginning of the year have showed a startling eagerness to prove themselves defenders of the planet. In March Margaret Thatcher called an international meeting to discuss reduction of Fluorocarbons released by industry, for which England is prepared to sell the technology. A week later, the governments of France and Norway convoked an encounter at The Hague with 24 countries, in which Mitterand declared that the resolution of global environmental problems requires "a certain renunciation

of sovereignty on the part of some countries" In February, George Bush warned prime minister Takeshita of Japan against financing projects in Brazil potentially destructive to the Amazon Forest. The sudden greening of Western leaders led the Paris correspondent of the Folha de São Paulo, Caio Título Costas, to comment that the environmental banner was being "stolen" by governments from the green movements. "The preservation campaign of the Green Parties has been reduced to dust by the government machines of the First World. Whether the objectives are healthy is another question."

The Brazilian government has been the first to shout, or more often, to whine, that the objectives are not healthy. President José Sarney has denounced the clamor over Amazônia as at best, hypocrisy, and at worse, a conspiracy by the First World to rob Brazil's sovereignty over Amazônia, impede Brazil's economic development and gain access to the region's mineral wealth. For Sarney, the discussion of Amazônia "is a science fiction that has begun to mess with people's heads." He has declared his refusal to let Amazônia become "a green Persian Gulf", insisting that "those most responsible for the environmental disequilibrium, for the heating of the atmosphere and for the reduction of the ozone layer, are the industrialized countries."

If Sarney has caught the leaders of the North in an apparent hypocrisy, his critics in Brazil have been quick to turn that irony back on him. Liszt Viera, the vice-president of the PV, commented, "It's curious to observe that the protests over the attempts to internationalize Amazônia are coming from those who were always associated with the internationalization of the Brazilian economy." According to Liszt, the government's protests are "an ideological appeal to the nationalism of sectors of the opposition and the left in general." The appeal is not working; even the seringueiro I quoted earlier could look at the devastation by foreign companies in Amazônia and declare "we are already sold to the foreigners."

A closer look suggests that the great confusion over control of Amazônia lies in who one means when one talks of internationalization. The North is not a uniform block, as anti-imperialists are prone to believe. At least three distinct parties are involved: foreign governments (Sarney's target of criticism), multinational corporations with investments in Amazônia (the target of the left), and the citizen-run environmental movements in Europe and the United States that denounced the devastation of Amazônia long before it entered the conscience of the first two. One must look at the interaction of these three forces to understand the struggle of interests in Amazônia.

In the case of government leaders, one can make some legitimate criticisms that go beyond Sarney's pseudo-nationalistic hysteria. As a correspondent of the Folha wrote, "ecology is one of the only matters of the Third World that today interests the First World." The interest is long in coming and not to be rejected; but on the other hand, conveniently superficial. Sarney felt frustrated with his meeting with Bush and others in Japan because no one wanted to hear about his proposals for improved trade relations. "What are you doing about your rain forest?" was all he heard from every side. The correct answer that Sarney couldn't openly give was "very nearly nothing". But by shaking its finger at Brazil, the North avoids confronting the question of how the structural imbalances of the international economic system fuel the predatory development patterns of the Third World. As ecologist Fernando Gabeira wrote, "the statesmen limit themselves to artificial repairs and don't examine the profundity of the changes the preservation of the environment is imposing."

Those who are beginning to examine these changes in greater depth are the North American and especially the European green movements. Here it is civil society, and not governments, which are extending the ecological debate to

wider economic and social questions. Representatives from 150 organizations participated in the non-governmental "counter-congress" held in Berlin last September during the meeting of the IMF and the World Bank. At the accompanying "International Civil Conference on the World Bank, Environment, and Indigenous Peoples", participants debated the connection between international economic structure, principally the Third World Debt, and ecological problems. Among the star participants were Brazilian indigenous leaders and representatives of the seringueiros - and this four months before the assassination of Chico Mendes. The final document of the counter-congress criticized World Bank and the IMF for supporting the exploitation and oppression maintained by "our international capitalist economic order" and declared "our 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, by pop artists, they have at least forced the European Greens to recognize that ecology goes deeper than protecting trees.

Of course, this mobilization of civil society only evoked a reaction from the Brazilian government when it began to influence the center of economic power: in this case, the international lending institutions on which Brazil depends for its development projects. The Berlin counter-congress had repercussions at the meeting of the World Bank, which was beginning to tune its ears to the environmental effects of the developmental projects it was funding in the Third World. In 1987, over the protests of Brazil's credit negotiators, Chico Mendes was invited to testify on the destructive effects of the interstate road, BR-364, which had brought heavy colonization and deforestation projects to the state of Rondônia. Chico argued that the same would happen as the road passed through Acre to Peru, resulting in further forest burnings and expulsion of seringueiros. As a result of the testimony of Chico Mendes and other environmentalists, the Inter-american Development Bank suspended financing for the road, and other infra-structure projects were put on hold until the government could come up with a convincing plan of action for the protection of the forest and Amazon populations.

The cosmetic response of the Brazilian government to the pressures of the World Bank has been the new project, "Nossa Natureza" (Our Nature), launched last April after six months of preparation. The program's title shows its nationalistic appeal, designed to conquer public sympathy as well as thumbing its nose at foreign "interference". The project includes the creation of four national parks or forest reserves, regulations for use of agro-toxics and for the exploitation of wood and minerals, and a plan to combat forest burnings. It also creates a new organ, the Superior Council on the Environment, composed of representatives of each of the government ministries. The council has been strongly criticized for its exclusion of civil scientists and environmental groups. And the fact that the project was elaborated in the military cabinet with no consultation of the scientific or environmental community, much less the population of Amazônia, has led critics to denounce the project as evidence of the growing "militarization" of Amazon policy.

The military interest in Amazônia was evident long before the current fuss about "internationalization". In 1985 the government created the program "Calha Norte", with the purpose of installing a military presence on the northern border. Although the project tried to woo the local population with promises of infra-structure such as roads and energy, health and sanitation programs and commerce with border countries, its strategic goal was to affirm national sovereignty over Brazil's Amazon territory. The occupying soldiers came into conflict with indigenous communities who saw the occupation as violating hard-fought land demarcations. The movement of seringueiros also positioned itself against the project, seeing its real goal as providing security and infra-structure for the continued entrance of farmers into the

region. Last July the government announced a complementary project for the western border, passing through the states of Acre, Amazonas, Rondônia, and Mato Grosso. This new project, called PROFFAÇO (Program for the Development of the Border Area of Western Amazônia), is coordinated by SADEN (Secretary for National Defense) directed by General Rubens Bayma Denys, the same general responsible for the elaboration of "Nossa Natureza".

According to General Leonidas Pires Gonçalves, Brazil's army minister and military chief, the Armed Forces want to prevent "two things we consider malign and prejudicial: devastation and untouchability." This dichotomy shows how far the government's military advisors are from the discussion within the environmental movement. Almost no one now defends "untouchability". I recently went to a debate in which a distinction was made between old style "preservationists", who see no compatibility between nature and humans and want to create "pure" nature reserves, and the up-to-date "conservationists", who speak in terms of "sustainable development" and the rational, non-predatory exploitation of natural resources. The seringueiros would clearly be in the latter category. Their proposal for the creation of "extractive reserves" run by rubber-tapping cooperatives (see AEM-16) has attracted international attention precisely because it attempts to combine preservation of the forest with alternative economic development.

The major short-coming of "Nossa Natureza" is its complete side-stepping of the need for a sustainable development policy for Amazonia. The government seems to think it has resolved the problem by creating a few national parks. The proposal for extractive reserves is not mentioned, nor the urgent, related questions of land expropriation and the accurate mapping of regional soil types, vegetation and native populations, an imperative first step in reversing the current disordered, predatory occupation of the region. At most, the project presents a collection of restrictions and bureaucratic regulations that run the risk of entering the Brazilian tradition of "laws that don't stick." The risk is greater considering the scanty resources destined for the newly created Institute for the Environment and Renewable Resources (IBAMA), which doesn't even have a helicopter of its own to inspect forest burnings. The director of IBAMA, a close aide of Sarney, has estimated that with 2000 forest guards, burnings in Amazônia could be brought under control. The agency currently has 50, and is without funds to contract more.

The only surprise of "Nossa Natureza" is the government's first admission that it may study plans to convert the external debt into funds for environmental protection. Previously Sarney had vehemently refused to discuss such proposals, calling them an affront to national sovereignty. But the idea caught the imagination of politicians, environmentalists and public opinion worldwide, with its apparent happy ending in which two world crises are attacked with one stone. According to the proposals, small parcels of Brazil's debt would be purchased on the secondary market by international environmental groups, which would then either pardon the debt in exchange for government investment in preservation programs, or collect payment of the debt in local currency and put the money in a foundation administered by world environmental agencies.

As it turned out, it wasn't the principle of debt-conversion that worried the government, but rather the idea of a foundation controlled by civil society, and especially, by international environmental organizations. An alternative proposal for a foundation controlled by Brazilians was equally rejected. "Nothing of private foundations," snapped General Leonidas. "This country has a government, and who commands in this country is the government." The only conversion proposals Sarney admits considering are those in which environmental funding passes strictly through government hands, no strings attached. Any outside control is seen as threatening national sovereignty.

One must ask why the government has positioned itself so firmly against the participation of civil society, national or international, in environmental policy, especially since it itself has advanced so little towards a coherent development project for Amazônia. If the government isn't interested in sustainable development, what are its interests? Three possibilities come to mind. One is that it is committed to protecting financial investments of multinationals in the region, investments the government has subsidized since the military period. If so, Sarney's nationalistic discourse is pure hypocrisy. Another is that the government shares the vision of the region's farmers and cattle ranchers, that Amazônia will become the "granary of humanity" with the help of highly-mechanized agricultural technology. Besides being ecologically unrealistic due to the poor quality of Amazonian soil once deforested, the plan would intensify land and labor conflicts, since agro-business depends on concentration of land, throwing small cultivators out of work. The third possibility is that the real strategic interest in Amazônia is not farming at all, but rather the immense mineral deposits rumored to be beneath the soil. In that case it becomes imperative that neither foreign governments nor environmental groups gain the right to call the cards in Amazônia.

Unfortunately, the international lenders have let themselves be convinced by the surface remedies of "Nossa Natureza". The World Bank announced in July the approval of a loan of US\$ 8 million for the prevention of forest burnings, while the Inter-american Development Bank has re-initiated funding for the pavement of BR-364. Of course, both have conditioned funding on the Brazil's compliance of its proposals for environmental protection. But the request of the seringueiro and indigenous movements, that the road not be completed before the legal determination of extractive and indigenous reserves, was not attended. This leads one to ask whether the environmental concerns of the lending institutions aren't essentially cosmetic, or at least, one-dimensional. Like most government leaders, the banks have shown little interest in addressing the deeper social conflicts of the region.

For their part, the seringueiros have stopped waiting for help from governments or financial institutions. From their history of head-batting with government agencies they have concluded that their only source of financial and technical assistance is civil society, both within and outside of 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. As Fecury pointed out, they have simply moved into the vacuum of government thought and action in the ecological field, because like Chico Mendes and the seringueiros, they have taken it upon themselves to think and act.

Still, Fecury is right in warning that mobilization of civil society is not enough. Social movements can protest government action or inaction, formulate proposals, pressure for implementation, but they remain in a certain sense 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 assassination he was discussing with the Inter-american Development Bank a plan for the extensive implantation of extractive reserves. But the Banks deal ultimately with governments and not citizens, and the extractive reserves require the legal intervention of government to expropriate land and grant concessions of land use to cooperatives. For whatever its motives, Sarney's administration has not shown itself disposed to facilitate such projects, nor to open official channels for the participation of the population of Amazônia in the region's planning. The result is that civil society - in this case, the seringueiros, Indians, and international organizations in solidarity - is pitted against the state, rather than taking a constructive role within what should be a democracy.

Some final thoughts on ecology and the left

Before closing this letter I want to return to the question of why the movement of seringueiros has been so celebrated by the left. One hears a certain tone of exaltation, perhaps even in my own descriptions of the movement, which points to the ideological hopes and possible illusions of middle class activists and intellectuals who consider themselves socialist. The seringueiros intrigue the left because in a certain sense, they justify it. At last, it is visibly "the workers" who have taken the lead in the ecological struggle, turning the bourgeois hymn, "salve nosso verde" (save our green), into a revolutionary chorus. As a result, one sees a growing attempt to re-define the ecological movement within the ideology of class struggle.

To be sure, this process began before the rise to fame of Chico Mendes. Within the ecological movement there exists a sub-group of "eco-socialists" who link environmental devastation with imperialist exploitation, but they remained a little-known minority. Only now, with the growing attention to the seringueiros, has this group gained expression within the movement. Suddenly, it seems, they are proved right. But for me, the flesh-and-bones experience of the seringueiros raises as many questions about classical marxist analysis as classical marxism answers about the seringueiros.

Up until now, the left has had a hard time accepting ecology as a worthy banner because of an ideological knot: how does one combine the ideal of a revolution of the proletariat with a movement that everywhere on the globe has been a middle class phenomenon? On a theoretical level, the difficulty is not so hard to resolve. I read a 1978 article on "Ecology and Marxism" by the French theorist, André Durand, which took as its starting point the capitalist relationship to technology. Under capitalism, the environment is devastated in accord with the drive for profit. A socialist government would, on the other hand, use technology in accord with the interests of humanity, preserving the earth's eco-systems through planned, rational development. His conclusion: ecology "is a problem that is not limited to the working class - it interests a much larger sector - but it is only the working class that can re-take the struggle and carry it to its end." The workers "should take the forefront of the fight against the destruction of the principal capital of humanity, the terrestrial eco-system, explaining that this struggle cannot be victorious without the victory of the world socialist revolution."

I am bothered by the assertion, "only the working class", and I don't think that's because I'm a bourgeois. My problem here is not the historical question of whether socialist governments have in fact achieved a more rational use of technology (look at Chernobyl!); die-hards can answer by saying "genuine" socialism does not yet exist anywhere on the planet. I am bothered rather by the marxist tendency to turn "the workers", like the imperialists, into a uniform and thus abstract block that makes it impossible to grasp the process of social change. It becomes almost magic: the workers, by an innate superiority, will somehow know better than the capitalist imperialists how to produce without destroying nature.

What's missing is some indication as to why the workers would want to enter the ecological struggle. The banner "rational use of technology" is too abstract to be adopted by the working class, at least not without something else to give it immediacy. My concern is methodological rather than scientific; of course ecology "interests" the workers, speaking universally. But a characteristic (and a difficulty) of popular movements is that workers only become mobilized when their livelihood is directly threatened (i.e., not because of romantic revolutionary theories, nor because of scientific appeals.) The concern with preserving the planet for one's grandchildren requires a degree of abstraction from daily life that generally comes only

when one has conquered the fight for housing, for health care, for schools, for employment and buying power. That's why the environmental movement was born a middle class phenomenon, and that's why it has been so easy to maintain the division between marxist social criticism and the ecological vision.

What is fascinating about the movement of seringueiros is that on the initiative not of marxist scholars, but of exploited workers, the division has been broken down. It was broken down not because of an abstract concept, but because of an immediate, skin-felt threat to the livelihood of those who live and work in the forest. What happened in Amazônia was the dramatic convergence of intense economic exploitation, violent land conflicts, and environmental devastation. For the seringueiros, awareness of the planetary importance of Amazônia came only later, when Chico Mendes discovered that his objectives as a union leader coincided with those of world environmentalists, and began a campaign to carry this awareness to his companheiros.

The danger lies in seeing a marxist determinism in this. To my mind, a more accurate description of the seringueiros is not "only the workers", but rather, finally the workers. Finally, a convergence of historical circumstance has made clear a connection that always existed between the exploitation of nature and of human labor. As I heard a member of the PV say in a debate on "Ecology and Capitalism", it is not coincidental that the challenge to the political complacency of the environmental movement has come from the organization of poor forest workers. "The classes that are becoming conscious that they are victimized by the exploitation of nature-capital are exactly the classes most victimized by capitalist exploitation."

According to this debater, "the destruction of the environment begins with social disequilibrium, with divisions of classes." The ecological movement cannot any more keep its distance from the question of social justice and global economic imbalances. "The movement is recognizing that ecological reform depends on many other reforms: the fight for social equilibrium, for just distribution of wealth, for industrial planning, for land reform, for social and political democracy. We must see ecology as meaning a new type of economic development, which would be cooperativist, non-consumist, integrated with the environment, participative, democratic, and communitarian. We must make the product life the principle product of the economy."

What is emerging here is not only a new definition of ecology, but also a new definition of socialism. Fernando Gabeira made this clear when he was campaigning within the PT to become Lula's vice. "Bureaucratic socialism, with one party, the vertical state, anti-democratic, is a socialism that does not interest us. The amplifying of social and individual liberties does not depend necessarily on the expansion of the state." This discourse led some orthodox marxist-leninist tendencies within the PT to denounce Gabeira as "social-democratic", but Gabeira was quick to respond that neither did "we want the strong state of bourgeois society." The new vision of socialism is decentralized, unbureaucratic, democratic, and with a strong participation of civil society. This socialism a-la-Gorbachev and the Greens has threatened to send a renovating pulse through the left. Unfortunately it was cut short by the lack of electoral courage of the PT and its allies.

Even so, it's clear that the seringueiros are teaching the left an important lesson. A future question is whether this new ecological-economic consciousness will permeate other areas of the working population, especially when the integration of environmental, land and labor disputes is not so explicit as in Amazônia. Will organizers of urban movements for housing, health, education, transportation, employment, begin to perceive and present these movements as aspects of "ecology"? And will the inhabitants of favelas and working-class neighborhoods be able to make this connection?

I'll close by describing one experience in São Paulo in which the division between ecology and the popular movements is breaking down. In the region of Itaquera, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the Zona Leste (eastern zone), the community organized a movement to save a green area of six million square meters called the Parque do Carmo. The park consists partly of recreational area and partly of native Atlantic forest growth, fast disappearing to the dismay of ecologists. But in 1985 when the state government installed a trash deposit, it was not environmentalists who mobilized to save the park, but local inhabitants, who considered the park essential to the quality of life of that dusty, cement-block working-class region. Although the Zona Leste is the largest and most densely populated section of the city, it contains only two of the city's three dozen parks.

The movement "S.O.S. Mata do Carmo" organized a camp-in at the location of the trash deposit, together with the church base communities and the housing and health movements, already strong in the area. Over 2000 people passed through the site in the 18 days of the camp-in, after which the deposit was deactivated. But a further threat came when the governor proposed cutting down part of the park to build low income-housing projects. The governor hoped to dissolve the movement with this proposal, since the housing needs in the region are acute and the favelas growing. But the movement stayed firm; "we want housing and green too" read the banners on a hike-protest through the park, attracting swarms of the region's children. The movement pointed to the huge vacant areas in 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 succeeded in seeing passed (over the governor's veto) a bill by Rep. Roberto Gouveia of the PT, declaring the park an area of environmental protection.

During the movement's peak last year, I participated in several protest-hikes and talked with organizers, almost all of them militants of the PT and/or activists of the church base communities. What impressed me at that time (and this was before the death of Chico Mendes) was the newness of the concept of ecology for them and their excitement that this too was part of the "struggle for socialism". Improved living conditions for workers also meant their access to nature and to recreation, making necessary the fight to prevent this basic right from becoming a privilege of the elite. Ecology meant not only "saving our green", but defending the quality of life of the working population. As Rep. Roberto Gouveia wrote in his defense of the protective legislation, "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 parcels of the population are committed to the defense of life."

I mention this movement to show once again that ecology in Brazil is coming, slowly, to mean much more than protecting trees. Given this ferment in the Brazilian ecological debate, it becomes even more disappointing that the PT missed the chance, with Gabeira as Lula's running mate, to deepen the integration of ecology and the left and widen the penetration of this discussion in Brazilian society. Hopefully, this time Brazil won't have to wait 27 years for another such chance.

Um abraço,

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