The Politics of Amazonian Conservation:
The Struggles of Rubber Tappers

Introduction

This article is a reflection on the Amazonian rubber tappers’ movement. The Amazonian rubber tappers are the actors in a social movement that they started as a marginal group claiming land rights and ultimately succeeded in establishing “extractive reserves,” an innovative use of land for conservation and sustainable development.¹ Until the 1980s, they were virtually invisible even in the regional scene; in the 1990s, they have become exemplary of grassroots participation in sustainable development.

How was this transition possible? I will try to answer the question by narrating a series of actions which took place at the local level, on a transnational stage, and in the regional setting which links the other two. Three figures will lead each of these narratives: Chico Ginú, the rubber tapper and local trade unionist, Chico Mendes, the regional leader and environmental activist, and

abstract

The social movement of the Amazonian rubber tappers started as a marginal group which initially claimed land rights, and ultimately succeeded in establishing “extractive reserves,” territories designed for the sustainable use of traditional populations under the Brazilian system of nature conservation. In short, they became exemplary of grassroots participation in sustainable development. I try to show in this article how this transition was possible by narrating a series of political actions taking place at the local and national levels, as well as at the regional setting which links both. With these narratives, I will try account for the way local action and beliefs interact with wider powers and worldviews, in a “combined and uneven development.”
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Antonio Macedo, the charismatic organizer who connected Gintli and Mendes. Other actors were governments, multilateral banks, trade unions, non-governmental organizations and anthropologists, in a juncture which may narrated from the beginning of the Bruntland commission's work in 1982 to the Rio summit in 1992. They were also Amazonian anonymous rubber tappers, in a drama that reached a peak during the “burning season” of 1988, in which the rubber tappers' leader, Chico Mendes, was murdered by ranchers.

The transition, which brings attention to issues of marginality and possibilities of overcoming it, demanded changes in agenda, identity and methods. It took place as a series of conflicts and strategies on a scene which moved the actors from obscure rivers to the nation, and from there to the world, and then back again to the local conflicts. I will narrate these conflicts and strategies, which may help to account for the way local action and belief systems interacted with external powers and institutions.

resumo

O movimento social dos seringueiros iniciou-se a partir de um grupo à margem da sociedade brasileira que reivindicava inicialmente direitos fundiários e conseguiu finalmente criar as “reservas extrativistas”, territórios destinados ao uso sustentável de populações tradicionais dentro do sistema brasileiro de unidades de conservação. Tornaram-se em suma exemplos de participação popular no desenvolvimento sustentável. Neste artigo, procuro mostrar como essa transição foi possível, contando uma série de ações políticas que ocorreram no plano local e no nível internacional, bem como na arena regional que os interliga. Com essas narrativas, procuro explicar como as ações e crenças locais interagem com o poder e com visões de mundo globais, em um desenvolvimento “desigual e combinado”.
in a “combined and uneven development,” “by which we mean a drawing
together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps,
an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (Trotsky 1967:23).3

The case of the rubber tappers’ movement, indeed, illustrates possibilities
for creative political action in the periphery which results from the complex-
ity of a global society in which backward and modern, margin and center
combine to each other in a complex and unplanned way.

The overall story has been told many times, but it is worthwhile to men-
tion some of the lessons that have been extracted from it.4 First, the rubber
tappers’ case has been presented as an instance in which the interests of a
marginal social group coincided with the general interests of the society,5 and
the “forest people” strategies became paradigmatic in the later “ecological re-
sistance movements” literature.6 However, some unsympathetic observers have
suggested that “forest people” such as the peasant rubber tappers simply lacked
the opportunity to live elsewhere than in the forest, and thus lived in a situ-
tion of involuntary marginality; according to this view, their first priority
should be overcoming poverty and not protecting biodiversity.7 Other skepti-
cal arguments have suggested that the claims of rubber tappers were, on the
other hand, socially unfair, since they demanded too much forestland per
capita. Some have argued that the rubber tappers’ activity was economically
unfeasible, since “extraction”—which in this context means tapping the latex
of wild trees in tropical forests, as opposed to cultivating trees in plantations—
is said to be non-competitive as compared to “production.” It has also been
said that “extractive” activity is in any case environmentally disruptive: after
all, “extraction” means using natural resources (from minerals, plants, or an-
imals) without replacing them. The very idea of an “extractive economy” thus
has had a predatory connotation and suggested a lack of husbandry and of
investment in the future. Finally, in another view of this situation, a conspira-
torial objection has implied that the attention drawn to extractive reserves
conceals hidden interests from rich countries in preventing resource-rich coun-
tries from developing their land.8

These conflicting arguments have resulted, in my view, from the very
success of a claim made by rubber tappers against the state and the world.
They claimed large forest territories to use under traditional management sys-
tems and as collective property; the relative success of this claim contradicts
some academic opinion on the role of marginal groups and minorities in
global events.

Anna Tsing (1993), in a book on the Dayak of Kalimantan, has suggested
that marginality is at the same time an effect of central power policy and a
resistance strategy against a developmentalist discourse. In the margins, we
are told, resistance can take the form of a discursive parody of developmental
discourse, so that even through mimicking the dominant authorities, people keep themselves removed from it. The rubber tappers of Amazonia, another instance of "marginality in an out-of-the-way place," to use Tsing's apt expression, illustrate a very different strategy: one of transition from marginality to centrality, and from invisibility to over-visibility; but also a strategy in which discourse is taken seriously as an effective means for changing deep-seated realities of land ownership and the distribution of wealth. Rubber tapper leaders use a complex discourse (regarding community, government, and the environment) not as parody, but to act effectively to redefine marginality through the construction of a public space where they, as "forest people," may live with recognized rights.

On the other hand, it is suggested (Escobar 1995) that while marginal populations seem to obtain recognition for their rights over territory in resource-rich landscapes, this may be merely an appearance, in fact resulting from cunning strategies by world powers which have recently tried to integrate marginal groups as cheap managers of biodiversity reserves. If we accept this, then the arguments for landscape management by "forest people" become a mere component of hegemonic discourse which takes hold of marginalized subjectivities to put them at the service of a new world order.

The differing views of Tsing and Escobar imply that either "marginal" populations are indeed marginal to the global order or they are manipulated by external agencies, and there is no space left for a social creativity more effective than purely symbolic protest. It is true that Escobar suggests another possibility—the emergence of hybrid cultures assembled from fragments of local and global cultures, renouncing cultural "purity" but gaining the capacity to deal with diversified symbolic systems (cf. Cane1ini 1998; Bhabha 1994; also Escobar 1996). However, for Escobar (1995), this possibility seems to still hinge on the ability of communities to generate local experiences revealed and articulated by the ethnographic account as alternatives. He does not consider the possibility that the marginal groups themselves enter into the negotiation of wider policies and programs (as if they were doomed to fall prey to domination when transcending their immediate vicinity).

Schmink and Wood (1992), commenting on the relative success of rubber tappers' in the implementation of the extractive reserves, indicate that the complexity of world conjunctures creates opportunities for local groups to advance their own agendas in unpredictable ways. I align with this view, in which conflicts at the global, national and regional levels, as they lead to changes by jumps and reversals, allow a space for the self-organizing activity of local groups. As a consequence, the question is not how to deduce an inevitable historical fate—such as the aggressive expansion of capitalism and of hegemonic discourses in the periphery—but, rather, what will actually happen in
a particular struggle involving a particular historical subject. Hence, there might be a space of freedom where conflicting actions and conflicting views may lead to negotiations which allow for alternative orders. These alternative orders are thus not first produced within the boundaries of local communities, but are constructed, rather, as outcomes of negotiation among voices representing both these communities and external powers. The result is new events on the world scene which only in retrospect appear obvious and predictable.9

Amazonia, in the early seventies, seemed to follow a reasonably clear path, at the same time disastrous and inevitable: a predictable plot of modernization supported by an ideological agenda of the occupation of “empty spaces,” and by a combination of a national-militarist dictatorship and dominant classes eager for fast frontier profits. Funded by a rapidly expanding economy and by external banking, made irreversible by vast roads, dams and mining projects, and accompanied by seemingly irresistible changes to the old structures of land and labor use, this scenario combined original capital accumulation (in the Marxist sense) and the frontier phenomenon.10

From this followed the supposedly inevitable destruction of Indians and of the Amazonian peasantry, from rubber tappers to açaí palm gatherers to fishermen. New actors gained prominence in the public discourse: the immigrant farmers who were rushing after free land, the miners who looked for fast gold from rivers, the ranchers who tried to grab subsidized latifundia, the foreign entrepreneurs such as Daniel Ludwig who tried to implant modernist industries in the forest. While the Indians were seen as doomed victims of economic development, the peasants of the forest, including rubber tappers, simply did not exist in either official or in academic literature.11

History did not develop as it was thought in the early seventies, however. Of course the Brazilian state has not abandoned the developmentalist agenda, but rubber tappers became very visible in law and in public parlance and many of them managed to win the right to stay put in land previously defined as the private property of large companies and now converted into extractive reserves.12 And although suffering the pressure of intruders, several indigenous groups have since increased their numbers and obtained legalized territories. At the same time, there is continued violence against rural workers, including rubber tappers. The point is that the institutional innovations changes have created spaces where the conflict is visible, and where some struggles can be won by the weaker party.

Schmink and Wood correctly claim that such concessions in Amazonian policy “were the result of the political pressure mobilized by local and regional interest groups” (Schmink and Wood 1992:53). And they credit rubber tappers with the ability to vie, just as other actors, the symbolic resources avail-
able, as experts “in the art of exploiting political openings” (Schmink and Wood 1992:349, 353). One important issue debated at a recent general meeting of the Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros (CNS), or National Council of Rubber Tappers. A majority of women (from the federation of babassu-nut breakers) and men (from many rural grassroot groups, from shellfish gatherers to maroon communities) had proposed a motion to change the organization’s name to better reflect the socially multifaceted nature of its constituency, perhaps to something like “Council of Agro-Extractive Workers.” The president and candidate to a new term of office, Atanagildo de Mattos, or “Gatão,” argued: “Everybody here has heard the name ‘Coca-Cola.’ Would you change that name? With the National Council of Rubber Tappers it is the same. It is like a brand name. We have too much at stake in it.”

Although this story confirms the point made by Schmink and Wood, it could also suggest something else: that rubber tappers are simply manipulating images and symbols in the public scene, as if their agenda of environmental conservation were nothing but a tactical move, a media trick para inglês ver—“for the Englishman to see,” or for show, as we say in Brazil. If this were true, it would be as if trade union leaders were hiding under the “Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros” label because it resonates more inoffensively in public ears, as if they were disguising their land claims with environmental jargon to please current tastes, and as if it they were dressing as rubber tappers only to look more exotic than if they came out as rural workers.

There is more to it than that. In the last decade, there has been a deep change in the actors themselves, as hardened trade unionists have become ideological “rubber tappers,” as they have built their council and as they have elaborated the extractive reserve as an innovative concept. The process has involved a transformation of subjectivities, a conceptual reassessment of the meaning of land, of the limits of classical trade unionism and of the complexity of property regimes and public goods. The transformation of subjectivities has involved an intensive learning of technical language usages for planning, managing and monitoring alternative post-development paths—languages normally associated with positions of power.13 It has been a move away from corporate claims to land, protected prices and welfare benefits, toward universal goals of wise landscape use, economic innovation and cultural diversification.

All these moves are issues contested by some of the participants of the movement itself, as is illustrated in the meeting mentioned above. “Rubber tappers”14 became a metaphor for traditional populations, for these new Naturvoelker, “nature people.” Rubber tappers metonymically came to stand for the women who break babassu-nuts in the northern state of Maranhão, the dry-flower makers of the central highlands in the state of Goiás, the shell-
fish gatherers of the Atlantic coast in the state of Santa Catarina, as well as the maroon islanders of the river-Tocantins, just as the notion stands for agriculturalists of the colonialist frontier who care for landscape conservation. The point is that this enriched image—or, to use the capitalistic framework, this powerful trademark—corresponds to reconstructed identities and capacities.

Marginal Places: The Tejo River

I start by setting the scenario and the stage for the narratives which will follow, illustrating a simple point. Changes which take place in marginal places in the world system involve concrete personal histories and specific stakes which cannot be reduced to a single logic as if they were secondary musicians commanded to play a brief phrase in a long symphony, and then ordered to silence by a conductor who reads from the score. We need instead images of musical improvisation in which harmonizing voices vie for the listener's ear and may create variation and diversity. Hence, in the stories that follow the point is to suggest what Amazonian people did to what world history did to them, and, to continue paraphrasing Sartre, how they reconstructed their own essence which had ostensibly already been defined for them once and for all.

I met the rubber tappers of upper Jurua River, a southwestern affluent to the Amazon River (see Maps 1-3), during 1982. The place was the Tejo River, a distant tributary almost at the Peruvian border which, although represented as devoid of population in the best maps available, I soon discovered to have a local reputation of being still a "river of rubber." Early in the century, the Catholic missionary Constantin Tastevin had described the Tejo (Tagus) River in much the same terms, and I knew that rubber tappers had been working there since 1890, when the first seringais were established along its banks by rubber traders in land contested between Peru and Bolivia but in fact only inhabited until then by the native Panoan Indian populations. The forests along the Tejo River were also the place where the Brazilian seringueiros, or rubber tappers, headed southward and clashed with the Peruvian caucheros, who were driving northward along the Jurua River.

The two fronts had different ecological characteristics. On the side of the seringueiros, more or less where the current border between Peru and Brazil lies, the forest was rich in seringueiras, rubber-trees belonging to the genus *Hevea* (see Map 4). On the cauchero side there were no seringueiras, but plenty of caucho trees, belonging to the genus *Castilloa*. The fact that the international border between Peru and Brazil coincides with a botanical boundary should not come as a surprise. It was an artifact of the fact that Acre forests, previously disputed by Peru and Bolivia, were added to Brazilian territory in 1903 when Brazil compensated Bolivia for the area occupied de facto by rub-
1. Are State anid Soudtb1

2. Nhe Uipperflinmia vtractil'e R'csow're anid Acre State.

Based on original research by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Keith S. Brown Jr., and Mauro Almeida; and on information from the CNPT (Centro Nacional de Populações Tradicionais e Desenvolvimento Sustentável).

Map 1. Acre State and South America.

Map 2. The Upper Jurua Extractive Reserve and Acre State.
ber tappers, and later made a similar treaty with Peru in 1909. The Brazilian tappers occupied Acre in search of the extremely valuable *Hevea brasiliensis* rubber, which produced the *Acre fina*, the best rubber ever. They ignored the low-grade caucho rubber from the *Castilloa elastica*.\(^2\) In contrast to the *Castilloa* trees, which the itinerant caucheros felled to exploit a lump of rubber in a single stroke before moving on, the *Hevea* trees could be tapped virtually for life, and were. This meant also that seringueiros settled permanently in *Hevea*-rich forests, while the caucheros were nomadic. Hence, the seringais rich in *Hevea* trees were seen as natural capital able to generate a permanent flow of wealth to their owners, as well as windfall profits as they changed from hand to hand in speculative deals; rubber trees, not land, were

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Map 3. The Upper Jurua Extractive Reserve.

Based on original research by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Keith S. Brown Jr., and Mauro Almeida; and on information from the CNPT (Centro Nacional de Povoações Tradicionais e Desenvolvimento Sustentável).
the measure of wealth, and they were accordingly protected by rules bordering on the excessive. Unlike rubber regions such as the Putumayo, the Acre seringais did not rely on Indian labor. Instead, those who had a claim on forests rich in rubber trees contracted migrants from the arid lands of the Brazilian northeast to come and take up settlements where they would tap rubber trees to pay their debts and, so they hoped, to earn themselves money. In the meanwhile, particularly from the 1870s on, the Indians themselves were mostly exterminated by this frontier economy in the southwestern Amazonia. These native inhabitants, mainly belonging to the Panoan linguistic stock, had traded with whites until the mid-1860s, but after the onset of the rubber boom, were seen more as a hindrance to the occupation of forest than as a source of cheap labor. Many of them attacked the isolated barracks of rubber tappers in search of tools and sometimes kidnapped women and children; the rubber patrons, in turn, hired professional killers to wipe out entire Indian villages, from which they often took back young women who

Map 4. Distribution of Rubber Trees (Hevea spp) and the Brazilian border.
Based on original research by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Keith S. Brown Jr., and Mauro Almeida; and on information from the CNPPT (Centro Nacional de Populações Tradicionais e Desenvolvimento Sustentável).
would be handed to the rubber tappers. The extractive economy was compared to the fur trappers' trading post economy of the Northern Hemisphere. Each rubber tapper exploited a couple of trails (estradas, "roads") which linked rubber trees together in a loop, starting and returning at the barracks. The trading posts supplied goods in advance to these lonely workers, to be paid in rubber delivered at the end of season. The trading posts were located on riverbanks and surrounded by the forest, within walking distance from each tapper's settlement. The rubber delivered once a year had to be floated downriver tied up in rafts, then sent in steamboats to go as far as coastal Belém, where it was then shipped to British and American ports by import-export houses. Imported goods, from jerked beef and sour manioc flour to machetes and shotguns, came up the river along the same chain of traders until they reached the last tapper in the forest, together with the final yearly credit or, more often, debt balance of each tapper according to the latest rubber quotations in the international market. This was an economy of generalized debt, which tied not only the rubber tappers, but also every trader to the foreign export-import companies, and thus to the world economy.

The year of 1912 brought a shattering blow to this system. That year, the Brazilian Amazonia yielded a record 40,000 tons of rubber, but Malaysian plantations started to flood the market with the first crops of plantation rubber, started from seeds which had made their way from Amazonia to Southeast Asia through the Kew Gardens. In a mere few years, the Asiatic plantations were producing 400,000 tons of rubber a year and more, and wild rubber became superfluous. Capital had domesticated nature, and unfortunately not in Amazonia itself, but on the other side of the world.

Or was it, rather, a fortunate turn of events? Though all the trade companies went bankrupt in a matter of years, as historian Barbara Weinstein put it, how could those at the bottom go bankrupt? The Belém-based company Nicolau and Co., which controlled the upper Juruá River and the Tejo River, went bankrupt in 1916, and its successor Mello and Co. closed its doors in 1936. After the crash, the rubber tappers were freed, as it were, to produce most of what was imported before on their own. Former employee Mauricio Quirino, who lived in the region himself, stayed and became the de facto owner of a huge estate of devalued seringais, which became tropical manors supported by rents and services paid by the forests peasants. Families grew, agriculture flourished, and gathering and hunting became major modes of obtaining a livelihood in the upper Juruá River. Every forest niche, from the flooded riverbanks to the dry upland bamboo forest, was used in this emerging regional economy. This was not a subsistence economy, but an active regional economy that traded locally in a variety of forest products including jaguar skins, brown sugar, brandy, and manioc flour among many others.
Trade was released from the grips of powerful bosses, and retail flourished in the hands of the petty canoe traders. Now, many rubber tappers could buy from them and were bound to customary seringal-owners only by the obligation to pay rents for trails.

It could be said that the migrant rubber tappers had been stranded along these remote rivers, so to speak, without a return ticket. In any case, many did not want to go back to the arid, drought-stricken *sertão* of northeastern Brazil, where landlords ruled and natural cycles could bring famine instead of food crops. Many rubber tappers, like my paternal grandfather, became forest peasants willingly, and many bosses, such as my maternal grandfather, stayed there as an impoverished middle class. Their small families grew in time to form extensive networks of kin, in-laws and god-relatives spreading across entire rivers. During the worst years of trade, imported goods—which included shotguns and ammunition, soap and salt, axes and machetes, clothes and pots—were kept to a minimum. Rubber tappers learned to use harpoons and arrows, and how to make soap from the embaba (genus *Cecropia*). The peasant images of nature that the rubber tappers had brought from the northeast were now enriched and transformed in contact with Indian cultures—a process vividly illustrated by intense intermarriage among the Tejo headwater rubber tappers and Cashinahua and other Panoan Indian women. Fish were abundant, the forest gardens supplied a variety of crops besides the trio of manioc, maize and bananas, and game was bountiful. The Tejo River seringais which accrued to the former employee were valueless in cash, but provided a livelihood not only to the peasantized rubber tappers, but also to their impoverished patrons. Incidentally, no valid titles to land existed, although nobody contested the so-called owners. The Acre forest peasantry thus subsisted as part of a regional economy relatively cut off from the world market which had produced it, until a new wave of capitalism hit.

World War II closed the U.S. off from the Asiatic plantation rubber, and prompted a “Rubber War” (as it was called) in Amazonia. The U.S. agreed with the Brazilian government to obtain rubber from its first and obsolete source, the forest itself, where they did not need long-term investment to grow trees, only laborers to tap them. Thus, the Brazilian government, in an operation financed by the U.S., recruited a new wave of migrants from among the poor Brazilian northeastern peasantry, and the weakened local Amazonian patrons were strengthened with capital and authority. Rubber tappers were promised fast gain and a soldier status with corresponding benefits, but in fact their contracts implied the condition of indentured laborers. They were expected to deliver to their patron a labor week of six days, a rule which precluded them from cultivating food crops, and they could not abandon their post while in debt.
The Rubber War, however, was a fiasco. The laborers did not deliver as expected. The coerced labor reinstated in Amazonia under U.S. accord did not boost productivity, but, rather, resulted in its relapse to the low levels typical of the older peasantized forest dwellers. Why? Between the two world wars the older rubber tappers had become peasants; the newcomers met this forest peasant economy in full operation and mixed in with it. In this economy, a rubber tapper worked for himself on the trails for which he (or she, as with widows and unmarried mothers) paid the rent, living in the forest except for short visits to the trading post. Hence, by 1945, the prefect of the upper Acre Juruá department asked for state support to suppress what he described as an open rebellion against new rules—such as the obligation to use personal marks on rubber balls to prevent smuggling—and blamed “subversive” agents and petty traders for stirred sentiments among the laboring population.27

The problem was ultimately that the workers were not subordinated as wage-laborers to bosses, not to mention that they were not subordinated by a technology beyond their control—a lack both of “formal” and of “real” subordination of people under capital, to use a distinction devised by Marx. The same cause for the low level of physical productivity, the dispersed nature of the object of labor, accounted for the low measure of control over persons. Violence could be and was used under the pretext of enforcing the payment of debts, but violence over scattered areas had costs and limits.28 A rubber tapper in Acre uses around 400 hectares—over 1,000 acres, or one and a half square miles—to gather latex from about two trails containing less than 300 trees dispersed throughout a rich forest of vines, palm-trees, bamboo and hardwood.29 A plantation worker can tap over 400 trees condensed in a single hectare, or two and a half acres. The productivity may thus be 100 times higher on plantations, due to both a greater number of rubber trees per area, and the possibility of directly supervised labor by several workers. It is also true, on the other hand, that biodiversity is more than 100 times higher in the tropical forest than in rubber tree plantations, as measured in plant variety, not to mention wildlife variety, but it is the peasants who benefit directly from this biodiversity and not the owner. There is also abundant room for sustainable slash-and-burn agriculture because an average household needs less than half a hectare per year to obtain the basic manioc staple, allowing for the regeneration of the overall 400 hectares of forest in use by each family. The sparse population, which on the Tejo River is around one person per square kilometer (100 hectares, around 250 acres), allows for hunting and gathering without depletion30; however, all these activities compete with the rubber labor, cutting into the more measurable rubber productivity demanded by traders.

There were attempts to subordinate both workers and the forest. After the end of World War II, and during the following four decades, the Brazilian
federal government continued to support local Amazonian bosses with subsidies and market quotas, which multinational tire industries in Brazil—that flourished along the booming car industry of the fifties and sixties—had to buy from Amazonian suppliers at prices above the international quotations before being allowed to import. This protectionist policy, running against the interests of world capitalism but in accordance with the logic of national politics, was a consequence of the political clout of Amazonian senators and deputies in federal politics (the Acre federal territory became a state in 1961, and it alone had 11 representatives in the higher and lower congressional chambers). The protectionist policies included programs intended to modernize the rubber economy. Early in the eighties, I witnessed some attempts at establishing rubber plantations inspired by the latest biological technology and specifically using clones of highly productive trees which had been imported from Malaysia and relying on wage labor. The first problem was that wage labor was out of the question for most rubber tappers, when they were given the option between becoming plantations workers or remaining peasant rubber tappers working on their forest trails. In one project led by Mário Lobão, workers recruited by intensive radio advertising would typically accept to work under overseers equipped with walkie-talkies for a season, but would then quit the Fordist town for their pre-modern forest life. Mário Lobão attempted to cajole the neighboring Ashaninka Indians with wages above the regional levels and additional gifts which included clothes and medicine, only to be again left without workers after the dry season had passed, and the Ashaninka had completed their wandering season. A miniature town complete with electricity, running water and a church was wasted, as cash wages were ignored by riverbank cultivators and rubber tappers who seemed to be above it all—above working for wages under walkie-talkie surveillance and above a life that deprived them of freedom to hunt, to fish, and to grow manioc as they pleased. And they would be above it as long as there were forests around. José Messias, another young would-be entrepreneur who was descended, as Mário Lobão, from a traditional family of local patrons, managed to solve the labor problem by articulating pre-capitalism with capitalism. He maintained a traditional seringal on one side of the river, and established seasonal wage labor on the other side, so that wage labor was then part of the obligations of the clients at his trading post. However, in this case the cloned rubber trees died in great numbers while young, in what can only be described as nature’s own rebellion against subordination. It was as if people rebelled against the subordination of wage-labor, while nature rebelled against the subordination to imported clones and chemical pesticides.

The patrões (patrons, singular patrão), and to an even lesser extent the would-be entrepreneurs, did not have true power over people and nature, just
as they did not own game, fish and trees, but could only charge rents for trails in which they had invested, in theory, by paying woodsmen to open them. At least this is the way rubber tappers saw the situation. Endowed with a strong sense of autonomy, much as artisans who well know their own job and what it takes, the rubber tappers saw patrons as traders and as renters, who were expected to provide credit and transportation services as part of the implicit contract which bound rubber tappers to them.

The fairness of the implicit contract was doubted, because patrons had ceased to invest in the conservation of trails, and were believed to systematically manipulate the accounts in this economy without circulating money. The rubber tappers responded by smuggling rubber out, by skipping payments, by substituting local goods for imported ones (e.g., coffee, soap, buckets), by becoming themselves petty traders. As a result of this system of negotiated exploitation, early in the eighties, when rubber prices fixed by the government were above US$1.80 per kilogram, the trading posts offered luxury goods such as watches and disc-players to cajole the rubber tappers to yield record rubber amounts (one to two tons per worker), well above the average of 600 kilograms in the best parts of Tejo River. (Self-respecting tappers boasted Seiko watches and some held contests of their qualities—a macho watch was supposed to stay in working condition after a day under dirty canoe-bottom water full of fish.) They also offered more basic shotguns and Briggs-Stratton “black donkeys,” three- or nine-horsepower gasoline motors used to power canoes and manioc-graters.

**Tejo River Tejo Conflicts: Chico Ginú**

The rubber tappers had survived the crash in the rubber market before World War I, and had managed to resist the attempts to modernize the rubber economy during the post-World War II period. By the 1970s, however, the whole Amazon area was the target of a vast move led by the military government, which aimed to integrate its natural resources into the national and world economy. One effect of the concomitant speculation in frontier land was that the Tejo River—which in 1936 had been passed down from a Belém company to the local patron Mauricio Quirino—changed hands again, and by 1980, became the property of a São Paulo-based company, Santana Agropastoril Ltd., itself a branch of Consulmar and Co. This distant company started to lease the Tejo River seringais for three-year periods to regional businessmen who were interested in quick commercial profits. One of these emerging local businessmen was Orleir Cameli, who by 1985 had taken over the trade operations on the Tejo River. By 1987, this new boss had lost interest in the rubber business, coinciding with the end of four decades of protectionist policy for Amazonian rubber, in 1985. Owning sawmills and a ferry-
boat company among other businesses, Cameli was by then preparing to exploit mahogany with capital of his own and also with support of a "Japanese" partner. He surveyed the Tejo basin in a helicopter, while another team went on foot in order to assess the economic profitability of logging. In previous years, Cameli had ravaged the forests of the neighboring Amonia River, occupied by the Ashaninka Indians, with heavy tractors on caterpillar treads. A classic scenario was being played out: the approaching capitalist frontier, land title manipulation, forest depredation, eviction of traditional dwellers.

From the local perspective, it would be hard to see how this scenario could be altered. As suggested above, the forest economy of the peasantized rubber tappers was the ground for the identity and struggle of the rubber tappers with the older patron system. The resistance resorted to the "weapons of the weak," to use James Scott's phrase: product adulteration, smuggling, wildcat strikes, evasion. (Allegretti 1979; Almeida 1993; Hecht and Cockburn 1989:165). Along the Tejo River, these forms of resistance were accompanied by gossip, discussion and some measure of open contestation. These struggles were intra-hegemonic because they superimposed the tenets of patron-client trade onto the gift economy of neighborhood and ritual attitudes toward the forest.

The rubber tappers' small struggles, however, became notoriously anachronistic when new businessmen tried to pressure rubber tappers before undertaking mahogany exploitation during the eighties. The new businessmen exemplified by Cameli were aggressive in style and were backed by a mesh of institutions, including the German-supported, conservative Catholic Church (which owned the local radio station on land donated by Cameli), the justice system (rubber tappers who infringed the patron's code were easily evicted with police support), the federal land agency (which ignored the legal rights of rubber tappers to 100-hectare plots when it started a program in 1982 to issue valid land titles to benefit the São Paulo company), the federal and state banks, the fiscal system (which granted tax holidays to traders like Cameli), and so on. Thus, the bosses' power did not really reside in their control over the rubber tappers or over the forest, but rather on their ability to control state institutions; they controlled the economy through politics. Hence, in these forests, there existed a political economy in a very literal sense.

The trade union was the only alternative institution to connect the rubber tappers to outside sources of power. In 1977, several rural trade unions were created in different municipalities in Acre, as a reaction to the aggressive takeover of rubber tappers' land by ranchers, a process particularly acute and violent on the eastern side of Acre. The Tejo River belonged to the municipality of Cruzeiro do Sul in western Acre, which had its own trade union since then. Thus, in 1981, there were trade union officers at two Tejo River tribu-
taries, the Bage River and the Riozinho. The officers, or *delegados* in Portuguese—the same term applied to police officers—were seen as representatives of an institution backed by federal law, and were feared by many local patrões who knew that the recently instituted trade unions were backed by federal law. The main organizer at the Tejo River was João Claudino, himself a rubber tapper coming from the Tárauacá River, and whose background included a strike which had been savagely repressed. In 1981, Claudino led a group of rubber tappers to one major Tejo River trading post, in an action which succeeded in reducing debts and canceling some altogether, as compensation for unfair treatment of sick, elderly or widowed "heads of family." More importantly, Claudino told the tappers to stop paying rent for trails because the patrons never showed them land documents proving their claims, and he started to collect contributions to purchase a boat which would enable the rubber tappers to supply themselves directly in town. He also built a big house for meetings and started a manioc plantation sizable enough to sustain large numbers. All these initiatives cut deep into the traditional system of the seringal, and in particular affected the probability that the new boss leasing the area would obtain the expected commercial profits and the rents. One of the main supporters of Claudino was Chico Gînu. Gînu had never attended school, but by 1982 had acquired functional literacy thanks to the teachings of his wife, and was able to conduct trade union meetings where he settled local conflicts between neighbors, and where he urged all to pay trade union fees—using his authority as a delegado. Some rubber tappers, particularly the most productive, argued that it was better to befriend the boss, who could give them credit and transportation, and help in case of disease. Claudino and Gînu insisted in the idea of *direitos* ("rights") or rubber tappers under the law, and announced that the issues between bosses and rubber tappers were not personal and criminal issues anymore. These questions were now labor and land issues, to be discussed and settled under the mediation of the trade union.

Claudino was eventually bribed with a patron post at another river, plus the promise of a Bank of Brazil loan to obtain abundant and cheap trade goods. The trade union was demoralized for a while, until 1986, when Orleir Cameli became concerned at the end of his first three-year lease, since many rubber tappers were heavily indebted. Cameli hired a team of soldiers to visit every tapper's house and collect debts in kind, thus taking away everything from Singer sewing machines to milk cows, beating residents and interrogating children about hiding places for rubber and other goods. When I visited the Tejo River in July and August of 1997, after four years of absence, rubber tappers were again thinking favorably of the trade union, because Chico Gînu, using a tactic he had learned from Claudino, had led a group of resolute tappers to the trading post and obtained the withdrawal of the police. It must
be kept in mind that every rubber tapper has at least a shotgun for hunting, and that the soldiers were being paid daily wages, on a non-official mission, so that their motivation to risk an armed confrontation was small. Thus, the action led by Ginú was successful in that the debt-collecting operation was interrupted and the police group left the area. The story was then narrated in prose in every detail and in verse by the rubber tapper and curador, or healer, João Cunha. It is true that movement led by Ginú did not obtain the return of the motors, sewing machines and milk cows, and that the physical and moral damages inflicted upon the rubber tappers were not compensated, but the trade union had obtained a clear victory. The trade union had some use, after all. Chico Ginú, who incidentally had always refused bribes and continued to do so (gossip works like the press in the seringal, but he was never charged of accepting bribery), later became a vice-president of the National Council of Rubber Tappers, and the first president of the Association of Rubber Tappers of the Tejo River, which eventually overthrew the patron's domination over the area.

In 1987, Ginú was concerned with the indifference of the new boss Orleir Cameli towards the conservation of the seringal, and with his plans to start logging operations to replace the increasingly unrewarding rubber trade. Cameli did not attempt to maintain the trails in good condition as the previous patrões used to do; on the contrary, he suggested that tappers should aim for a maximum yield by using techniques that kill a tree within a couple of years.34

Ginú proclaimed, in a speech delivered on July 1987, that doing this was like killing one's mother, since the rubber tree was the source of the milk which supported the rubber tappers' lives.35 He scolded his fellow rubber tappers for forgetting the rules, as if, in the absence of other authority, the trade union had become responsible for the conservation of trails. Common sense advised the conservation of rubber trees (as he put it, what would their sons and grandsons live on in the future?). Chico Ginú and the older tappers were not only protesting against the exploitation of persons by the patrões, but also against the exploitation of rubber trees. In fact, Chico Ginú would say in private conversation that trees are capable of feeling pain just as people are. This was consistent, at least, with the idea that "mãe da seringueira" (or Mother of the Rubber Tree) was believed by some to show scars on her face resulting from ill treatment.

All this made sense as part of a wider set of beliefs and practices. For rubber tappers in general and in particular for those who, as Chico Ginú, were grandsons of caboclo mothers who were taken forcibly from their native villages, the forest was inhabited not only by ordinary people, but also by "mothers/fathers," and in particular by the "mother/father" of wild animals.
Caipora, sometimes referred to as a male), as well as by caboclinhos (little Indians, or Indian children) who dwelt in small streams, and by other encantados, enchanted beings. Caipora, a “person responsible for the animals of the forest,” demanded respect and a measure of abstention from hunters, many of whom will deal with great care with the carcasses of animals killed in the forest from the moment they are tied up to be taken back home to the disposing of the bones after meals, lest the animal will be insultado, insulted. If the dead animal from the forest is thus disrespected or dishonored (being carried in the wrong way, being pissed upon, etc.), or if its bones are thrown around and get in contact with ashes, with feces or are stepped on by pregnant or menstruating women, the hunter will become panema, incapacitated for hunting by chronic inability to see the game in the forest, by an intense and lasting lack of “happiness” in hunting. Abstention is also necessary: game must be given as gifts to neighbors under strict rules of sharing, and may not be sought in the forest on days such as Thursdays (“Caipora days”). Sharing brings additional risks, since even the involuntary contact of bones with sources of pollution (such as women during menstruation or after childbirth) is believed to cause the hunter to become panema. Abstention is also imposed by numerous food prohibitions, particularly of the meat of certain animals, sometimes on the basis of encante (enchantment) of animals such as anteaters (all three local species) and armadillos (a few), or on the basis of non-explained repugnance (sloths), or because they are “beasts” (jaguars), or for health reasons since some animals and fish have reima (cf. rheum) and are said to be harmful to sick persons or women who have given birth recently (Almeida et al. 2002:307-332). The belief in panema is almost universally shared, as well as in several of practices related to it (talismans to become a “happy” hunter, cure for panema and so on). The belief in the efficacy of pautas (or pacts) with the Mother of the Rubber Tree seems to be less widespread, but belong to the same circle of ideas according to which all wild things have a keeper or a “mother/father” who is responsible for them. The Mother of the Rubber Tree was said to be a beautiful woman who could make young, unmarried men very productive as long as they kept faithful to all creatures.

As the rubber tappers saw the situation, the patrões were charging abusive rendas (rents) for rubber trails they had not opened in the forest, and also failing to respect the very life of rubber trees which they had not created in the first place.

There were thus several grounds for opposition to the old system of patrões. The problem was that the trade union was much weaker than the boss and his allies. We turn now to areas where it was strongest, such as the other side of the state of Acre, where Chico Mendes lived.
Rio Branco and Brasília: Chico Mendes

In Xapuri and Brasília, two municipalities in eastern Acre, much more pressure was being put on the rubber tappers. Ranchers were killing and evicting rubber tappers there and felling down the rubber trees and Brazil nut trees with chain saws. The traditional seringal system that still existed in Cruzeiro do Sul and in the Juruá River region in western Acre had crumbled in the seventies in eastern Acre. The former bosses sold their precarious titles to ranchers coming from the south, and quit. Ranchers who wanted to evict rubber tappers fast, so as to try and make legal their titles to land, cut down the forest because this was the most efficient way of forcing rubber tappers to leave their homes. A single settlement burned down and ruined the whole forest neighborhood, having a domino effect on many others.

In Xapuri and Brasília, the rural trade union resisted by direct action against the chain saw gangs, which they prevented from doing their jobs in operations called empates—from “empatar,” to block or to obstruct an action, in Amazonian usage. The empates, initially under the leadership of Wilson Pinheiro and, after he was murdered at his union office, conducted by Chico Mendes since the early eighties, were collective actions that prevented the action of chain saw gangs. Over a hundred of men, women and children would go to an area and stand in the way of the trees, preventing the peses, as the chain saw wage workers were called, from doing the job. They would usually stop working, until the police were called in. A major problem with empate tactics by 1985 was that they were on the defensive, always lagging behind the escalating violence, winning diminishing gains each year. Thus, Chico Mendes started to seek external support and allies, and resorted increasingly to tactics reminiscent of the Gandhian combination of direct action and visibility, against the massive clout of ranchers at the local level.

Chico (nickname for Francisco) Mendes was born in the Xapuri seringais and had worked as a rubber tapper in his youth. He used to mention as an important early influence his contact with an adult he described as a militant hiding in the forest from political persecution. Later on, Mendes followed a trade union trajectory in Xapuri, but modeled many of his actions on the example of Wilson Pinheiro at the Brasília trade union. He had ample experience not only with the trade union movement, but also with the political activity in Rio Branco, being in touch with the progressive Catholic Church of eastern Acre and with left-wing political parties such as the PC do B or Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil), as well as with non-governmental activist organizations such as the CTA (Centro de Trabalhadores da Amazônia, or Amazonian Workers’ Center). After the death
of Wilson Pinheiro, a critical period during which he was arrested and charged of having incited with his speeches the killing of Pinheiro’s murderers, he became a personal acquaintance of Francisco “Lula” da Silva, the president of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Workers’ Party, who came in his support. Chico Mendes had thus already a national reputation as a trade union leader.

Mendes was respected by his ability to deal with critical situations toward a successful outcome against all odds. In 1986, for instance, he led nearly 120 rubber tappers who marched for three days through burnt-down forest remains, evading soldiers and scaring chain saw workers, before being encircled and made to walk back in single file. Before that, Mendes made sure that the march would be witnessed by a photographer, two agronomists, one anthropologist and a young teacher and trade unionist. When the apparently defeated column arrived back in town, the participants adopted another civil disobedience tactic: they sat inside the local offices of the Brazilian forestry agency, encircled by police armed with machine guns. Meanwhile, Chico Mendes both called the national press saying that over 200 people were surrounded in the offices, and sent emissaries to the forest to bring in more rubber tappers to increase numbers. In a carefully timed move, Mendes waited while the tension increased, preceding the announced intervention of federal agents, in order to start negotiations under heavy press attention and the mediation of the Church.

As part of the tactics aiming to increase the visibility of rubber tappers, Mendes sought in early 1985 the support of his friend, anthropologist Mary Allegretti, then working in Brasilia. Allegretti put her great personal capacity and deep feelings about the plight of rubber tappers (who were the subjects of her master’s thesis and with whom she had worked early in the eighties in a “projeto”) to organize what Mendes had in mind, a big event designed to create national visibility for the rubber tappers. The idea was not that of a trade union meeting. Instead, it looked more like a seminar, in which 120 rubber tapper leaders summoned from everywhere in Amazonia sat in the audience while invited politicians, academics and spokespersons for government agencies made speeches and answered questions. Sometimes the rubber tappers talked about their situation, and about violence and high prices in the forest, while the authorities listened, somewhat puzzled by the exotic, quixotic speakers who mixed songs, poetry and lament with seemingly impossible demands. The strange format created both embarrassment and discovery. It forced authorities to reveal their absolute lack of plans or even the knowledge of rubber tappers’ mere existence, while some experts were quite frank on their pessimistic views on the future of this peculiar people. The overall effect was not so much making rubber tappers visible, but instead making the government visible to rubber tappers. The rubber tappers came to Brasília believing that
“rubber was the wealth of the world” and that they were necessary to the national economy as the only producers of the world’s rubber. Why didn’t anybody even know of the existence of rubber tappers?

A closing statement asserted the urgency of a “development policy for the Amazonian population,” and demanded specifically “land reform adequate to the rubber tappers,” which meant that land should not be cut in 50- to 100-hectare homesteads as the government used to do, and that, instead, the traditional system of trail territories should be preserved without boundaries in the forest and respecting the need for 400 to 600 hectares of extractive territory per family. This document also mentioned for the first time the “extractive reserves,” a label clumsily inspired by the “Indian reserves.” Chico Mendes read the final document in public as it came from the working groups, and must have come across the “extractive reserve” formulation with some perplexity regarding the name, if not the content. And to add to the new strange names, on the last night of the meeting, before going home, the rubber tappers created an informal Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros or CNS (“National Council of Rubber Tappers”). This was a protest after they were frustrated in their attempt to address the “Conselho Nacional da Borracha” (National Council for Rubber),” the federal organization that ruled over all matters related to rubber, and in which the seringal owners (known as seringalistas and mistaken by many authorities with seringueiros, rubber tappers) had a seat alongside representatives from the industries and other interested parties. “Since the National Council of Rubber will not receive us, let us create our own National Council of Rubber Tappers,” they reasoned. It should be noted that, at this point, Chico Mendes did not play a significant role in the newly founded organization. At least, he was not part of the first Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros (CNS) board; its president was an obscure trade unionist from the Madeira River in the state of Amazonas, Jaime Araião, who enthralled audiences with his poetic language and came with a two-person delegation. Acre’s politically sophisticated delegation of 70 trade unionist leaders did not see the CNS as a relevant political body, or was taken by surprise with it; maybe it was seen rather as a symbolic organization for the divulgence of the plight of these previously invisible “forest workers.” It might seem as if the rubber tappers were only making a parody of power, a parody of federal institutions for protecting Indians and the rubber industry, an ironic comment on their own actual marginality. But, again, it became more than that.

Around 1986, the CNS represented by a board of about a dozen directors but without legal existence, met several times at Rio Branco and Rondônia among other places, always with the attendance of the same advisors from the Juruá River, the Madeira River and other remote places. In order for these meetings to take place, the availability of funds was crucial to pay boat, bus
and airplane tickets so that the directors could meet across the huge Amazonian distances. During 1986, the financial support came from the British OXFAM, a humanitarian organization based in Oxford which had been financing cooperatives and educational projects in Amazonia. The activists of the Rio Branco CTA (Centro de Trabalhadores da Amazônia) were also essential for providing personnel to “advise” or technically support the CNS. Chico Mendes attended these meetings, although without formally belonging to the CNS board of directors. He was becoming increasingly interested in its possibilities. One crucial CNS meeting took place in December 1986, in the outskirts of the Acre town of Brasileia. There, one “advisor” (an anthropologist) talked about the rubber economy and made clear some facts that lecturers at the Brasília meeting were perhaps too embarrassed to mention. Until then, Jaime Araújo (the council’s president), Chico Mendes (the experienced political leader) and other trade unionists believed that the rubber tappers’ strongest argument was economic. Using the same language of the ordinary land settlement projects, they argued that better conditions for rubber tappers would give more production of rubber in return, enough to restore Brazil’s self-sufficiency and generate export earnings, as well as increased employment. These, however, were bitterly impossible goals. During the rubber boom peak, the Brazilian Amazonia produced around 40 tons of rubber per year, and since World War II it yielded between 20,000 and 30,000 tons yearly from its wild growing rubber trees; however, by the 1980s the Brazilian tire industry alone consumed between 300,000 to 400,000 tons of rubber yearly, including 120,000 tons of natural rubber mostly imported from plantations in Malaysia and India. Imported rubber, moreover, was cheaper than Amazonian rubber, and the prospects for significantly increasing Brazilian production were the southern plantations, not the Amazonian wild forests. Since 1945, only government protection had kept wild rubber exploitation profitable for Amazonian seringalistas or patrões, but beginning in 1985, the government policies looked toward opening the market at the same time that the old patrões were quitting their seringais and selling their claims to land titles, and new interests like logging and ranching took over the region.41

The ensuing silence was broken by a question made by Osmarino Rodrigues, one of the most radical rubber tapper activists, a trade unionist based in Brasileia, strongly influenced by Trotskyist ideas.42 He asked, addressing the advisors: “I like to ask the meaning of words I don’t know. I heard their talk of ecology. What is ecology?” He knew what he was driving at. After the answer, he went on: “If they do not want our rubber, then we can offer this ecology. This we have been doing all the time anyway.”

Osmarino had heard about “ecology” many times since the September 1985 meeting in Brasilia. In October of the same year, the council’s president,
Jaime Araújo, had been invited to hearings in São Paulo where he moved Gro Brundtlandt, chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), to tears. The Brazilian Secretary for the Environment, Paulo Nogueira Neto, part of the WCED, heard Araújo's speech and promised to him to create an extractive reserve on his own territory, along the upper Madeira River. Osmarino himself was very sensitive to the environmental issues. The Brasiléia area where he was born was by then a landscape of majestic Brazil nut trees, left alone (in a token of respect for environmental legislation) amidst land otherwise laid to waste, and reminding everybody of what savage capitalism was doing to places that had before been home to rubber tappers. Osmarino felt strongly what was being done to his home place; and besides being a well-informed political activist, who would return sometimes to rubber tapping activity, he firmly believed in the panema ideas, described by him not as "superstition" but as hard facts amply corroborated by experience.

In fact, the Brasiléia meeting did an even more important task than to merely displace the emphasis on economic productivity. The delegates defined what the extractive reserves should be, after asking all advisors to leave the room, having all the technical information they needed. They were there assembled under the identity of "rubber tappers," in an informal meeting and without predefined strategies from party or trade union federations, and they could take their time and invent. So they spent a whole morning to reach a decision that made the reserves almost impracticable under the law. The reserves were defined as territories under public property (and, therefore, property of the Brazilian state as in the case of the Brazilian Indian Lands, then named "Indian reserves"), that should be granted to rubber tappers or other extraction workers under permanent and collective use concessions. This apparently strange formulation followed a detailed discussion of alternatives, from individual ownership of trail territory to condominium collective property, none of them satisfactory because in all cases there was the risk of the land being sold to ranchers. One defector would suffice to sell out a whole forest area, and thus individual titles were deemed unacceptable. But even a majority decision was not considered as justification to allow the powerful capitalists the opportunity to buy out people's land. Only public property would effectively block what rubber tappers saw as a tragedy of privatization of nature. The idea of collective territories without individual titles, moreover, fit well into the traditional pattern of trail territories, which were not separated by any fence or physical boundary, and often overlapped with each other. The concept also appealed to radical leaders such as Osmarino Rodrigues and Chico Mendes, to whom non-private ownership seemed advanced and socialist. That the Brazilian law had no provision for this was consciously disregarded. The major land reform movement at the national level did not
have any similar claim. It was again an almost naïve idea that only the CNS, meeting independently in an obscure township in Amazonia, could entertain.\textsuperscript{45}

The next year, early in 1987, the CNS visited Brasilia (the federal capital) again, this time to press for specific policy measures, and now together with an Indian delegation from Acre. The negotiations with the Brazilian land agency (lead again by Mary Allegretti) made it possible in the same year to attempt to include the provision for “extractive settlements” under the program of land settlement. This program, however, did not have a legal framework for collective concession or for public ownership; moreover, the agrarian law under the lobby of powerful landowners had made the process of land redistribution (by state acquisition, followed by redistribution to settlers) extremely difficult and expensive. In the case of huge land areas the process was almost impossible, short of the willingness of the owner to pay the price set by the land agency:

The rubber tappers also tried to widen their base of allies by paying visits to prominent governmental authorities in search of political support for their agenda. The reactions were mixed. When they visited the Minister of Culture, Celso Furtado (a former Minister of Economy in the civil government deposed by the military coup of 1964 and a living classic in Brazilian economic history), they heard him answer: “Are you serious?” Furtado then thought it appropriate to lecture the group on the three phases in the history of mankind: extractivism or gathering, pastoralism and agriculture, and industry. He ended by asking, again rhetorically: “Do you seriously wish to remain in the most backward stage of humankind’s evolution?”

The kind of activity that the council was trying to do, with the increasing role of Chico Mendes, faced a constant pressure for funds. Already in 1986, there surfaced a split among the advisors and supporters. Some thought that money would be best put into grassroots activities (“ant’s work”), not into large-scale activity such as that of the high-sounding but abstract “council.” The split concretized in 1987, when funding from OXFAM disappeared suddenly. The rubber tappers realized that they needed their own autonomous organization, with its own ways to obtain resources. In mid-1987, Osmarino Rodrigues and Raimundo Barros wrote—in their own handwriting, in the backyard of a friend in Rio Branco—a first grant request which eventually, with the inclusion of other targets, obtained around US$30,000 from a Brazilian human-rights organization, Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional (FASE), or the Federation of Social and Educational Assistance Organizations. In the meantime, they awaited the answer to a more ambitious request of US$100,000 to finance a full-scale mobilization activity for the next year. In January 1988, almost by a miracle,\textsuperscript{46} the council was
informed that one Dutch agency (CEBEMO, later renamed Bilance) had de-
cided to fund this proposal without cuts and without further ado. By then, 
Chico Mendes had become the council’s president de facto. The council was 
obviously an organizational identity more appropriate to the expanding circle 
of Mendes’s alliances, involving now the Indian movement (the UNI, or União 
das Nações Indígenas, and the CNS, represented respectively by Ailton Krenak 
and Chico Mendes, had launched the “Alliance of the Forest People”), the 
emergent Partido Verde (the Green Party, based in Rio de Janeiro), the inter-
national lobby against World Bank projects which generated “bankrolling di-
sasters” (through anthropologist Steven Schwartzman at the Environmental 
Defense Fund, Washington), and Mary Allegretti (who, besides linking Mendes 
with Schwartzman, established her own non-governmental organization and 
was waging an intensive public campaign in favor of the extractive reserve 
concept as a conservation solution for Amazonia).

Now with its own endowment, the CNS had the autonomy to establish 
its agenda for 1988 irrespective of advice. It could conduct meetings all over 
Amazonia, creating local sections, discussing local problems, and raising the 
idea of extractive reserves. It also helped to create local trade union sections 
and to strengthen others. And it backed local struggles such as that of the 
remote Tejo River and of the Juruá River. It acquired legal identity in the 
second half of 1988, in order for it to manage its new resources and account 
for them. The councilmen (Chico Mendes included, as a matter of fact) found 
time to meet for a crash course on accounting and reporting techniques in 
Rio Branco by September 1988. Chico Mendes’s own report characteristically 
included items from “meeting in Washington” to “empate in Xapuri”; the 
other reports were similar distillations of continuous activity across various 
states and communities. They moved continuously from grassroots tasks to 
networking assignments, fulfilling a schedule laid out in advance, and report-
ing individually on goals achieved and resources used. The underlying strat-
egy was twofold. It strengthened local organization (trade union, cooperative 
and other movements) and struggles (such as empates), and it pressed for 
specific policy goals, embodied in a specific program of extractive reserves but 
also planning a transitional phase of protection for rubber tappers’ produc-
tion. In the process, the role of advisors changed. The mixed role of advisors 
and fund-managers had ended when the CNS became itself a fund-manage-
ment entity; “advisors” started to be replaced by staff, voluntary or profes-
sional, and eventually the CNS made it clear that could, given material re-
sources and adequate staff, speak directly on the relevant issues.

When Chico Mendes was murdered by a rancher’s son in December 1988, 
the rubber tappers’ movement had ceased to be a classical social movement 
and the CNS had formally become a new kind of organization for workers.
The CNS stated this formally for the first time in 1989, the year after Chico Mendes was murdered, at its second general meeting (if one could count as a first meeting its foundation in Brasília; in 1985). Amid polemics on the right course to be followed between a more orthodox land-oriented, trade union strategy, and environmentally-oriented, non-governmental organization strategies, the CNS voted its first statutes. It defined itself as a civil association, with no subordination to any party, trade union or federation; membership was open to a variety of “extractive workers,” and was therefore flexible enough to accommodate farmers interacting with forests, as well as many others, from shellfish gatherers to residents of maroon island communities. An essential feature was that the council did not recruit mass membership, issued no cards, conferred no individual benefits and collected no fees—everything that trade unions did. By dissociating itself from trade unions, the council also eliminated all possible competition with them. It could be seen as a supporting factor for trade unions, but also as an agent for more general policies. Being a body of about three dozen councilors elected by local committees, the process of succession was not open to universal vote. The CNS’s goals, as expressed in its statutes, included the establishment of areas under the management of the extractive population, specifically the extractive reserves. The implications were clear. While some participants thought that the movement had displaced itself too much from its class and trade union origins, others saw that what was really at stake was the possibility to negotiate and to attain goals; not abandoning the defensive, local strategy of empates, but extending it to an aggressive, global strategy of negotiation and institution-building. As the rubber tappers’ changing identity transcended the isolation of the local arena, they refused marginality as a strategy, and gained the leverage needed to infuse power into the local domains, where struggles such as that of the Tejo River continued to be fought on a daily basis.

The Tejo River Revisited: Antonio Macedo

Back in the early seventies, in the Juruá River, the lay missionary Brother José, held as a saint by upper Juruá dwellers and founder of an Indian religion at the Solimões River, had prophesied that a day would come when a stranger would arrive to hand the people “new things for old things.” Age-old prophecies printed in chapbooks promised that a day would come when “the greater ring will go through the smaller ring.” Some remembered these sayings as fitting with what started to go on in the Tejo River in the late eighties, when the poor started to score victories against the rich aided by “strangers.”

The news of rights backed by federal law first arrived at the Tejo River by the late seventies, through trade union discourse. In the late eighties, news of new rights were arriving, this time associated with the high-sounding CNS,
the National Council of Rubber Tappers, or simply “The National Council.” That nobody knew what it meant, exactly, only added to the effect of prestige. I discussed above how the CNS was started and expanded under the leadership of Chico Mendes, Osmarino Amâncio, Jaime Araújo and others. Now, the focus will be on its local effect on the struggles of the Tejo River, mediated by Antonio Macedo.

The council met in January 1988, in Rio Branco (the capital of the state of Acre), to plan the current year’s activities, as part of a strategy to mobilize rubber tappers throughout Amazonia and create a network of local organizations aiming for the creation of extractive reserves. One of the decisions taken on this occasion was to recruit Antonio Macedo. Macedo had been a rubber tapper in the Juruá River Valley in his youth. Since then, he had embraced several professions including boat helmsman, farmer and mechanic. His last job had been with the Indian agency where he set up cooperatives and where he was responsible for the indictment of Orleir Cameli, for his illegal trade of mahogany taken from the Ashaninka territory. Macedo had been fired from the agency, largely in consequence of his activity against Orleir Cameli, and was thus not only well prepared for his mission of supporting the rubber tappers of the Juruá Valley, but also available for this mission.47

However, the decision to intervene at the upper Juruá River was a polemical one. One reason for the hesitation was the remoteness of Cruzeiro do Sul: at a distance of 600 kilometers from Rio Branco, the capital of the state and the seat of the council, the town could only be reached by two weekly flights and did not have any road links to other towns (three additional days on canoe are necessary to reach Cruzeiro do Sul from the Tejo River). The main difficulty was that, according to prevailing opinion, the “captive” rubber tappers (that is, working under bosses to whom they paid land rents and from which they purchased goods at trading posts under a monopoly regime) had no potential for mobilization, contrary to the “free” rubber tappers of eastern Acre, where the recent transformations had ended the old system of trade.

Macedo’s first task was to visit the Tejo River, where he contacted Chico Gini. By June 1988, Macedo had published a report in the Rio Branco entitled *Uma experiência de autoría* (An Experience in Authorship), in which, after an ecological and sociological report of the Tejo River, he proposed the creation of an extractive reserve. By this time, Rio Branco was full of talk on the issue. In January 1988, the Acre state government had announced the creation of a first extractive reserve, not as demanded by the rubber tappers’ movement, but on land already targeted for an ordinary land settlement program—an easy measure designed to appease the World Bank after an interruption of funding to a road connecting Rio Branco to the rest of the country, partly due to Chico Mendes’s depositions. At the suggestion of Adir Giannini,
an economist linked to the BNDES (or Banco Nacional para o Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social, National Bank for Economic and Social Development) and who had read his “authorship experience,” Macedo prepared and submitted a full project to BNDES.48

Chico Mendes helped to win the council’s support for the submission, a proposal entitled “Projeto de Desenvolvimento Comunitário—a Reserva Extrativista do Rio Tejo” (Project for Community Development—The Tejo River Extractive Reserve), in a decision which some thought was a deviation from legitimate trade union practices. Sending such a project to a federal agency was as unheard-of to the trade unionists of the council as it was for the governmental bank to receive a proposal for funds to be managed directly by rubber tappers. The problem was ultimately the following: should the council, originally an informal gathering of trade union leaders, limit itself to supporting trade unions by channeling external funds into them, or should it act as an agency capable of implementing specific projects?

Some advisors argued that rubber tapper leaders risked losing their grassroots character if they became “cadres” of a formal organization (these voices favored a division of labor in which town-based, middle-class–staffed NGOs would handle projects, public relations and funding, while grassroots activists conducted the struggle in their own working places). In this context, the decision taken to embrace the Tejo River project was an important turning point. In a sense, this decision followed the pattern created earlier in 1988 when the CNS had decided to obtain its own funding, leading to the creation of a legal structure to manage such funds.

The Cruzeiro do Sul meeting of October gathered 700 rubber tappers from four municipalities, around 200 Indians from several ethnic groups, and a unknown number of women and children whose names were not recorded. Nearly 200 canoes arrived, two buses were hired for urban transportation, and the biggest dancing club in town, previously a territory for exclusive use of the rich and middle-class citizens, was hired to accommodate the meetings. The agenda was to discuss the extractive reserve idea, after a presentation of local problems and demands. Instead, the meeting was flooded by angry protests against violence, plundering or rubber trees, price abuse and rent requirements, an amplification of the discourse on rights of the trade union, now at the very center of local power.

In December 1988, Chico Mendes was murdered by ranchers. Early in 1989, in the wake of international and national commotion, the BNDES, the National Bank for Economic and Social Development, approved the “Project for Community Development—The Tejo River Extractive Reserve.” It was a grant of US$70,000 that skipped all social components of the project, such as education and health, and concentrated on boats, cooperative installations,
and rotating capital for a cooperative. As a result, by March 1989, the local struggle gained a completely different character, as the local branch of the council had accumulated a huge storage of goods in Cruzeiro do Sul, and took them in a procession of boats up the Juruá River and eventually into the Tejo River itself, the very heart of darkness of patrões’ domination. The rubber tappers were thus appropriating the main symbols of the patrão power: merchandise.

This was a conscious strategy on Macedo’s part. He also had a storehouse built at the Tejo River’s mouth, replacing the headquarters of former patrões, again a symbolic gesture and a challenge: the CNS would fill the place with more merchandise than the current businessmen could dream of. Macedo was a charismatic personality and also a religious leader of ayahuasca cults who became popular not only among rubber tappers but also in the urban circles of Cruzeiro do Sul—and also the object of bitter opposition. He talked to rubber tappers about the upper Juruá as a world center of biodiversity of which they should be proud, and at the same time he was seen very much as a personal friend to them; as an equal, a powerful ally who could humiliate the patrões and even make a few of them kneel down and repent for their crimes and injustices. For Macedo, just as for Osmarino, the issues of panema and of other “ciência da mata” (science of the forest) were very objective topics supported by practical experience. In his own ayahuasca sessions, Macedo invoked the rainha da floresta, the “Queen of the Forest,” his counterpart to the “mothers of the forest” of the local rubber tappers.49

Cameli started a press campaign against Macedo; he hit Macedo in public (Macedo suffered also several attempts against his life); he led a commercial boycott against the cooperative.60 Cameli also issued a spate of lawsuits aiming to prevent both Macedo and Chico Ginú from physically entering the Tejo River, arguing that they were breaking up century-old traditions with disastrous results for the whole regional economy. The lawsuits were prepared in Rio Branco with the support of the UDR, the “União Democrática Ruralista” (the Ruralist Democratic Union), the right-wing national landowners’ organization. At this time, however, the attorney general (Procurador Geral da República) intervened to question the authority of the local justice system to rule on this case, which involved federal issues, since funding from a federal bank was at stake. This intervention was itself part of a concerted, careful strategy taking place between Rio Branco, Brasília and São Paulo, and aiming at a legal way out of the Tejo River crisis. The Tejo River project involved 500,000 hectares, an amount of territory way beyond the reach of the land agency for agrarian reform purposes, given the fact that this agency had severely limited powers under the Brazilian law. The solution would come through the environmental agency, not the land agency. Environmental law
in Brazil allows the creation of conservation areas even before the property issues are settled. Thus, nothing would prevent the creation of an extractive reserve as an environmental preserve if such a thing existed in law, and if it could be demonstrated that its creation performed an important environmental service to the nation. This also was a polemical issue within the CNS.

In any case, while Macedo and Chico Ginú conducted a local struggle in 1989 to establish the reserve de facto with federal funding from the BNDES and political support from the CNS, several steps were taken by a network of scientists, lawyers and allied government officials to legally establish the reserves. The project, while selecting the Tejo River for its social struggles, had an obvious environmental aspect. The 500,000 hectares of forested land (having around one percent of unforested area) included the totality of the Juruá River basin from Amonia River on (including the Tejo River basin), and had as neighbors Indian territories (Ashankinka to the west, Cashinahua to the east, Arara-Jaminawa to the north, and Cashinahua/Ashaninka to the south), a deliberate strategy. The projected reserve area also had boundaries with the Serra do Divisor National Park, without overlap and without gaps. This meant, in fact, that the already existing national park and Indian lands became integrated by the reserve into an almost continuous protected area.

Was the place worthy of federal concern? Three points were made to the attorneys general who visited Acre early in 1989 to this effect: (1) that labor relations similar to slave-labor prevailed in the area; (2) that in the region there was a threat of depredation of natural resources by logging plans and by a projected road without environmental and social provisions; (3) that the region might be part of a patch of very high biodiversity and endemism already documented in its proximity. Much activity was expended on the field during 1989 to gather scientific evidence for all these three points, accumulated by October 1989 in a 17-volume report by the attorneys general.

So by the end of the rainy season of 1989, when judges started to consider the flood of lawsuits intended to block Macedo and Ginú, they had to face the federal attorneys’ countermoves. The lawsuits were frozen. The state government was caught in the middle of a confrontation involving regional and federal politics. The trade goods had to go to the Tejo River immediately, for the dry season was approaching. Thus, a group of river rubber tappers, chosen previously to act as co-op managers, descended to Cruzeiro do Sul and conducted a procession of cargo boats to the Tejo River, while Macedo and Ginú waited for a solution to the judicial impasse. At the very instant the loaded boats entered the first curves of the Tejo River, a government airplane sent them bottled messages asking that they wait at the nearest town for a legal decision. The rubber tappers decided to go on, and the cooperative was born.
A legal decision was never reached over the legality of starting the co-op on what was seen as private property (although on the basis of doubtful titles), and with federal funding. Macedo, like Ginú, had yet to face beatings and imprisonment, but cooperative posts were built, and a huge headquarters appeared at the mouth of the Tejo River, a symbol of power and affluence which was the only effective proof of the weakness of landowners’ rule.

And in January 1990, when economists from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development, at the mouth of the Tejo River on an evaluation trip, puzzled over co-op management practices that ignored such things as interest, inflation and amortization, the news of the official creation of the Upper Juruá Extractive Reserve by presidential decree was heard on the radio, followed some days later by a law that defined the extractive reserves as conservation units under federal protection.58

In 1991, the Association of Rubber Tappers conducted the first census and use plan for the area, as part of the preliminary conditions for requesting the expropriation of land, and a collective use concession. It was acting for all practical purposes as the only authority over the area since 1989. In the early cooperative days (1989–1992), its newly created headquarters in Cruzeiro do Sul were equipped with telephone, fax and computer; in the forest, it established a network of two-way radios powered by solar panels. The residents elected a body of forest inspectors to enforce the use plan rules, and neighborhood commissions to democratize power within the reserve. Another initiative was a health system. During these first years and until 1992, the ASAREAJ (Associação de Seringueiros e Agricultores da Reserva Extrativa do Alto Juruá, or Association of Rubber Tappers of the Upper Juruá Extractive Reserve) depended heavily on Macedo’s leadership from his position at the Cruzeiro do Sul office of the CNS.

It emerges that a complex set of regional and national events and strategies, none of them foreseen by analysis, led to Macedo’s planned participation as a link between the local struggles of rubber tappers like Chico Ginú and the national arena, here represented by Chico Mendes. He commuted extensively between the Tejo River and the international scene, resorting when necessary to media tricks such as personally awarding a medal to Paul McCartney when he visited Rio de Janeiro.

It is true that the first cooperative instituted with funding from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development failed economically. The cooperative, however, was a political success, materializing in a cargo of goods as a challenge addressed against the power of the local ruling classes. In the period from 1988 to 1992, several other rubber tappers’ associations were created in the area of the upper Juruá River to run similar cooperative projects, some of them sharing the resources obtained by the Tejo River, and others doing well on their own resources.
From 1995, the Upper Juruá Extractive Reserve was included in the Pilot Program for Tropical Forests, a project managed by the World Bank and funded by European Economic Community countries, under the authority of IBAMA, the Brazilian environmental agency. By then, the association was working without Macedo and without support from the council, but it was able to manage a health project, plan for a reformed commercial system, implant a monitoring system, and improve its democratic representation. To these ends it established contracts of technical cooperation and financial support with different institutions, particularly the Universidade Estadual de Campinas and the Universidade de São Paulo. It was a new struggle, now to manage the territory and its public affairs.

Here it is worthwhile to mention some concerns. Some observers fear that the upper Juruá association (ASAREAJ) is not self-sustaining. How can rubber tappers fulfill tasks such as town-based financial management and conflict mediation in the forest, and ranging from the enforcement of social rules to arguing for their constituency when meeting with foreign experts, while simultaneously earning their livings as rubber tappers? And how to support these drains on contributions by local dwellers? These demands were and are impossible. The reason why they are made in the first place is that observers, including experts from the World Bank, are applying an utterly inappropriate model of local community to a new situation of public administration. The reserve was started with nearly 900 households, but it was composed of dozens of communities in the sense of people who could meet on a regular basis on weekends, often isolated along their own secondary rivers. In the past, these were linked to each other mainly through the trading post hierarchy and to the world through the trader’s infrastructure of commerce. To replace such a structure with additional services and functions requires more than the concept of self-sustaining community can deliver—it takes an effective institution-building process that includes costs normally associated with public goods, exactly like those the government provides. These rubber tappers are local government. They argue that if they are to perform such services—in the forms of resource conservation and local development management for a plurality of communities—then this must be paid for. In the past, the patrões were supported by generous protectionist policies, tax holidays and paternalistic loans, and they appropriated the benefits privately. Today, the rubber tappers are committing themselves—through binding contracts of use concession between the state and the rubber tappers’ association—to conserving at least 95 percent of the territory as a forest; in exchange for this and for other public services, they simply ask for adequate funding. They are acting not as group vaguely identified as residents. They act now as a political body with legal identity and responsibilities, engaging in written negotiation, representing a population vis-à-vis the state and other institutions.
These events are still unfolding.

While an extractive reserve on the Tejo River was receiving federal attention and World Bank funding by 1995, in the same year Antonio Macedo and Damiao Gomes (the leader of a cooperative which followed the example set on the Tejo River) each received a 16-month prison sentence under the charge of “inciting rubber tappers to resist a judicial order of eviction.” (The sentence was issued in March 1992, but was enforced only in September 1995.) The police had visited Damiao’s brother, as well as other rubber tappers of the Humaita River, to enforce an eviction sentence at the request of the rubber boss Sebastiao Corrêa. The evicted families had all been born in the Humaita River area, where their own parents had lived before. Incidentally, the titles presented by Sebastiao Corrêa, a former boss on the Tejo River, gave him rights to only 14,000 hectares starting at the river mouth, while the evicted families lived at the back of an area measuring 114,000 hectares, on which Corrêa could claim only the rights of tradition. After soldiers met a group of nearly 60 rubber tappers and neighboring Indians (the Arara-Jaminawa) waiting for them, they did not try to evict the families, but later accused Damiao and Macedo as the intellectual mentors of the pacific act of resistance. The judge accepted the charge and refused an appeal.

The rubber tappers of the nearby Valparaíso River, also by judicial sentence, were forbidden to hold meetings and were treated like slaves, as amply reported in a first hand account published by Amnesty International and confirmed by official inquest (Procuradoria Geral da República 1989; Sutton 1994:76-91). Macedo and Gomes have had their sentences commuted to community services, but the Valparaíso River rubber tappers are still deprived of the basic rights of other citizens. More generally, recent violence in Acre includes the murders of rubber tappers and squatters, the eviction of rubber tappers’ families, the interdiction of rubber tappers’ cooperatives, meetings and trade by judicial sentences (Almeida 1995b). The governor of the state of Acre was as of the writing of this article Orleir Cameli, a former Tejo River boss who has a condemning record of ravaging the Ashaninka territory for mahogany. He was also responsible for punitive expeditions against rubber tappers, and was the one who made every effort to block the extractive reserve idea from materializing in the Tejo River, where he planned to extract timber. More recently, in order to obtain the funding necessary to achieve his obsessive plan of linking Acre to the Pacific by means of a road crossing Cruzeiro do Sul, Orleir Cameli offered an obscure Colombian long-term rights to a large part of the state, a maneuver he later withdrew after it was made public by the national press.

Thus, the localized victories such as those of the Tejo River rubber tappers should not be taken as a proof of a general change. Rather, they suggest
the possibility of making localized moves. Other, new extractive reserve projects are, in fact, under way in the same area. Antonio Macedo and Terri de Aquino were working on the “Riozinho da Liberdade” (The River of Freedom) project, answering the requests made for years by the local association of rubber tappers there. And another project is under way on the Tarauaca River, after a request of that local trade union of rubber tappers.55

The schizophrenic effect of local, state and federal/international politics is sometimes disconcerting. Governor Cameli sought Colombian private funding for opening a road to the Pacific which multilateral banks are today unwilling to fund, while World Bank projects support two extractive reserves in Cameli’s own state; and Senator Marina Silva, a former socialist militant, was given precedence over Cameli in presidential talks. These apparent contradictions should remind us that the political scene, even in the “periphery,” is complex enough to allow for resistance and the construction of alternatives.

Final Comments

One of my goals in recounting the above stories was to question the theory according to which hegemonic powers have an uncontested capacity to control marginal populations and territories. The point is that such views leave little room for political change and for social creativity, condemning oppressed communities to powerless resistance, perhaps in the form of appropriative parodies of powerful discourses (Tsing 1993). I think that the stories suggest more complex ways in which local struggles for freedom and self-determination may counter national and global power structures. I used the example of the creation of extractive reserves, but it is possible that the arguments apply to other attempts by local populations to control, in some degree, their resources and their lives.

Marcio de Souza suggested that “environmentalism” was just a tactic, or a camouflage, for agrarian struggle. But my stories do not support this static view. Along the rubber tappers’ struggle—as in the stories of Chico Ginú, Chico Mendes and Antonio Macedo—there was a clear transformation of subjectivities, a conceptual reassessment of the meaning of land, of the limits of classical trade unionism and of the complexity of property regimes and public goods. The transformation of subjectivities has involved an intensive learning of technical language usages for planning, managing and monitoring alternative post-development paths—languages normally associated with positions of power. But also, as in the case of Antonio Macedo, it was a mystical journey mixed with personal politics.

It has been a move away from corporate claims to land, protected prices and welfare benefits, toward universal goals of wise landscape use, economic innovation and cultural diversification. These identities are both grounded in
substantive communities and displaced from them, because they are reconstructed in larger arenas in which the actors navigate, so to speak, through land, ethnic, gender and environmental issues, and in which they engage in struggles for recognition at both national and global levels. For, while the locus of class analysis was production, its stakes were labor values, and its mode was the conflict over value distribution, these coordinates are now not so much superseded, as enlarged; now, after successive displacements, the rubber tappers also define themselves in relation to nature, see their stakes as including cultural and environmental values, and formulate conflict in terms of who controls the human and natural resources.

The rubber tappers have been successively confronted with different interlocutors. Each time, they have had to assess what they had in their hands and what they have been able to accomplish; at the same time, they have had to reassess their own image and their own lives. They have reconstructed themselves as new political subjects, as their programs and methods evolved from mere resistance to the creative construction of alternative social realities by means of interaction in wider arenas. Have the older goals and the traditional identities been lost along with these changes? Should they, however, be taken as immutable? By reasserting their identity, and at the same time redefining it in new contexts, marginal groups such as the rubber tappers have been able to overcome marginality and stand for their rights in a world that should allow for variety. The concept of extractive reserves, of multiple uses of the forest without too much negative impact, of common ownership combined with family appropriation of resources, of democracy and kin-oriented organization, is perhaps more of a utopia than a fixed development model. External agencies understand extractive reserves as systems that will be assessed by fixed goals, but just as the concept evolved in the past as an answer to new problems that were framed in light of traditional experience, the concept will continue to evolve. It is thus a contribution—in progress—to general struggles for alternative ways of living taking place at the margins of the world.
Acronyms

ASAREAJ – Associação dos Seringueiros e Agricultores da Reserva Extrativista do Alto Jurua (Association of Rubber Tappers and Agriculturalists of the Upper Jurua Extractive Reserve)
BNDES – Banco Nacional para o Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (National Bank for Economic and Social Development)
CEBEMO – Catholic Organization for Development Cooperation, now Balance
CEDI – Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e Informação (Ecumenical Center for Documentation and Information), now ISA
CNB – Conselho Nacional da Borracha (National Council for Rubber)
CNPq – Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas (National Research Council)
CNPT – Centro Nacional para as Populações Tradicionais e Desenvolvimento Sustentável (National Center for Traditional Populations and Sustainable Development) This is an agency subordinated to IBAMA.
CNS – Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros (National Council of Rubber Tappers)
ÇTA – Centro de Trabalhadores Amazônicos (Amazonian Workers’ Center)
FAPESP – Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Research Support Foundation of the State of São Paulo)
FASE – Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional, the Federation of Social and Educational Assistance Organizations
FUNAI – Fundação Nacional do Índio (National Indian Foundation)
IBAMA – Instituto Brasileiro para o Meio Ambiente e Recursos Renováveis (Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Resources)
INCRA – Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute for Settlement and Land Reform)
ISA – Instituto Socioambiental (Socioenvironmental Institute), formerly CEDI
PC do B – Partido Comunista do Brasil (Communist Party of Brazil)
PPG7 – Pilot Program for the Protection of Brazilian Tropical Forests
PT – Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party)
PTU – Partido Unificado dos Trabalhadores (Unified Workers’ Party)
SNUC – Sistema Nacional de Unidades de Conservação (National System of Conservation Units)
UDR – União Democrática Ruralista (Democratic Ruralist Union)
UNI – União das Nações Indígenas (Union of Indigenous Nations)
UNICAMP – Universidade Estadual de Campinas (State University of Campinas)
WCED – the World Commission on Environment and Development
Notes

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1. Extractive reserves (reservas extrativistas) were proposed initially by the rubber tappers’ movement in 1985 and were legally instituted on January 30, 1990 as part of the Sistema Nacional de Unidades de Conservação (SNUC), or National System of Conservation Units (protected areas), by presidential decree n. 98.897. They are defined as national heritage areas ("territórios integrantes do patrimônio nacional") assigned to "sustainable use by traditional populations," upon the request of its stakeholders and after preliminary assessments of its natural potential and social situation. They should not be confused with the extractive settlements (assentamentos extrativistas), created earlier in July 1987 by the Instituto Brasileiro de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA), or Brazilian National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Portaria n. 627), also in response to the rubber tappers' claims.

2. Marginality means in this context, of course, “at the margins,” or peripheral. The Portuguese word marginalizado designates the “poor,” “excluded,” while marginal, when applied to people, also carries the sense of “criminal.” Note also that rubber tappers call riverbanks as margens (the “margins”), the focus of civilized life, in contrast with what they call o centro (the “center”), or uplands far from the navigable waterways.

3. This is how Trotsky expands on his “law”:

A backward country assimilates the material and intellectual conquests of the advanced countries. [...] Although compelled to follow after the advanced countries, a backward country does not take things in the same order. The privilege of historic backwardness—and such a privilege exists—permits, or rather compels, the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date ... The development of historically backward nations leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process. Their development as a whole acquires a planless, complex, combined character. [Trotsky 1967:22-23]

7. Parfit (1989); Torres and Martine (1991); Romanoff (1992); Browder (1992); Anderson (1991) is a moderate critic.
9. The process of emergence of a local order in an environment of disorder was described by means of the “Maxwell’s Demon” metaphor—beings that open or close doors which control the flow of signs and things, thus maintaining through time a transient, unstable structure. See Almeida 1990b, 1993:ch. 12.
12. From 1978 to 1994, a total of 23 million hectares of land were distributed through the Brazilian National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). Between 1988 and 1992 alone, a total of 3.4 million hectares were established as extractive reserves or as extractive settlements. Rubber tappers thus gained a share of land much above their relative weight in total rural population (Almeida 1995a). As of 2001, there were 17 extractive reserves in Amazonia and six in coastal areas of Brazil.
13. By 1990, officers at the government environmental agency argued that rubber tappers could not possibly understand a management plan for lack of “mathematical” knowledge. Accordingly, another expert mistakenly attributed to Julio Aquino, a former president of the National Council of Rubber Tappers, the possession of graduate education. The logic was the same: if Aquino could use the technical language of management, then he could not be a rubber tapper. Maria Aquino, Julio’s wife, is now an expert in interpreting satellite images (Brown et al. 1995).
14. Even when applied to forest dwellers in rubber tapping areas, “rubber tappers” is a misnomer if understood in a literal sense. Acre “rubber tappers” are better described as forest and riverine peasants who have a portfolio of activities, in which rubber tapping may be a minor or absent component.
15. I have drawn on published literature and archival sources (I am particularly indebted to Manuela Carneiro da Cunha for letters and reports from missionaries now deposited in the archives of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, in France, and also to Cristina Wolff and Mariana Franco for initiating research at public archives in Cruzeiro do Sul); on ethnographic data from fieldwork on the Tejo River, a tributary of the upper Jurúá River in southwestern Amazonia, starting with 14 months from September 1983 to November 208.
1983, followed by frequent visits from 1987 to 2000; and on my activity, from 1985 to 1990, as a non-paid assessor (advisor) for the CNS, and from 1989 on for the Association of Rubber Tappers and Agriculturalists of the Upper Juruá Extractive Reserve (ASAREA), Associação dos Seringueiros e Agricultores da Reserva Extrativista do Alto Juruá. All stories and dialogues without cited sources come from personal participation in the events and were witnessed personally by me.

16. An example is the way rubber tappers appear in Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), and in writings by Brazilian economic historians such as Celso Furtado (1963). The point is well formulated by Marshall Sahlins (2000), and Comaroff and Comaroff (1992:5).

17. The paraphrase is based on Sartre 1968.

18. A seringal (plural seringais) is a forest territory rich in wild rubber trees (seringas), linked by trails (estradas de seringa or "rubber tree roads"). The size of a seringal is specified by the number of estradas it contains, not by an area of land. In contrast, a rubber tree plantation is denoted in Portuguese by seringal de cultivo, or "cultivated seringal." The expression rubber estate, not used here, refers usually to a plantation.

19. Hevea brasiliensis is one of the several species of the genus Hevea; Castilloa is the genus of several species giving an inferior latex. Cf. Emperaire and Almeida 2002.

20. The point was made a long time ago by Euclides da Cunha, the Brazilian engineer and celebrated writer who volunteered to head the Brazilian part of the mixed Brazilian-Peruvian mission sent in 1904–5 to Acre to determine the boundaries of occupied areas as part of diplomatic negotiations toward a solution for the frontier issue (Cunha 1906).


22. The parallel was made by Julian Steward and Robert Murphy (1977), to make the theoretical point that similar dispersion of resources over vast areas and market pressures produce a common social structure (i.e., disperse family groups integrated only by the trading post).


24. The main scholarly works focus on the boom period. For the post-boom period, the main source is Father Constantin Tastevin (1913, 1914, 1920, 1925a, 1925b, 1926, 1928). Some of these are translated in Tastevin 1943, a manuscript for which I am grateful to Professor Robin Wright of Universidade Estadual de Campinas).

25. The official reports are good sources. Prefeitura do Alto Juruá 1913, 1914. Also Andrade 1937.
26. The existing claims on upper Juruá River seringais were issued by the Brazilian state of Amazonas when the area belonged to Peru (and was claimed by Bolivia). After the area was eventually incorporated into Brazil (1904 de facto, 1909 by treaty with Peru), the federal government did not validate the claims until the 1980s, after a protracted legal controversy.

27. The incident is reported in the personal papers of the governor Jose Guiomard dos Santos (1946).

28. In other words, the terror-based system of the Putumayo area cannot be generalized. Instead, seringais in Brazilian Amazonia often rested on a combination of coercion and negotiation along patron-client lines. For this use of “patron” and “client,” see for example Wolf 1966.

29. According to Laure Emperaire and based on data from the Tejo River, a typical trail of 120 rubber trees can take from 60 to 300 hectares. This means 120 to 600 hectares for two trails. If we use 180 hectares per trail as an average, we obtain 360 hectares for two trails (Emperaire and Almeida 2002).

30. Recent research, based on insects, frogs and birds, has evidenced that the Tejo River area has one of the highest biodiversity indices known for South America; larger mammal populations, though undergoing strain, are also found in the area. See Brown and Lucci Freitas 2002.

31. While Barbara Weinstein (1983) explains the failure of capitalism to establish plantations in the Amazon on the basis of the resistance of the workers against wage labor, Warren Dean (1987) argues that there was an ecological barrier against domestication.

32. Patrão (plural patrões) is the word applied by rubber tappers to the person who advances merchandise and purchases their product on a permanent and exclusive basis, often keeping the fiaguês (or client) in chronic debt. A patrão may also be the supposed owner of the trails of rubber trees to whom a rent is paid.

33. The information on Cameli's helicopter trips came from rubber tappers in 1987, and particularly from Valdomiro Timoteo, a small boss who was promised a position in the logging enterprise. Other pieces of information come from legal actions moved by Antonio de Macedo, then at the Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), the National Indian Foundation, against Cameli (Procuradoria Geral da República 1989, vol. 1).

34. These harmful practices included making superimposed slashes on trees, reducing the prescribed horizontal distance among slashes (the “two-thirds” system required that two-thirds of the circumference of the tree remained free of tapping at each given year), tapping more than the two weekly days of accepted rule, tapping during the flowering season, forcing the trees to yield more by tying up the trunk with vines, or simply making too-deep incisions which cut through the bark (“getting to the wood”). The experienced
rubber tappers used additional and minute preparations before starting to tap a trail (such as scraping the tree and gradually “taming” it before actually tapping them, choosing the full moon to start the actual tapping). They also cleaned carefully the “estradas de seringa” (“rubber tree roads”) twice a year. Areas rich in rubber trees were completely forbidden for agricultural purposes (Emperaire and Almeida 2002).

35. The Portuguese word leite applies in regional usage equally to animal milk and to the white sap or latex of rubber trees.

36. Caboclo is a word is usually applied in the Amazonian context to either people with mixed Indian ancestry, or to detribalized Indians, and still as a synonym for the poor Amazonian peasant (Wagley 1964; Galvão 1951, 1976; Parker 1985; Nugent 1993; Lima Ayres 1992; against this usage, see Lima 1999). In Acre, caboclo is synonymous with Indian, detribalized or not. Chico Gini is the grandson of Rita, a cabocla captured as a young woman by the rubber tappers. His brothers were described as caboclos and were feared for their magical powers; Chico Gini, though a delegado sindical or presidente de associação, has also been described as a caboclo (cf. Lima 1999).

37. Chico Gini, in the future, would become involved in the enforcement of hunting rules such as the prohibition of using hunting dogs, part of the “Use Plan” of the Reserva Extrativista do Alto Juruá.

38. Cf. Hecht and Cockburn 1989. Note that the dictionary definition (“stalemate” or “stand-off”) corresponds to the southern Brazilian, not to the Amazonian usage of “empatar.”

39. The young schoolteacher and trade unionist, Marina Silva, later on became the first black, female, forest-born senator in Brazil’s history.

40. After the public hearings, the rubber tappers gathered in small groups where they discussed issues included like the development policies for the Amazon, the land reform, health and education, social security issues and transportation. Each working group worked on a topic, having an assessor (“advisor”), usually priests, activists and anthropologists locally involved with the rubber tappers in their areas of origin.

41. The patrões in the seringal business used to call themselves seringalistas.

42. Osmarino Rodrigues kept a small library of Trotsky’s books in an (unplugged) fridge in his modest house in Brasiléia; he was under permanent danger due to threats against his life. Later on he became one of the founders of the PTU (Partido Unificado dos Trabalhadores, Unified Worker’s Party), a dissident wing of the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores).

43. A passage of Jaime Araújo’s speech at the commission is quoted in Brundtland’s report (WCED 1991:58).

44. Rubber tappers were thus implicitly criticizing the conservative model of a “Tragedy of the Commons,” and in fact reversing it (McCay and Acheson 1992).
45. I did not witness directly the actual debate on the land property system, since in order to discuss this point the trade unionists required all of us non-workers to leave the meeting (among these invited “advisors” were Mary Allegretti, Ligya Simonian, and myself). The role of Chico Mendes and of Osmarino Amancio in favor of the chosen system is my conjecture based on their personal convictions. It was a bold position to state that the rubber tappers should not claim actual titles to land, but only rights to use territories as collectivities.

46. The mediation of a division of CEDI, the Ecumenical Center for Documentation and Information (now ISA, the Socioenvironmental Institute), which had standing relationships with CEBEMO (now Bilance), must have been decisive in this action.

47. Macedo was fired by 1988 from FUNAI; nearly ten years later, he was reintegrated to his post after an administrative process acknowledged the political nature of his expulsion from FUNAI.

48. I prepared this project together with Antonio Macedo. Without changing the part prepared by us, Adir Gianinni added a second section following the BNDES’s financial guidelines. Since Adir Gianinni wanted the state of Acre to appear as a proponent of the project, in the end a compromise was reached: the state of Acre would have a role of “interveniente técnico” (technical intervening participant) in a project under full responsibility of the CNS itself.

49. The ayahuasca (or “rope of the dead” in Quechua), the tea prepared with the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaves of *Psycotria viridis*, is the central piece in the ritual of several Amazonian urban religious traditions founded in the thirties by former rubber tappers: the Santo Daime, the Barquinha and the União do Vegetal. In the Tejo River area, the ayahuasca was used by some families of rubber tappers under secrecy, being forbidden by patrões. Macedo was not linked to any of the above organized ayahuasca cults. He composed his own ritual songs and led ayahuasca sessions in own very personal way, inviting to them all visitors to Cruzeiro do Sul, and also making followers among rubber tappers. He called his ayahuasca sessions “festas maravilhosas,” “marvelous parties” (cf. also Franco 2002; Labate et al. 2002).

50. There was also a gossip campaign suggesting that he was the devil. Wasn’t he handing the rubber tappers “new things for old things”? After all, he was also a shaman who guided ayahuasca sessions in which he addressed the Queen of the Forest and other pagan entities with his own songs. It was also said that Macedo was selling the whole area to foreigners who would take over the place for “protecting nature” after evicting all rubber tappers.

51. The region we call the “upper Jurua” (the eastern Acre) has an area of 75,161 square kilometers, 43 percent of which are now protected areas: three
extractive reserves (11,362 square kilometers), 19 indigenous lands (13,282 square kilometers) and one national park (6,050 square kilometers).

52. Professor Keith S. Brown Jr., from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas, together with Professor Adão Cardoso, were key in establishing the facts on the field. See Brown 1987.

53. This was the first extractive reserve as a conservation unit (see note 1), created on January 23, 1990. It was followed by three other reserves in March 12, 1990, among them the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve.

54. On April 15, 1991, following traditional rulings in the area, Judge Jerônimo Borges Filho issued an Interdito Proibitório (Prohibitory Interdict) “against setting cooperatives for selling goods, and producing and buying rubber within the boundaries of seringais Russas and Valparaízo.” He acknowledged the plaintiff’s argument, according to which the cooperative would “detract from their [the seringal managers’ and owners’] legitimate rights in exercising the selling of goods, production and buying of rubber within their seringais, causing them irreparable losses” (Processos n. 1.262/91 and 7.414/91, Manoel Batista Lopes vs. Sindicato de Trabalhadores Rurais, Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros, União das Nações Indígenas and Centro de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos). On March 15, 1994, Judge Heitor A. Macedo reasserted the same interdiction. On March 18, 1994, 34 Valparaíso dwellers described themselves, in a letter sent to INCRA, as “squatters” of the seringais Russas and Valparaíso ... living in a regime of slavery and under threats of death...” (cf. Procuradoria Geral da República 1989, 1:71 and the report by anthropologist Eliane C. O’Dwyer, appended to the same report; also Sutton 1994; Almeida 1995b).

55. Both reserves have been created as of 2002. Jorge Viana, from the Partido dos Trabalhadores, has succeeded Orleir Cameli as governor of the state of Acre.

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