

Chico Mendes and Dorothy Stang

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Two defenders of the Amazon rainforest. One man and one woman. One Brazilian and one American. Both assassinated. Two completely different stories with completely different outcomes and expectations. Chico Mendes and Dorothy Stang are both remembered as environmentalists, specifically fighting for the protection of the Amazon rainforest. While both Mendes and Stang were advocates for protecting the rainforest, they did not cross paths during their activism in Brazil, with Mendes preceding Stang by a few decades. Although Mendes and Stang had somewhat similar objectives and ultimately the same fate, they went about achieving their goals in very different ways because of their distinct backgrounds and circumstances.

One of the most significant differences between Dorothy Stang and Chico Mendes was their positionality to the Brazilian natives. While Dorothy Stang moved to South America on a mission to serve the poor and spread the word of God while fighting for protection of the Amazon, Chico Mendes was a Brazilian native of the working class. Because the Amazon rainforest is a glorious example of God's creation, according to Stang's religious beliefs, she felt strongly that it needed to be preserved at all costs. Unlike Stang, who grew up in a Catholic community in the United States, generations of Mendes' family have relied on the resources extracted from the Amazon as a means of living. Seeing as Mendes worked as a full-time rubber tapper alongside his father since the age of 11¹, it is evident that his goal was not to make the rainforest untouchable, rather create boundaries for the rainforest ensuring that it is to be used sustainably. To achieve this goal, Mendes had to make connections with people with more money, power, and resources than he had, drawing international attention to his cause while doing so. This was not the case for Dorothy Stang, as she was already a member of a huge community: the Catholic church.

¹ Andrew Revkin, *Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest* (Island Press, 2004), 75.

Through the Church, Stang was able to attract many people towards the advocacy of the rainforest and to the native people who inhabited the region. Her work as a missionary was especially attractive to the members of the Catholic church, who saw an opportunity to expose the citizens of Brazil to Catholicism while attempting to modernize the region as well, through the Western ideas that she brought from the United States. The reason why her assassination reach so many people can also be attributed to the fact that she was a part of such a large and prominent community, as it could have been perceived in the United States as an attack against the Catholic church. Although Stang was naturalized in Brazil and learned to speak Portuguese to communicate with the Brazilian people, she was still viewed as an outsider coming into the region with an agenda of unfamiliar ideas. In addition to fighting for land reforms for the rainforest, she also wanted to make Brazil a more developed region by bringing Western norms to the country. The ranchers were extremely suspicious of Stang, believing she was sent by the United States government for ulterior motives involving the exploitation of the land and its people. Because Mendes was a native of Brazil, he was not faced with these suspicions, though he was fighting against the ranchers just as Stang.

Chico Mendes was an incredibly intentional and savvy leader. For example, while he was younger, he flirted with the ideologies of communism, a political view that Dorothy Stang undoubtedly detested, but walked away from it once he realized the extent of its rigid worldview that could turn away potential environmentalist allies. He was successful in adapting his political views to benefit his larger goal of protecting the rainforest, exhibiting the traits of a determined leader. There is a certain amount of privilege that one must have to be an environmentalist, which Mendes had to have been aware of. The extensive publicity he attained would not have been possible without the more affluent connections he made in the United States and in Europe,

a necessarily strategic move on Mendes' part. He had the ideas, but he needed the help executing them on a widespread scale from his wealthier associates. He was very successful in his motives and earned impressive awards from the "United Nations Environment Program, the Gaia Foundation, and other groups"², as well as helped form the Xapuri Rural Workers Union in 1977³. Mendes can be attributed for groundbreaking accomplishments regarding the establishment of reserves with the Brazilian government to protect the rainforest while still benefiting financially from its resources and extracting from it. Throughout his trials and tribulations, Mendes "insisted on a non-violent approach"⁴, something he and Dorothy Stang had in common, who was shot by two men shortly after reading a Bible verse aloud.

Another significant difference between Mendes and Stang was the aftermath of their deaths. Dorothy Stang's assassination was unsettling to citizens of the United States, as many people knew her through the media coverage as a Catholic nun who courageously traveled to Brazil to save the poor native people. Following her death, Stang's brother traveled to Brazil as well, seeking justice for his martyred sister. He was displeased with the Brazilian judicial system, as he came to Brazil holding Western expectations of what the justice system should look like. Unfortunately, by the end of the trial there was very little justice on the behalf of Dorothy Stang, leaving her brother and many other United States citizens disappointed and disheartened. The justice system did not prove to be flawless for Chico Mendes as well, though his killers did see more jail time than Stang's. Both cases received international coverage, but the difference between the two is that had Mendes not made connections with "environmentalists, labor organizers, and human rights advocates from Brazil, the United States, and Europe"⁵, this

² Revkin, *The Burning Season*, 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

likely would not have been the case. Mendes worked hard for his word to be heard and his fight to be felt, and newspapers like the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, and, most of all, the *New York Times*⁶ gave him a platform to do so and backed him with legitimacy, partly why his death was consequently so publicized. About a week following Mendes' death, "another president of a rural union, in Eastern Brazil, was blasted in the face with a shotgun"⁷. The death of said Brazilian union president was much less remarkable for obvious reasons, and the fact of the matter is that the only condition needed to make Dorothy Stang's death remarkable was being a white American woman killed by a brown man in a seemingly underdeveloped region.

Just as Mendes brought people from all over the country together while he was alive, he continued to do so after his assassination through his funeral on Christmas day. The funeral not only brought hundreds of rubber tappers, whom "hiked for many hours through the forest to attend the wake and funeral"⁸, but also the friends that Mendes made through his environmentalism work from all over the globe. One of the less obvious accomplishments on Mendes' impressive list was his ability to bring people of different backgrounds together, "the people from the forest and those from the outside, who had found in this simple rubber tapper an indispensable ally"⁹. Although the justice system ultimately did not bring forth all the justice that some would have hoped or expected for Dorothy Stang and Chico Mendes, their accomplishments do not go unnoticed even decades after their deaths and go beyond just their environmentalism work. Not only did they bring international attention to a pressing environmental issue, but they also inspired a change in those who followed suit when they no longer could.

⁶ Ibid., 226-228.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 12

⁹ Ibid., 13