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Export Agriculture and the Expansion of Urban Slum Areas

By RAYMOND E. CRIST*

ABSTRACT. Many of the richest people have all or a large part of their accumulated *wealth* in *land*, yet the men and women who work the land are usually their country's most *poverty*-stricken. The *landowning elite* is very powerful because land has been *concentrated* in few hands. In the *'Third World'* of less developed countries (LDCs) and in the *United States* this situation in the last four decades has led to an emphasis on export crops and a restructuring of agriculture to produce them. *Brazil* is an example of this change, which has led to *deforestation* and multiplication of the *hungry, homeless and alienated*, the new "*barbarians within the gates.*" Comparable developments are seen in the U.S., threatening *fiscal* and *political stability* in many countries.

I

Introduction

LAND IS THE BASIS of agricultural wealth, yet the man with the hoe who works it has for centuries been the poorest of the poor. The Spanish have a proverb to the effect that the country is the mother of the poor. Yet, everywhere many of the richest people have all or a large part of their wealth in land. The concentration of land in few hands has played a primary role in agricultural production in many countries. The landed elite group is powerful, in a position to use what science knows about soils, plants, animals, and machines. During the past four decades, in the Third World as well as in industrialized nations, governments and big businesses alike have emphasized the importance of crops for *export*. Modern technology and large-scale mechanized equipment are being extensively used to further this goal. An investigation of certain aspects of agricultural production in Brazil, a so-called Third World nation, and the "developed" industrial United States brings to light significant contrasts and even more significant comparisons.

II

Facets of Brazilian Demography and Development

BRAZIL IS A COUNTRY with a young population. Almost one half of its almost 140 million inhabitants is under 20 years of age. It is conservatively estimated by

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Brazilian social agencies that between 5 and 7 million of these pre-teenage youngsters are homeless, poor, abandoned, completely marginalized, living at the very edge of their society. Due to socioeconomic conditions over which these street waifs have no control they often are able barely to stay alive at all only by sifting through garbage or engaging in petty thefts. This in a country whose government has chalked up national indebtedness of more than \$100 billion, and where the annual inflation rate is nearing 800 percent.

Professor Sioli points out in his study¹ of the effects of deforestation in Amazonia that plans for Amazonian development are made by a highly developed industrial-commercial civilization and that these plans are concerned with and elaborated solely to serve that civilization all over the world.

Large scale producers, subsidized by the government or by multinational companies are able to sell hearts of palm, mangoes, and papayas to Parisians and New Yorkers. At the same time 38% of Brazilians are malnourished. Soy beans are exported and black beans for domestic consumption are in short supply. Thus these development plans, Sioli continues, are nothing but a new wave of conquests sweeping over the last vast tract of land spared by the original and subsequent conquests. He hopes that true development, in a humane sense, for a growing number of people at home and abroad, can be achieved without the destruction of an extremely fragile landscape, with its diversity and sustainable bio productivity. He also hopes that the idea that "small is beautiful" may prevail and "triumph over the destructive objectives of instant profits for foreign regions and peoples!"

One of the goals of strongly nationalist Brazil is *integrar para não entregar*, that is, the nation must be internally integrated or it will be absorbed by outside nations and interests. However, the vertical integration of Brazil's social strata must also be achieved, along with its economic coordination through the construction of modern transportation facilities. Millions of hungry, homeless, human beings, the waifs, delinquents and strays of its own society should be incorporated into the society. They will not wish to live in a society where all the cards are stacked against them. If they continue to fail to become incorporated into Brazilian society as full, dues paying members, they will become willing workers in undermining it.

III

Brazil as Exporter of Food

GREAT CHANGES HAVE TAKEN PLACE in the agricultural landscape of Brazil during the last few decades, as the country became a substantial exporter of agricultural crops, particularly of soy beans. The ecological niche in which this change is

most noticeable is the Campo Cerrado with its some 500 million acres of arable land. Before 1970 the Cerrado was used mostly as pastureland, 12 acres being required to support one head of stock.

However, with the addition of limestone, phosphate and other fertilizers many different crops can be grown. By 1985 about 2 million metric tons of soy beans were produced. Researchers have been able to identify the level of additives necessary to correct deficiencies of the soils of the Cerrado and to plant resistant strains of crops. Varieties adjusted to each particular locality have been developed and Brazil has 15,000 extension agents in service to make the new technology available to farmers. Soy beans are a key crop because of their nitrogen fixation capability and their great export potential. Further, during the past decade roads and markets have been developed.

But the first great successes in the production of soy beans have been accompanied by a decline in the production of the black beans that are basic in the diet of practically 100 percent of Brazilians. Black beans mixed with the *farinha* made of the manihot root are the staff of life. Unfortunately with the emphasis on soy beans for export, less emphasis has been placed on the production of black beans for domestic consumption. Bean riots have erupted.²

Great wealth accrues to a few people at the top of the economic and social pyramid. Millions of street people are on short or no rations. They lack land, housing, education and health care. Scores of small almost naked children along with clouds of red-headed vultures sift for tasty morsels in the rubbish of the vast city dumps. In this connection the role of the church is of utmost importance.

Jane Kramer's pertinent and most perceptive "Letter from the Elysian Fields"³ is recommended reading. This is a description of the work of the church, the "liberation church," in the swampy plains of Baixada Fluminense, between Rio and Petropolis. The Portuguese name of this particularly poor and rundown shantytown is Campos Elíseos. Here have settled the human flotsam fleeing the droughts of the Northeast and the social terror and corruption of the 21 years of a particularly vicious, sadistic, and stupid military dictatorship. Yes, stupid. It allowed a group of landowners and foreign companies with mining and ranching schemes to destroy 100 million acres of Amazon forest.

Frei David Raimundo Santos, a 34 year old mulatto, lives at the parish house in Campos Elíseos. He holds to what has become known as "a theology of liberation." He believes that Christ was born poor to announce, in the name of the poor, an end to tyranny, and that with His death the mission of deliverance was passed to every Christian. He believes that religion in Latin America is the source of all popular enthusiasm and popular understanding, the invigorating, liberating idea in poor people's lives. He firmly believes that a People's Church "starting with the poor, standing with the poor against poverty" will be very

different from the opiate Church of saints and shrines and pilgrimages which has dominated religion in Brazil since the Europeans arrived. The parishioners of the People's Church are indeed beginning to "free themselves" with squatters' strikes and catechism classes, with meetings about land rights and Black consciousness.

IV

Relevant Aspects of U.S. Agriculture

MANY SMALL FARMERS in the U.S. are able to stay on in farming by catering to the local market, by raising truck crops or specialty crops. These farmers and their womenfolk also often have supplemental incomes. They drive a school bus, clerk in stores, teach in the local high school, work in a nearby hospital, and so on. Farmers in this category have usually inherited their land which is entirely unencumbered or carries a very small mortgage. Farmers with middle-size farms are in a bad way. Many of them can rent for cash or on shares all or most of their land and be better off financially than if they continued farming. Potential buyers or renters are the big farmers with the enormous and heavy pieces of agricultural equipment.

Thus large farms grow by accretion. The large farmer receives subsidies both for not growing certain crops and as a stimulus for growing export crops. The larger the farm, the larger the subsidy. A former Secretary for Agriculture put it quite bluntly: Get big or get out. Total farm subsidies of some \$100 million to American farmers made it possible for the U.S. to supply the foreign market with wheat. Our grain to be exported *must* be heavily subsidized to compete with grain from Argentina or Australia. Tens of millions of dollars of U.S. taxpayers' money are paid to large farmers who export to the Soviet Union. The *reductio and absurdum* is that U.S. grain can then be bought cheaper in the Soviet Union than it can be in the U.S.

V

Home Grown Poverty

AT THE SAME TIME, according to a report issued in April 1987 by the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, nearly 13 million American children under 18 are living below the government's official poverty line (\$10,989.00 for a family of four). It would seem only logical that U.S. farmers produce foodstuffs for domestic consumption while devoting millions of acres to crops for export. It would also seem logical for Brazilian farmers to produce enough black beans for the domestic market while producing for export soy beans, citrus fruits and concentrates, and so on.

These glimpses of certain facets of agriculture in Brazil and in the U.S. show the widespread use of the most advanced methods and techniques in solving problems of agricultural productivity. Socioeconomic problems on the other hand seem much more difficult to solve.

Nations around the world, both those in the early phases of industrialization as well as those highly industrialized—one might almost say *over* industrialized—find themselves on the horns of the dilemma so succinctly described by Professor Hugh Popenoe:

Recent studies in several tropical countries show that food production per area rises dramatically as farm size drops below three hectares. Small farms are usually more productive per area than large farms because the smaller system can be much more diversified—such small-farm techniques as kitchen gardens, intercropping, multiple cropping, two- or three-story agriculture, and the use of many different species are difficult, at best, in a large, mechanized system. Also, small farms usually make better use of organic residues and integrate animals into the system. Therefore, a country that wants to maximize agricultural production could develop a strategy to increase the number of small farms. Unfortunately, although small farms produce more per area than large farms, farmers on small farms receive less total income than farmers on large farms. Thus, the question is often asked: should a country maximize agricultural production or income per farmer? One of the most important dilemmas in tropical agricultural production for our times is this trade-off between yields per hectare and income per farmer.⁴

The main thrust of the message in the preceding paragraphs is that the highly industrialized and, shall I say?, the *under*industrialized, nations of the U.S. and of Brazil, respectively, have social problems that are comparable. The leaders of both countries seem to be having little success in solving them, yet the problems of how to integrate into society the millions of the poor and downtrodden are not new. The mighty Caesars in “Rome in all her Glory” in the early centuries of the Christian Era tried mass executions of slaves in revolt and Bread and Circuses for those more docile members of society. In the long run neither course was a scintillating success.

VI

The Eclipse of Rome

THE NORTHERN MARCHES of the far-flung Roman Empire were guarded by military garrisons in outposts along the Rhine and Danube rivers and along Hadrian's wall across northern Britain to keep out marauding Scottish Clansmen. As the years passed and as the population around the military posts became somewhat Romanized, local Gauls, Britons, and Teutons were recruited in the Roman army. It became ever more difficult to enlist Romans in the mother country south of the Alps for duty in the distant frontier garrisons. Army battalions became more and more restive as the percentage of native recruits over Romans increased.

Army contingents gradually evolved under the leadership of local strong men

who, less inclined to obey orders from the far off capitol, ultimately marched on Rome itself, where they were welcomed as deliverers by the thousands of slaves Romans had captured in their campaigns. In the end the capitol city was sacked and burned by the legionnaires from the north in collusion with the oppressed slaves who felt they had no stake in their society.

This in encapsulated form is what happened over time as the barbarians took over the nerve center, the capitol city of Rome, whence had emanated for so long the stern edicts along with the heartless, bloodthirsty mercenaries to enforce them.

VII

Modern Homegrown Goths and Vandals

MODERN SOCIETIES are not monolithic. They are made up of distinct social and economic layers or strata, that are not hermetically sealed against each other. Individuals in the past have moved from one to another stratum depending on certain variables. As the number increases of those without land or skills that would enable them to carve out a satisfactory niche in their own society, that society becomes static. Upward social and economic mobility is impossible. The danger is that these millions of pariahs without hope, unable to get even a boring, mind-numbing, eyestraining, assembly line job at absurd minimum wages, a kind of modern Trojan Horse, will not willingly accept their status as "untouchables."

The great megalopolises of Brazil and the United States—indeed of the entire western world—are surrounded by many square miles of shanty towns. In these seething human termite nests are bivouacked temporarily hundreds of thousands of modern Huns, Goths and Vandals, readying themselves to storm into and destroy the inner city with its luxury apartments and skyscrapers. They are not foreign mercenaries. They are a homegrown byproduct of the modern technological society that has rejected them.

This is not meant to be a worst case scenario. Barring nuclear war or an accident on an unprecedented scale, the author is confident that man will survive. Ghost cities as well as ghost kingdoms that flourished millennia ago now lie buried by the drifting sand of the desert or by dense tropical rainforests. Yet man continues to survive. May he live in peace for the 'length of time,' and may we be able to sing with the chorus of Sophocles: There are many strange wonders but nothing more wonderful than man.

Notes

1. John Hemming, ed., "Change in the Amazon Basin," Vol. 1, "Man's Impact on Forests and Rivers," (Manchester, England: Manchester Univ. Press, 1985, p. 51.

2. P. H. Abelson, James W. Rowe, "A New Agricultural Frontier," *Science*, Vol. 235, March 20, 1987.
3. *The New Yorker*, March 2, 1987, pages 40-41.
4. Art Hansen, Della E. McMillan, eds., "Food in Sub-Saharan Africa", Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986, p. 175.

In Memoriam: Karl L. Falk, 1911-1988

DR. KARL L. FALK, member of the editorial board of this JOURNAL and a longtime collaborator in its work, died on September 16, 1988 after heart surgery. In his passing this project loses an ardent supporter and this country a leading economic and financial scholar.

Dr. Falk was born in Berkeley, California. He took his bachelor's degree at Stanford University. Offered a scholarship, he did his graduate work at the University of Berlin (where another of this JOURNAL's supporters, the late Dr. Julius Hirsch, was dean of its famous *Handelshochschule*). There he took his doctorate in economics in 1936.

This was when Adolf Hitler was consolidating his dictatorship over the German people by political murder and demagoguery. Dr. Falk's first job was as a radio news broadcaster, translating Hitler's speeches to the Reichstag.

He joined the faculty of Fresno State University in 1938. Becoming professor of economics, he began a career of scholarship which was to make him, after the war, a sought-after lecturer in many countries. He took an active part in the work of the Committee on Taxation, Resources and Development (TRED), which promoted research in public finance oriented toward social progress. The group of leading scholars in economics and public finance who meet annually to report on their research was organized and funded for many years by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and is now continuing its work under the aegis of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

He retired from Fresno State in 1968 to become president and manager of the First Federal Savings and Loan Association. In 1969, however, he was called back to the university in the midst of the campus turmoil over the Vietnam War to become its president. A week after he took office he shook up the administration, an action that resulted in more demonstrations and several acts of vandalism. But he prevailed.

Determined to make Fresno State a strong regional college in the University of California system, combining an outstanding record in the liberal arts, and technical training in agriculture, engineering and business, he held the post during the 70s, laying the foundation for its present-day standing.