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# THE RAFT FISHERMEN

*Tradition & Change in the Brazilian  
Peasant Economy*



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Rather, their interest lay in discovering how much of the SUDENE funds could be diverted to their own use and how much political advantage they might derive from the Society. Since the fish tank was an experiment that could have failed, they preferred to disassociate themselves from it. They neither joined in the work themselves nor encouraged other members of the Society to work.

With the work well advanced on the fish tank, the Society received an additional Cr\$200,000 (\$110) from SUDENE. Mestre Geraldo was elevated to president. He requested and received the aid of a literate *compadre*, one of the owners of the remaining salt tanks, in the keeping of records and books. This *compadre* also kept the money locked in a trunk in his home. In his new role as president, Mestre Geraldo has maintained a high level of interest in the Society. He has kept a core of retired fishermen hard at work to complete the fish tank. With the promise of help from his literate *compadre* and with SUDENE's supervision, there was no need for him to involve leaders of either political group in the county. Energies could be directed exclusively toward completion of the fish tank and toward consolidation of an association comprised of fishermen sharing common needs and goals.

In 1967 I returned to Coqueiral to find a defunct Benevolent Society and a badly organized and malfunctioning fish breeding tank. SUDENE funds had been used up in the completion of the tank, and there was no money available for its upkeep and maintenance. The old men were evidently weary of toiling in the mud; without the representatives of SUDENE to encourage them, they gave way to the remonstrations of the local bigwigs. The mangrove swamp grew up again, overrunning the tank.

[ X ]

## Conclusion

IN THIS STUDY I have examined the processes of change within the traditional raft fishing economy of Northeast Brazil by means of historical, economic, and sociological investigation. This analytical approach follows from my conviction that peasant decision-making and subsequent behavior are conditioned by the complex interplay of ecological, social, structural, and organizational factors which comprise the totality of that domain known as the peasant economy.

In the preceding chapters I have tried to elaborate those factors that affect the outcome of decisions concerning the acceptance or rejection of technological innovations. It should be clear from the foregoing account that the peasant economy is not an easily bounded sub-system, and that a variety of forces form the alternatives from which the peasant fisherman makes his choices. Although the locus of peasant economic life is the family, and it is within the household that most decisions are made and acted upon, socioeconomic relationships extend far beyond the limits of the household or even the community. Since traditional economies are part economies which serve among other things as commodity producers for a larger system, household decisions depend upon events in the wider universe, many of them beyond the immediate control of the peasant fisherman. Therefore, we must approach the subject of innovation and change in peasant societies in two ways. On the one hand, we must understand the quality of household relationships and the extended family ties that sustain the local economy. On the other hand, we must examine the exchange relationships which exist in the larger ecological complex and which clearly account for peasant behavior.

An alternative approach in the anthropological literature is presented by George Foster, who posits for the members of every society



a "common cognitive orientation" from which behavior is derived. According to Foster, "The model of cognitive orientation that seems best to account for (emphasis mine) peasant behavior is the 'Image of Limited Good'" (1965:296).<sup>1</sup> That is,

... peasants view their social, economic, and natural universe—their total environment—as one in which all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, security and safety, exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply as far as the peasant is concerned. Not only do these and all other "good things" exist in finite and limited quantities, but in addition there is no way directly within peasant power to increase the available quantities (*Ibid.*, 296).

While Foster may be giving us an adequate description of the ethos of the Mexican village where his research was done, his thesis treats only a part of a system which he attempts to view as closed and from within (*Ibid.*). In his rather "ontological" approach to the existence of peasant communities,<sup>2</sup> he fails to explain the cultural phenomenon of peasant conservatism as a result of historically given power relationships that provide the peasant with his "rules of the game of living." Although he footnotes his recognition that peasant communities are parts of more complex societies (*Ibid.*, 311), he does not seem to think that the "sympiotic spatial-temporal relationships," about which he wrote earlier (1953:163), are necessary to an understanding of the attitudes and values held by the villagers. In this way, he clearly forgoes the analytical framework that I believe necessary for an understanding of peasant conservatism. There can be little doubt that the peasant's desires are not finite and that the possibility of fulfilling them are not in his own hands (Nash 1964:226; De Vries 1961:43).

Given this assumption, it is essential for us to understand the role of local elites as mediators between the peasant and the wider system in which he participates. In Coqueiral, it is the local bigwigs who manipulate the natural and social environments to their own ends. In their attempt to exploit the labor of peasant fishermen, they exacerbate the tensions that prevail in the village, an incipiently stratified local community in which superordinate-subordinate relationships are maintained by virtue of the bigwigs' access to outside sources of

wealth and power—notably, the sugar producers and coconut planters desirous of a steady supply of inexpensive high-quality fish.

These local bigwigs dominate the daily life of the peasant fishermen in an effort to serve their own interests. They dictate codes of conduct and enforce legislation designed to control the prices and marketing of fish. It is they who introduced hull sailboats to Coqueiral in order to enrich themselves by exacting as their share one-half of the catch from fishermen who, as permanent crew members, would become, in effect, sharecroppers-at-sea. At the same time, the bigwigs discouraged the introduction of other techniques, such as the gill nets, which might provide capital, and thus mobility, to the fishermen.

Yet, within the limits set by their ecosystem, the peasant fishermen remain free to select the fishing strategy most advantageous for their own economic well-being and to accept innovations that maximize their individual gain—as is evidenced, for example, in the widespread use of new, more efficient nets. Despite the introduction of the larger hull sailboats, the fishermen of Coqueiral show a preference for the traditional log rafts, which indicates a more general preference for independent production.

The alternation of fishing pattern between independent production and fishing as the member of a crew on someone else's raft represents a highly rational adaptation to local ecological conditions that took place long before the introduction of hull sailboats. Jangadeiros maximize their own productive efforts by using several types of rafts equipped to exploit a variety of fisheries. The added comfort of hull sailboats makes it possible for fishermen to spend longer stretches of time at sea, but their range is still limited to fishing above the continental shelf, and handlining from sailboats in the same general area exploited by jangadas does not increase the daily catch per man. Instead, hook-and-line fishing from hull sailboats extends the hours and energy spent fishing without altering the work-production ratio in any significant way. Even more important, the share system requires that a fisherman devote twice the numbers of hours to earn the same amount of money he obtains as an independent producer because he must contribute half of his fish to the nonfishing owner of the boat. While changes in boat type might be accompanied by considerable increases in over-all production by joining a number of men together



in the fishing process over longer periods, few if any benefits accrue to the fishermen, owing to the disproportionate share of the catch taken by the owner of the vessel.

Moreover, market controls in turn affect production strategies. Fishermen have a clear understanding of the way in which the market functions. They are aware of the difference between a "free" and a controlled market because they have received far higher prices for their fish in urban markets, where the rigid price ceilings that characterize the local Market Place are not in effect. They are cognizant, too, of the extent of consumer demands, and the alternation of fishing pattern within given seasons is predicated on the receptivity of the market. Given the price controls in Coqueiral and the dangers of a saturated market, there is little monetary incentive to fish on hull sailboats.

In sum, as long as the logs necessary for the construction of rafts are available and within their means, and while the local market structure continues to be prohibitive, jangadeiros will have no incentive to alter their traditional fishing pattern. Generally speaking, where there have been rewards for hard work, motivations will be high, and the level of performance will stay constant and perhaps rise. Where there is no notion that increased work pays off, however, there will be limited aspirations—simply to maintain past levels of achievement—rather than increased incentives to hard work or innovation.

The peasant fisherman in Northeast Brazil sees a definite relationship between wealth, production techniques, and work.<sup>3</sup> He is also aware that there can be no further accumulation of wealth for him with the production techniques available to him no matter how hard he works. In fact, the jangadeiro sees his fishing universe as being infinitely expandable given new production techniques. He knows that nets are likely to yield a larger catch than hooks and line and that motorized vessels could open up new fishing grounds. However, new techniques and technology cannot be acquired arbitrarily. Some advantage must accrue to the peasant before he will accept innovations.

It is the entrepreneur wanting to exploit an enlarged market who introduces new techniques, and these are rationally accepted or rejected by a people with freedom of choice. There is always discussion of alternatives and of economic advantage among peasant producers

(Firth 1964:22). There is also widespread knowledge of market conditions and production costs and a strong desire to maximize returns for productive efforts (Bauer and Yamey 1957:96-97). Differential acceptance or rejection of innovations does not necessarily reflect the lack of motivation which is all too often attributed to peasants. Rather, the dangers for a marginal earner with limited capital can be very great, and experimentation among peasants occurs only when the risk is low. As Firth (1961:109) points out, the peasant "... has a highly expandable set of wants." *The overwhelming problem is his limited means.*

Fishermen have been able to maintain their status as independent producers in the face of the rising cost of logs by combining their own efforts with those of members of their families and by the cooperation of their fellow jangadeiros. Indeed, while disputing neither the individuality of the fisherman nor the amount of interpersonal strife in rural villages, one must emphasize that intrafamilial—and even inter-familial—cooperation is essential to the maintenance of the most traditional peasant economies. The community of Coqueiral functions, through the cooperation of its members, to the best advantage of the individual and his household. In order to accumulate the capital necessary to replace log rafts and/or their parts, the fishermen depend upon income from diverse household occupations, including animal husbandry and straw handicrafts. Economic risk is offset not only by the diversification of economic roles within a family, but also by the large number of people engaging in any single occupation. Hence, the large number of middlemen created by agreements between individual fishermen and fish hawkers, who are often kinsmen, tends to distribute the risks inherent in an easily glutted market evenly throughout the village.

At the same time, a system of credit and savings exists through the workings of these extended families. This system serves to maintain the traditional economy rather than to afford significant sums of money for investment in innovations. In fact, the need to insulate these carefully balanced productive and banking units against the dangers of risk often inhibits innovation. Peasant societies operate so near to the bare margin of existence that the security of the individual becomes one with the security of the group. It is an attempt to



protect his security rather than a distaste for sharing (Bauer and Yamey 1957:103 *et passim*) that leads the peasant producer to reject innovations.<sup>4</sup>

There is an obvious need to examine closely the nature of cooperation and competition in traditional societies, particularly as these factors are related to social mobility and change.<sup>5</sup> I have noted the high degree of cooperation among peasants within the general fishing economy in Coqueiral and hypothesized that economic competition between individual productive units is actually minimized by the maintenance of secrecy about fishing spots. Peasants do not jockey for position against each other, and intravillage hostilities are more often than not generated by noneconomic factors. Competition seems rather to characterize behavior among the local bigwigs, whose mobility is often gained at the expense of their fellows. Not only do they seek control over the fishermen's labor for their own profit, but they are also intent on perpetuating an ideology of superiority as a crucial indicator of their rank to outside sources of power. Thus, the bigwigs consistently denigrate the beliefs and values of peasant fishermen and ridicule the fishermen's attempts to improve their situation. They vie for status and prestige in the eyes of the landowning "power-holders" in the region, thereby gaining access to resources not available to the rest of the local peasantry. They invest these resources in innovations that will help them to stabilize their own position in the local socio-economic system, and not in ways that are likely to benefit the community as a whole.

Commenting upon the possibility of economic change and growth, Foster (1965:309) argues that David McClelland's psychological prescription—"the need for Achievement," or, *n* Achievement (McClelland 1953, 1961)<sup>6</sup>—is not lacking in peasant society but lies suppressed beneath the surface by the sanctions of traditional villagers, who, in the spirit of "limited good," discourage personal initiative. He then offers a simple instruction—to wit: change the opportunity structure by opening the "system" and a fertile field for the full expression of *n* Achievement will be propagated. But this merely lays bare the complexity of the problem and hardly approaches a solution. The solution must lie instead in an explanation of those factors in the eco-

logical and social system from which peasant cognitive orientations are formed.

Brazilian peasants do not lack initiative. Rather, it is clear that entrepreneurship exists at all levels of Brazilian society. The multiplicity of middlemen active in the market arena attests to this fact (Forman and Riegelhaupt 1970). Whether or not entrepreneurship comes to the surface, however, depends wholly on the possibilities for its expression and development. It is important to explain how entrepreneurs emerge and why at a given time.<sup>7</sup> If the underlying socioeconomic system does not permit of capital formation within the local economy, we will not find effective entrepreneurship arising out of the peasant sector no matter how much initiative peasants might have. On the other hand, if there is not a market for goods, there will be no outside entrepreneurial investment at the local level no matter how much creative genius and business acumen exist in the society at large.

By focusing attention on these sociological and economic factors I do not mean to imply that psychological and social psychological phenomena do not play a part in technological innovation. There are motivational differences among individuals. However, a psychological level of analysis does not provide satisfactory causal explanations of innovation and change. It is my belief that obstacles to change in peasant societies are not so much psychological and cognitive as they are ecological and social. Lack of development in the peasant sector is not owing to inherent limitations in a closed system nor to the peasant's inability to cooperate or to perceive possible alternative courses of action. Rather, it is owing to politico-socioeconomic factors beyond the peasant's control.

Observation and informants' statements clearly indicate that class consciousness has a decisive influence on achievement motivation in Brazil.<sup>8</sup> Peasants are well aware of the nature of the bonds which tie them to the dominant segments of society and which clearly limit their mobility. They think in terms of "we and they" and "everything for them, nothing for us." They contrast themselves to the rich and the powerful and fear that they themselves are "nothing in this world." When queried as to why they do not try to improve their situation,



they correctly cite lack of opportunity: "*Não tem possibilidades!*" They know there is nothing inherent in their poverty, and they always hope to rise above it. If we can delineate one common peasant thought, then surely it is the overwhelming desire to rid themselves of the yoke of poverty and to share in all the good things with which the twentieth century tempts them.

The so-called "traditional barriers to change" have been erected over the past four centuries by socioeconomic conditions far beyond the control of peasants. Shown an effective way to improve their situation, peasants will readily accept innovation and change. As we have seen, such "effective ways" may well require a complete restructuring of local society (and beyond). The ideology of an inherent peasant conservatism has existed far too long as a rationalization for the exploitation of man. We can no longer justify the immobilizing effects of widespread poverty by our own conservative thoughts regarding peasant behavior. If social scientists are to contribute to an understanding of the processes of change in traditional societies, we must place our discussions of peasant decision-making firmly within a comprehensive framework that includes the ecological and social-structural parameters which condition peasant behavior.

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