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SOME PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE CENTRAL PLATEAU OF BRAZIL

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SOME PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE CENTRAL PLATEAU OF BRAZIL

E. A. Wilkening

I. Introduction

The Central Plateau is still regarded as one of the frontiers for development in Brazil. But one geographer has referred to it as a "hollow frontier" since much of its best mineral, land and forest resources were exploited by early explorers and settlers who moved on as these were depleted.[1] The discovery of gold in Goiás in the early eighteenth century attracted settlers to the region. With the decline of mining, cattle raising became the main activity in most of the region. Cattle ranches were large with their boundaries relatively undefined because of the sparse settlement and lack of minerals in the soil, insects, and diseases were constant problems for the cattle growers. The cultivation of crops on a commercial scale did not occur until roads and railroads were constructed through the area. The first railroad was completed through lower Goiás in 1935. Roads were only graded and graveled until the construction of the paved highway leading to Brasilia within the past 15 years.

The decision to build the new capital Brasilia, 1200 miles from Rio, has had a major impact upon the whole Central Plateau in which the capital is located. Although the soundness of the decision to build the capital at this location has been widely debated before and since its construction, the fact that it is there is having economic, social and political impacts upon the whole of Central Brazil, of which the Central Plateau is a major part. Roads have been built extending from Brasilia to the North, the South and the East. Those to the South and East are paved and have provided a route for migrants and for the transport of goods to the capital city. As the roads were improved settlers began to move into the area and the population along the major roads grew very rapidly, some sections more than doubling in numbers in the decade 1950 to 1960.

It is in one of these counties in southern Goiás that the author and two graduate students studied the process of settlement and adaptation in the spring of 1966. It is intersected by the paved road from São Paulo to Brasilia and is just north of the Paraniaba River, which is the border of Minas Gerais and Goiás. Cattle grazing predominated until about 15 years ago when rice became an important cash crop in the area. Rice replaced cattle on the more fertile slopes and lowlands

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[1] Preston James, Lecture, University of Wisconsin, 1962.

near the River. The need for labor to plant and harvest the rice resulted in the spontaneous settlement of migrants from nearby and distant locations. The purpose of the study was to learn about the migration process in the interior and to determine the factors affecting the migrants' adaptation to the area.[2]

II. Factors in the Development of the Interior

The development of the interior of Brazil presents a problem much different from that of other regions of Brazil. The Central Plateau, which comprises most of the state of Goiás and Mato Grosso and parts of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Para and Amazonas, has soil, climate and geographical characteristics which present special problems for development. These problems have been described and analyzed by a team made up of a soils scientist, an agronomist, a geographer, and an economist-sociologist. While the appraisals of the region and its potential for development differ among the members of this team, as among other students of the area, there is general consensus on certain points.[3]

The upland soils of the Central Plateau lack the fertility for intensive crop and livestock production. However, ten to twenty percent of the soils are sufficiently fertile to permit cropping and intensive use for a limited period without artificial fertilizing. Timber resources of the area are very limited; the best have already been cut. Water resources are adequate in total amount, but not in distribution throughout the year, so the growing season is considerably limited without irrigation. The lack of roads and transportation severely limit agricultural development. Most of the area is better suited to large-scale mechanized agriculture than it is to small-scale nonmechanized operations.

The development of this region is also affected by certain special considerations. Much of the land in this region is owned by foreign investors. These absentee owners are usually not interested in the development of the region, but rather in speculation or in non-taxable investment. This type of ownership does not foster the settlement of small owner-operators. The state of Mato Grosso was authorized to grant 50 hectares to Brazilians and foreigners who wish to settle

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[2]See John van Es, E. A. Wilkening and João Bosco Pinto, Rural Migration in Central Brazil: A Study of Itumbiara, Goiás, Land Tenure Center Research Paper No. 29 (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1968).

[3]Survey of the Agricultural Potential of the Central Plateau of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, American International Association for Economic and Social Development, March 1963.

in the state, but this policy has not been effective in attracting many settlers.[4] Before Brasilia there were no paved roads through the region. Rivers have provided the most reliable transportation, but follow slow and devious routes to the interior. Air transportation by small planes now provides access to areas of the interior where a landing strip can be built.

The importance of roads and transportation for settlement and development of the interior is shown by the number of migrants attracted to highways recently constructed through the interior. Those who came to build the roads provided the first nuclei of settlers. While the road from Brasilia to Belem is still not paved, thousands of migrants have also settled along it, with little concern for land titles, schools, or other facilities. Foreseeing the settlement needs of newcomers, the state of Goiás and private companies have attempted to establish planned colonies. With a few exceptions, however, these colonies were either discontinued before they were completed or abandoned after unsuccessful attempts at planned settlement. Plans for these colonies were based upon patterns from other regions where physiographic, economic and cultural conditions are widely different from those in the Central Plateau of Brazil. Close settlement, with irrigation and intensive cropping, is hardly adapted to a region in which soils are lacking in basic fertility, the population is sparse and grazing has been the main enterprise. Furthermore, the isolation of the colonies and the problems of health, access to market, and access to friends and relatives are not conducive to the settlement of native Brazilians who value their ties with family and kin more highly than ties to the land, and who have been accustomed to moving when circumstances are not favorable.

With these conditions for the development of the Central Plateau of Brazil in mind, let's take a look at the people and their characteristics in a municipio in southern Goiás.

III. Migration to Itumbiara

The municipio of Itumbiara is in the lower part of the Central Plateau and includes a somewhat larger share of more fertile soil than is characteristic of the Plateau, since it is located along the Paranaiba River.

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[4] T. Lynn Smith, Brazil: People and Institutions (Baton Rouge, La.: University of Louisiana Press, 1964), pp. 422-423.

The influx of people to Itumbiara following the building of the highway from São Paulo to Brasilia indicates that there is no lack of people ready to settle in the area. Brazilians are a mobile people who are quick to leave one residence for another if there is some promise of gain. Much of the land is affected by drouths or rapid soil depletion which have contributed to a type of shifting agriculture, particularly in the North, the Central and the Northeast. In addition, the latifundia system, with large numbers of tenants and landless workers with no tenure rights to the land, has added to the numbers of migrants from farm to farm. It is not surprising, therefore, that the sample of respondents interviewed in Itumbiara had lived in 2.5 different municipios and had twice that number of residences.[5] The rate of moving is highest among the tenant class. The reinterview of 100 sharecroppers six months after the first interview revealed that about half had changed residence, most to another farm in the vicinity, between the two interview periods.

The high rate of mobility among the tenants reflects the instability of rice-growing in the area studied as well as the tenuous nature of owner-tenant relationships. The nature of the rice sharecropping system is such that there is no incentive for either party to maintain a contract when there is the slightest reason for changing. The owner fears incurring obligations to the tenant if he remains; the tenant, who is without bargaining power, feels that he can't do worse by moving. The system does not provide much opportunity for improving one's status, since the margin of returns for the sharecropper are low and the opportunities for obtaining land without credit are few. It appears that the excessive geographical mobility stems in part from a lack of opportunity for social mobility.

Some of the migrants to the area settle down without further shifting. About one-third of the migrants over 30 years of age had made only one move between municipios. The proportion having made only one move across county boundaries was about the same. The proportion making four or more moves increased markedly with ages, suggesting that for another third, moving becomes a "way of life." This group is the core of the stream of shifting families who moves every few years to seek opportunities elsewhere.

The migrants in general felt that they were better off than in the place from which they moved, but many felt that they were worse off. Half of the respondents felt that working conditions were more favorable than in the place from which they had moved, while only one-fourth felt they were worse. However, just as many felt that health conditions and educational facilities were worse as felt they were better in Itumbiara. Hence, while most realized economic

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[5]John van Es, E. A. Wilkening and João Bosco Pinto, op. cit.

advantages as the result of moving, the lack of educational, social and health facilities were frequently viewed as negative results of their move. Migrants from the northeastern part of Brazil tend to rate the educational and economic advantages somewhat better in Itumbiara than in their previous location. This reflects the low levels of the areas from which they came.

Early migrants to an area appear to be more satisfied and have higher socio-economic status than do later migrants. This suggests that in an area with land somewhat marginal and where educational, credit and other opportunities for improving one's status are limited, the advantages accrue to only a limited number of migrants, most likely to the early arrivals. In an area where production is marginal and institutional resources are limited, only a few will benefit from the situation and others will work for a few years and then move on in an attempt to prevent the decline of their circumstances, if not to attempt their improvement.

The surplus of population in relation to resources or work opportunities in the interior areas (as in other areas of Brazil) stems from the nature of the channels of information and contact. The most common source of information about new locations is through family and friends. And once a family is established in a new location, relatives always follow. Despite the fact that the advantages and opportunities of the new area have declined, people continue to join friends and relatives rather than move to new areas where they have none. When asked whether they would move on to an area where there were no relatives, one-third indicated that they would not. The maintenance of family ties is as important among the owners as among the tenant class. In the absence of other sources of information about new settlement areas and sources of support in the process of adjustment, only the most venturesome are likely to move to areas where there are no family or personal acquaintances. This is particularly true in a country such as Brazil where family ties are strong, and where families are a source of economic as well as social support.

IV. The Social Structure and Development

Institutions and the services which they provide present special problems in the Central Plateau of Brazil. First, institutions in rural Brazil are part of centralized bureaucracies of church and government or urban investors on the one hand and a part of local systems of power and privilege on the other. Institutions at the municipio level receive most of their support from and follow the rules set forth at either state or federal levels. There is relatively little formal autonomy in government or in churches, schools or banks at the municipio level. The levying and collection of taxes on property is under the jurisdiction of the state and federal governments.

On the other hand, the functioning of both public and private institutions at the local level is highly influenced by the network of informal ties growing out of the patron-dependent relationship,[6] and kinship and cliques among the higher socio-economic ranks. Without a strong centralized government, the importance of the local network of informal relationships is particularly important in determining the course of events in the municipio. These relationships provide the bases for land rental, credit, jobs, political influence and personal favors of many kinds. A family member who becomes successful and has contacts is regarded as an important asset and is called upon for all kinds of favors. Access to social, economic and political opportunities is in large part a function of the operation of the informal system of relationships based upon kinship and upon personal ties growing out of reciprocal negotiation as well as out of genuine friendship.[7]

The interior is less traditional in its social structure than the older parts of Brazil. It has not inherited the rigid two-class system of the sugar plantations of the Northeast. Neither is it a family-farm type of economy as in the South. It is based upon a cattle-grazing system with large owners and a few hired workers interspersed among both small and large cultivators of rice, corn, manioc and other crops. The class structure tends to be characterized by a small group of large land owners at the top, a larger group of small owners, businessmen and skilled workers in the middle, and an even larger group of tenants and unskilled workers at the bottom. The opportunities in agriculture, in obtaining credit, in education for children, and in other resources is highly associated with one's occupational status or upon his connections with someone in a higher status. The tenant farmer has difficulty obtaining credit without the personal support of an established owner and such support is not likely to be given to anyone except a relative, compadre or a friend with whom there are personal ties. Tenants, and particularly those who move their residence frequently, are not likely to establish the kind of connections needed to obtain the backing for credit or other services.

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[6]See Bertram Hutchinson, "The Patron-Dependent Relationship in Brazil: A Preliminary Examination," Sociologia Ruralis, Vol. VI, No. 1 (1966), pp. 3-30.

[7]See Anthony Leeds, "Brazilian Careers and Social Structure: An Evolutionary Model and Case History," Offprint Series No. 15, The University of Texas, Institute of Latin American Studies.

V. Rural Services, Institutions and Development

The agricultural extension program which combines credit with technical advice is used by only a few farmers of the municipio. The radio program sponsored by the agency is most widely accessible to the small farmers. Personal contact with one of the extension agents is largely a privilege of the larger farm owners who live in or near the county seat. The same holds for associations and cooperatives organized to aid the farmers. Less than ten percent of the small farm owners and hardly any of the tenants belong to such organizations.

The lack of educational opportunities for those who live in the rural areas is probably the greatest single handicap to the improvement of agriculture, industry, and the level of living in the vast areas of the interior of Brazil. The significance of schools in the rural areas was recognized by the previous county government in Itumbiara, which authorized the building of 100 rural schools. While many were completed, few were occupied because of lack of teachers and the funds to pay them. There is little interest on the part of the larger farmers in education in the rural areas, since they usually live in town. Others have their children stay with relatives or friends in town while attending school. Without funds from the state or federal governments, there is not likely to be much impetus for manning the schools in the rural areas.

The church has influence among all classes in the interior. The Catholic church in the county seat was attended by tenants and owners alike. The priest was active in organizing welfare programs for women and children of migrant families abandoned by their husbands and fathers. He also helped to settle disputes among newly arrived migrants and the natives. Yet the church is not accessible to most of the people in rural areas for most of the time. It is a center for festivals on certain occasions during the year, but it cannot serve as an important center for social contact and religious influence for the people of most of the rural areas because it is too far away and few have access to automotive means of transportation.

There is little neighborhood or community structure in the Brazilian interior.[8] There are institutions and activities centering in the county seat and in other centers, but few of the people feel they can do much about their problems. Kinship and informal ties are relied upon for instrumental as well as for expressive

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[8]The lack of neighborhood and community structure in Brazil has been noted by T. Lynn Smith in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society, Miami, Florida, August, 1966.

reasons. The small amount of funds which comes from state or federal levels is available first to those who have the contact and connections with those in power. Little, if any, becomes available to the masses for their welfare. The system is difficult to break even in a relatively newly settled area. In the first place the productivity of the land is not high and is declining; secondly, the amount of outside funds for developing the infrastructure is small; and finally, the social structure is such that a few reap the greatest benefits, while the majority have little opportunity for improving their status.

The development of the interior of Brazil is likely to proceed with much waste of both human and natural resources. Because of its marginality for agriculture, it does not justify a heavy public investment. But with the construction of Brasilia and the growth of other centers in the interior, its population will continue to grow. Without public planning and investment in roads, schools and other services, the people living there will have little opportunity to better adapt to the conditions of the region or of other regions to which many will subsequently migrate.

VI. Summary

The settlement of and development of the Central Plateau of Brazil provides as much of a challenge to natural and social scientists as it does to planners and promoters. It is a region in which the appropriate technology has not yet been developed. With such a technology, and with the guiding of settlement to those areas most adapted to agriculture, the potential of the region for agricultural production may be realized. But combined with the technology there must be planning for institutions and public services needed to insure a stable and healthy population. Transportation, communication, educational and health services must be provided as a minimum in order to attract people to the areas who have the capital and know-how needed for the development of the region. Perhaps many areas should not be open for settlement but should remain in public ownership and control. If such areas are settled, innovations may be needed in the use of the radio and the airplane to provide schooling and medical services, as has been done in Australia and in other sparsely settled countries.

In short, the problem of settlement and development of the Central Plateau of Brazil is one which requires a combination of government and private resources, long-range planning, and people with the characteristics and skills suitable for the prevailing conditions. Absentee owners should be expected to contribute their share to the development of the roads and other facilities for the region.

Plans for development should begin with the characteristics of the region and of the people who are attracted to it. Policy decisions then need to be made as to how much the Central Plateau should contribute to efficient agricultural production or to the relief of population pressures from other regions. The two roles are not entirely incompatible, but the priority given to each will affect the nature of the program for the development of the region.