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Latin American Peasantry in Transition to Modern Farming

Latin America has experienced a period of turbulence and change during the past generation which is unparalleled in the long history of this culture realm. The root causes of these sweeping changes are well known: a population explosion, a communication revolution, vast rural to urban migrations, a rapid growth of nationalism, and rapid development of serious income inequalities among regions. Many Latin American peasants have become confused, unsettled and fundamentally dissatisfied with their lot in life as a result of these changes. The purpose of this essay is to assess the potential for geographical analysis which these changes present in light of the scholarly reviews of prior geographical research on peasants presented by colleagues elsewhere in this volume (e.g. Aschmann, Denevan, Horst, Nietschman, and Parsons). Hence, what follows is not a review of literature so much as an argument for change in the direction of research.

My basic contention is that geographic research in Latin America has long shown a penchant toward irrelevancy with respect to the dramatic changes taking place. Our reaction to the invasion of commercial civilization into peasant regions hitherto slumbering under the dead hand of a feudal past often has appeared to be either a retreat into the bush in search of contemporary fragments of a lost world or an escape into the long, and perhaps best forgotten, past. This is not to deny or to denigrate the value of historical research for certainly we are interested in the "attempt to understand cultural behavioral patterns and how and why they change" (Denevan, this volume) regardless of the time period during which the change took place. Unfortunately, there are severe difficulties in making practical use of the results of analysis dealing with events which have long since passed [for example: an inability to obtain sufficiently detailed evidence upon which conclusions may be drawn concerning "cultural behavioral patterns", the danger of committing the reverse of the error of historical anachronism (projecting into current situations change elements present in past situations but absent at the present time), and finally the simple fact that the nature, scope and sheer novelty of contemporary forces causing changes in peasant ways of life are not replicated

in past periods of time]. In summary, pre-Columbian and other historical studies by geographers are a nicety well worth preserving for a handful of our colleagues and their academic audiences. They should not, however, form the bulk of our literature during the coming crucial decades if we wish our work to be of some service to the tens of millions of Latin Americans who must, perforce, live through the agonies of modernization during the next generation. For too long, United States students of geography working in Latin America have fiddled while the continent burned (see Parson's review (1964) for rather conclusive evidence of the sheer lack of research in the fields of economic and urban geography dealing with Latin America as well as the reviews in this volume of the work or lack thereof after 1963).

Another practical reason for changing our research focus during the coming decade is that social science research tends to mirror topically the most pressing problems of the day. For example, a recent convocation of specialists in subsistence agriculture held under the auspices of Rockefeller's Agricultural Development Council (ADC) which was devoted to exploring the connections between Subsistence Agriculture and Economic Development (Wharton, 1969) contained nary one geographer! Gentlemen, it is not that most of our research is inherently poor; simply put, it is largely irrelevant to the most important concerns of our generation. There is little need to belabor the obvious implication. The costs of irrelevancy are high.

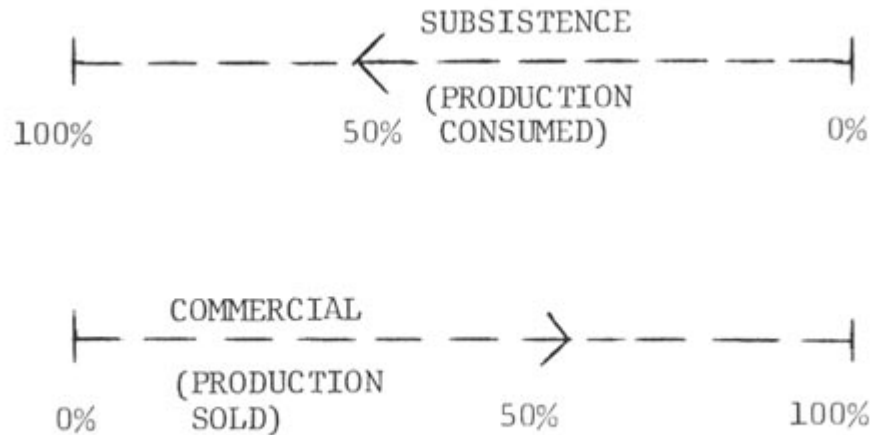
The remainder of this paper consists of an attempt to provide some specific suggestions concerning the type of research in contemporary Latin American peasantries which geographers may undertake profitably to all concerned. The contents are merely suggestive of a new paradigm, however, and no attempt is made to be comprehensive.

Some views of the peasant

Research dealing with contemporary peasantries by other disciplines is voluminous and far ranging in character. A reasonably comprehensive survey of the non-geographic literature dealing with peasants and their transition to modern farming would take far too much space. Fortunately, Wharton's Subsistence Agriculture and Economic Development (1969) summarizing the results of the ADC conference is a veritable lodestone of condensed information concerning the agriculture economies, anthropology, economics, psychology and

sociology literatures for the post-war period. Statements similar to portions of Wharton's summary may also be found in DeGregori and Pi-Sunyer (1969), Dalton (1967), Hunter (1969), Kunkel (1970), McPherson (1968), Rogers (1969), and Wolf (1966). Rather than taking up considerable space reviewing what may be read easily elsewhere, Wharton's summary will be briefly paraphrased and then discussed from a spatial perspective.

Wharton identifies ten economic and socio-cultural criteria by which one may measure the degree to which the transition from peasant to modern farming economy has taken place (pp. 12-20). Five of these are largely "economic" criteria, ie: farm products ratio, hired labor or purchased farm products ratio, level of technology, income and levels of living, and the decision-making freedom of the farmer. The "farm products ratio" and "hired labor or purchased farm products ratio" are simply the degree of commercialization of outputs and inputs respectively. Peasants may be defined in terms of the proportion of their production which enters trade channels. If subsistence production is defined as that production which is home-consumed, then peasants are agriculturalists who are mainly (more than fifty percent) subsistence farmers (see diagram).



Diagrammatic Definition of Subsistence and Commercial Farming

The level of technology relates to the type, degree of sophistication and level of productivity of the specific tools and farm practices employed. Generally, peasants tend to use hand and animal powered tools as well as less complex farm management practices than farmers. Generally, peasants are poorer in terms of either income or levels of living than farmers. The difficulty lies in defining poverty in either relative or absolute terms. Finally, farmers have greater decision-making freedom than peasants. This may be due primarily to fewer

alternative opportunities for disposal of farm products, institutional restraints such as serfdom or tenancy, and fewer technical choices due to primitive technological conditions.

Wharton also lists four socio-cultural criteria which may be important in distinguishing peasants from farmers and in measuring the degree of progress toward modernization, i.e.: non-economic factors in decision making, degree of "outside" contact, nature of inter-personal relations, and psychological differences. Non-economic factors in decision-making include such forces as kinship obligations, social considerations in the employment of labor and distribution of the product. "Outside" contact refers to information exchanges beyond the boundaries of the farm or immediate village. It is closely related to the receptivity of farmers to new ideas and hence to the diffusion of innovations. The nature of interpersonal relations tends to distinguish between those who are individualistic in orientation vs. those who prefer a family orientation as well as contrasts between achievement vs. ascription, particularism vs. universalism, and diffuseness vs. specificity. It may be true that modern farmers tend to: judge people more on the basis of personal achievement rather than family background, universalize social and physical relationships, and have more specific kinds of social relations with business associates than peasants. Finally, some of the ADC participants felt that there may be a distinctive attitudinal and motivational complex associated with peasant farming.

The last of the ten criteria summarized by Wharton is developmental in nature. Specifically, subsistence farmers may be characterized by their unchanging adherence to established patterns of production. Hence,, a dynamic/static continuum in terms of acceptance of technical change may be posited to exist with modern farmers being more technically, economically and socially adaptable than peasants.

Spatial perspectives of selected aspects of the transition to modern farming

The focus in any study of the peasant from a developmental standpoint is upon the role of "outside" contacts of local society. These "outside" contacts may be broadly defined as by Platt (1943) in terms of functional regions and the relationships which define them. For purposes of illustration, let us concentrate attention upon only three spatial aspects of the ten criteria summarized above.

- a) The degree of spatial extensity in social living space.
- b) The degree and nature of connectivity of farms with the market economy.
- c) The role of "outside" sources of opinion, attitudes and information in decision-making processes within villages.

These three are chosen because they are believed to be both crucial to the development process and also amenable to spatial analysis.

The degree of "spatial extensity in social living space" may be defined as the geographic area over which more than ninety percent of life is spent in terms of time. Sedentary peasant agriculturalists are notoriously "localite" (a sociological piece of jargon) in orientation. Foster's study (1967) of the small town of Tzintzuntzan before its development provides a good example for such extreme locality in living patterns. Although evidence is scarce concerning the geographic extensity of village living patterns, it seems likely that Modern farmers geographically have more extensive social relationships and temporary travel patterns than peasants. This concept is closely associated with the "nature of interpersonal relations" reviewed by Wharton. The spatial concepts of "mean information field", "*umland*", and "functional hinterland" are analogous to the notion of "spatial extensity" being employed here. Most of these geographic concepts relate mainly to urban activities. Perhaps, we may find that the spatial extent of activities by rural villagers may be a sensitive index of the degree of their connections with the rest of the world and hence of their modernity in outlook and activities. The implications of having a map showing the "*lebensraum*" of a set of villages within rural regions for analyzing (or promoting) the diffusion of innovations and for analysis of the spatial patterns of cultural change are quite obvious and need not be belabored here.

Connectivity of farms with the market economy is partially a function of Wharton's "farm products ratio" and "hired labor or purchased farm products ratio". It also depends upon the ratio of all consumption goods purchased to the value of all goods consumed. What is being indexed here is the degree to which farmers play a role in supplying products to urban areas, purchasing inputs from subsidiary industries and supporting a central place system. If the range over which economic transactions between town and countryside occur are known, a set of functional regions could be mapped thus revealing an important aspect of the space economy. In turn, this would permit construction of models to predict

the growth in number, size and spatial distribution of central places (Lentnek, Mitchell, and Koenig, 1971). Connectivity of regional economies is an important aspect of the degree to which economic impulses may be transmitted across the landscape. Its definition and measurement would allow planners to estimate the impact of alternative investment strategies. Yet, little has been done along these lines (but see Lentnek, 1966 and 1969 for some partial solutions to the taxonomic and empirical problems associated with obtaining spatial data series of this type).

The role of "outside" sources of information in local decision making is a very complex matter. Much depends on the status of the giver of information vis-a-vis the villagers (i.e., who gives and who receives the information may have considerable effect on how the information is used within the village). In addition, the persistence of the source, the quality of the information, and its relevance to existing social mores, attitudes and so forth are important. Clearly, the process being described is diffusion. Everett Rogers (1969) describes the process of innovation diffusion in a developing nation context in some detail but not, of course, from a geographic perspective. I am aware of only two studies related to innovation diffusion over space conducted in Latin America (Brown and Lentnek, 1971 and Willkie, 1969). Kunkel's book (1970) is devoted to an examination of the attitudinal formation aspects of cultural change and contained numerous ideas which may be extremely useful in a geography of contemporary cultural change among Latin American peasants.

All three indices are easily adaptable to spatial analysis as evidenced by Robert Platt's studies (1943) of the internal spatial organization of micro-regions in Latin America. Platt's difficulties with integrating the results of micro-regional analyses and thus generalizing to larger cultural realms is more easily overcome today due to the current state of analytic methods. Perhaps what is needed most are a series of comparable studies of the connectivity of the spatial economy of peasant regions. Hopefully, the results would show great similarities in the interaction space over which villages at particular stages of development relate to the outside world. These studies may also lead to a reformulation of central place analysis so as to create a dynamic theory of central place development (Lentnek, et al., 1971).

It is folly to attempt to pre-judge which particular lines of inquiry will lead most quickly to the goal of a geographic understanding of the transition from peasant

to modern farming. It is hoped only that this paper indicates the sort of approach which is needed in order for us to make headway toward this goal.

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