



THE SOCIAL POSITION OF THE PEASANT  
AND THE FOOD PROBLEM

Remarks by

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A combination of circumstances has led to the present juncture of history, where we now fear widespread famine in many part of the world. Efforts are underway in both national and international centers to try to deal with the situation. New technology is being developed, people are being trained, and techniques are being sought to get the information out to the farmers. Yet, despite these efforts, which have been going on for a number of years, the spectre of famine still haunts the world. Food production is not increasing as rapidly as population. The problem is particularly acute in many of the less developed countries, where the agricultural sector is divided into two distinct groups--one consisting of large, commercial farmers producing largely for export, and the other group consisting of small farmers producing food crops for local consumption. My remarks here concern the small farmer. In trying to generalize over a broad range of the history of the world, we shall ignore the peculiarities of particular regions and countries, even though these represent important exceptions to the general rule. There are regions where the small farmer is producing up to the maximum, in terms of what is known about that region and those crops. In other regions, no new acceptable technology has yet been developed. But, for the most part, modern technology exists which can be applied to increase food production. The reasons why it is not being applied with the speed needed to avert the crisis are many. The information is not available where needed, neither are the inputs, the credit, nor the marketing facilities. In a sense, neither is the sense of urgency which we think the problem merits.

The approach of the Small Farms Systems Team at CIAT is intended to complement the work of the commodity teams at the various centers, as well as the production systems work being focussed on the small farmer at such centers as IRRI, CATIE, and INCRISAT. That is to say, our concern is wider than the technological--economic relations involved in understanding complex farming systems. We need to achieve that understanding as part of the larger problem of understanding the whole complex of factors affecting the behavior of small farmers. Many of these factors have their origin off the farm, in the wider social environment in which the farmer makes his decisions and carries them out.

We can safely assume that we will encounter the same sorts of problems which face the commodity teams. Just as soil, disease, and climatic factors affect specific areas and require local solutions, socio-cultural factors vary widely, even between nearby villages, and require local adaptations. Although

we are just beginning our analysis, we suspect that we will have to look for solutions to the farmer's problems at at least four different levels of society.

1. People at the top of the national social structure in any country will decide the priority to be given to food production by small farmers in the context of other national priorities in general, and agriculture in particular. Within the general priorities assigned to agriculture, decisions will have to be made with respect to how much attention and resources are to be devoted to such policies as support for which prices, how much for which types of infrastructure investments in health, education, transportation will go into the rural areas, what are the appropriate levels, costs, and conditions of credit? These indicate a few of the sorts of decisions which must be made at the national (and even international) level of society.

2. Many of the national institutions having to do with agriculture function at the regional and local levels, and some problems require some organizational autonomy from the national level in order to develop policies which are specific to the various regions within the country. For example, general levels of credit may be set at the national level, leaving the specific conditions of loans to local authorities. Regions where monocrop culture prevails will have different credit requirements from those regions where multiple-continuous cropping systems are in use.

3. At the local level, village associations, cooperatives and other organizations can be expected to exert pressure to achieve bargaining power to cope with the problems of their particular locale. These may be oriented to such production-related problems as provision of inputs and marketing, or they may focus on efforts to reduce exploitation of the farmer by those with whom he must deal.

4. The individual farmer makes his decisions, not only in the light of those forces which result from the above-mentioned levels, but also in terms of his needs and those of his family. Such basic factors as the age and sex distribution of the members of the family determine much of the production strategy of the farmer.

The Systems Team will be concerned with the complex interrelations between all four levels, and their effects on the production behavior of the small farmer.

In order to gain some perspective on the situation of the small farmer, and society's efforts to deal with the problem of increasing food production by this sector, we need to take a few minutes to run quickly through the past 9,000 years

of the cultural evolution of humanity, and pick out a few salient points to indicate how we arrived at the present juncture in history. We need to take some note of the strategies tried in recent decades to see why they have failed to cope adequately with the problem.

About 9,000 years ago, with the development of a stable agricultural surplus, the peasantry came into being. This surplus was drained off to finance the development of cities, religious, military and administrative elites, as well as other occupational specialities such as crafts and commerce. Since then, peasants have always lived in relation to cities, have been controlled by them, and have generally formed the rural, lower stratum of complex societies. This agricultural surplus also provided the economic base for organized warfare, population growth and other phenomena which have characterized civilization ever since.

Administrators, religious and military leaders and philosophers of this period, and on up to the Industrial Revolution, devoted a great deal of thought to justifying the peasant's situation as both necessary and desirable, since it allowed the development of large-scale civilization.

The Industrial Revolution brought not only industry, but large-scale commercial farming into being, with the result that in some areas of the world, part of the peasantry was either driven or attracted to the cities. This was a long and difficult time for those involved in the transition, but for the most part, the peasantry remained in the countryside. The Industrial Revolution is also noteworthy for having brought the science of Economics into being. Again, intellectuals demonstrated not only the rightness, but the inevitability of the order of things by the use of such concepts as the "invisible hand", "supply" and "demand". Powerful analytic tools, such as Euclidean geometry were brought to bear, and the peasants position in society was demonstrated to be the result of "Natural Law." Since no one could be held accountable for the operation of such impersonal forces as natural law, peasants were again advised to accept their position in society.

What Adam Smith demonstrated in the case of pin manufacture, Ricardo generalized to specialization between nations. The Theory of Comparative Advantage demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that some nations enjoyed a comparative advantage in the manufacture of industrial products, whereas others were obviously more adapted to being hewers of wood and haulers of water. Each nation should specialize in those things it did best, and free

trade would assure everyone that they would get their fair share. This theory was not effectively challenged until Raul Prebische did so after World War II.

We need to return for a moment to two of the conditions which characterized the beginning of civilization, simply to note that population growth in general and urban growth in particular have accelerated greatly over the past two centuries, and have been out of control since World War II. Improved public health measures have suddenly dropped mortality rates, leaving fertility rates at levels required for normal growth under conditions of high mortality. Despite occasional periods of rapid technological change in agriculture, food supply has not increased as rapidly as population growth. Within the larger population explosion, there has been an even more rapid growth of cities, much of it due to rural-urban migration.

During the past two centuries, many of the industrial countries have subsidized the commercial sector of agriculture to the extent that in some countries it is now possible for less than ten per cent of the population to produce more food than the rest can consume. Industry, and increasingly services, have absorbed the bulk of the labor force.

In a desperate effort to try to catch up with the rich countries, many developing countries have been trying since World War II to finance industrial growth with exports of minerals and agricultural products. This has led to the formation of powerful associations in these countries with an interest in maintaining the status quo, and a de-emphasis on food production to the point where many of them have to use scarce foreign exchange for the importation of food, even though from forty to eighty per cent of their population is in agriculture. In short, many nations have become large-scale, mechanized, hewers of wood and haulers of water, just as Ricardo recommended.

The problem of rural poverty has not been completely ignored in many countries, and along with the efforts to develop industry, there have been some conspicuous efforts to alleviate the conditions of the peasantry. After finding that programs in health or agriculture alone did not achieve the desired results, the more comprehensive approach of community development was tried. Well-trained and well-meaning experts tried to help peasants deal more effectively with their problems, but neither the experts nor the peasants had the power to alter the conditions of the peasant. As optimism as to what could be expected from the community development movement waned, the Green Revolution arrived on the scene, and hope for humanity in general, and the peasant in

particular, was renewed. However, the ancient adage that, "To those who have, more shall be given," remained true, and commercial farmers were better able to employ the new technology than the peasant. But even commercial farmers have not been able to utilize the new technology to the degree that they would like, owing largely to a shortage of inputs.

For at least 9,000 years man has periodically sought solutions to the complex of inter-related problems--war, famine and population growth, which the Rev. Thomas Malthus analyzed so brilliantly two centuries ago. After both World Wars, leaders of many nations determined that the time had come for nations to quit making war on each other, but found themselves unwilling to give up those powers to an international agency. Giving up the national right to make war did not require the invention of new technology--only a willingness to forgo the use of existing technology for that purpose. Just as war, famine and population growth are inter-related problems, wealth, power, and prestige are a complex of highly inter-related, widely held values, and military power is an important underpinning for all three. A large and growing population is viewed by many leaders as a vital part of the military and economic strength of their nations, even if they are poor and hungry. Reducing the birth rate to achieve some sort of parity with reduced death rates did require the development of new technology, but cheap, effective technology is available, yet few nations have seen fit to try to apply this new technology on a massive scale. The technology and resources required to control the rate of population growth are nothing compared to the cost of feeding, clothing, educating and employing excess population, and we find ourselves having to confess that we do not yet have the technology in agriculture to begin this latter task.

Few countries have succeeded in dealing with the peasant. Some have been able to convert many former peasants into large-scale commercial farmers, and then reach them through extension services and rural development policies, which have subsidized the health of this sector. But, in most countries, there are too many small peasants, each with little impact on the total food problem. Cheap power sources seem to be a thing of the past, and good land is increasingly scarce and expensive. Most of the people who are threatened with famine in the near future live in that wide band around the world bordered by the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. Temperature and water conditions over much of the area are favorable to photosynthesis, but serious soil management problems remain unsolved. The peasant in this zone faces serious problems, and

many of them are finding that it is better not to try to face them. Migration to the cities is the easy way out. Different countries present a different complex of problems to the peasant--land shortage in the country, exciting possibilities in the city, inadequate policies for rural development, and a great emphasis on industrial development in the cities. Whether they are being pushed out of the countryside or pulled into the city doesn't really matter. The fact is that many peasants are voting with their feet in favor of urban life, even if that means a life of underemployment in a squalid settlement. That so many choose this way of life is an indicator of the quality of rural life that they have abandoned.

If we compare what is demanded of the peasant and what is given him by society with what is demanded of the urban worker and what is given him by society, we gain an appreciation of the advantages of urban life. The peasant must sacrifice all his life and forgo consumption to try to accumulate a little capital which must be tied up in land, animals, tools and inputs needed for production, whereas, the urban worker has little need for such capital. The peasant is an entrepreneur--a risk taker, who must make production decisions, carry them out, and wait a long time to see the results, whereas, the urban worker shows up on the job, follows instructions and gets paid weekly. While waiting for his crops to mature, the peasant may be victimized by weather, pests or other natural disasters, whereas his urban brother is unaffected by weather. Cash comes to the peasant only a few times during the year so he needs credit, and those willing and able to supply it are few, and able to take advantage of the peasant's weak bargaining position, whereas, the man in the city has a weekly cash income, many sources of supply, and is not as easily exploited. If peasants are lucky and produce a bumper crop, prices are likely to drop--depriving him of the rewards of his labor, whereas his urban brother receives a steady income despite fluctuations in what he may actually do at work. The peasant generally lacks social services, such as health, education, and transportation facilities, whereas, urbanites have the best that the country can afford. The lack of transport and communication facilities obliges the peasant to spend a great deal of his time and energies walking and waiting, while his urban brother rides, communicates by telephone, and is in touch with the rest of society via the mass media. The small scale and homogeneity of peasant society offer boredom and little hope of upward mobility, whereas the large scale, and heterogeneity of urban life offers at least the hope of upward mobility as well as entertainment, and excitement.

The peasant knows that he is part of the lowest stratum of national life because he gets daily reminders of it in his dealings with members of higher groups, whereas, the urban worker has a greater measure of dignity. No matter how badly off he may be, at least he knows that he is not a peasant. Under these circumstances, why should anyone in his right mind want to be a peasant?

The peasant seems to be lowest on society's most generalized values-- power, wealth and prestige. Paradoxically, in a time of chronic food shortage, we are asking that man's most valuable product--food--be produced by society's least valued group. We are asking peasants to change their behavior in ways such that more food be produced in a hurry. The most generally accepted explanation of human behavior is that it is a function of conditions. This being the case, then changing peasant's behavior necessarily means changing the conditions of which it is a function.

We noted earlier that the community development failed in large part to alter peasant behavior on any meaningful scale because it did not try, or was unable, to alter the basic conditions affecting peasant behavior. They focussed largely on trying to change behavior by assuming that behavior was a function of the internal states of the peasant--his values, attitudes, and state of knowledge. They lack the power to alter the basic structure of society, or the place of the peasant in that structure. If the peasant's behavior--such as his low productivity and willingness to abandon rural life-- is a function of his disadvantaged place on the bottom and all that it entails, then his position and the conditions producing it must be changed.

Altering the direction of the past nine thousand years of human evolution is a rather heroic task--beyond the powers of the Centers, and even beyond the powers of the various agencies of government responsible for agricultural development in their countries. It requires a major change at the highest levels of society, and it is a wrenching change that people have not been willing to even think about. At best, nations might be willing to let peasants participate in a general development--conserving their present share of a larger pie. That is to say, peasants might be allowed to enjoy a fifty per cent increase in real income if everyone else did also. This would improve the position of the peasant on an absolute scale of wealth, but would do nothing to alter his position relative to the rest of society. City life would remain just as attractive as before, since he would still be on the bottom. When we examine the position of the peasant in terms of the other two major values mentioned earlier--power and prestige--the situation becomes more complicated.



Unlike wealth, the supply of these "goods" cannot be increased. Power and prestige are inherently scarce and distributive. To the extent that one group is acquiring more of these values, other groups must be losing some of theirs. When national objectives become important enough to the leaders, they try to find ways to re-arrange the structure of advantage in ways to achieve their objectives. A classic example of this sort of thing was the decision to land a man on the moon within a decade, announced at a time when the needed technology was not even in sight. Resources were redirected from other priorities, incentives established, personnel recruited, and the objective achieved ahead of schedule. Landing a man on the moon was a relatively simple task from the society's point of view. No major sacrifice was required from any sector of the population, nor were the relative positions of any sizable group profoundly affected by the program.

Only a few societies have systematically tried to alter the position of the peasant. Cuba did it with great speed and at great expense not only to other groups, but to the economy as well. China has been tackling the problem with more planning and a step-by-step approach. Democratic nations face great difficulties in even discussing the matter, owing to the well-established powers of particular sectors and their alliances with other groups. Democratically elected governments cannot ignore the competing claims of the various sectors which make up their societies. Under the circumstances, we can predict that some democratically oriented governments will not survive the first years of real food crisis, as the populace will demand quick solutions and will be willing to trade off democracy for any promise of the end of famine.

The sense of urgency about the food crisis and the need to raise the productivity of peasants is not widely shared in those government circles where it really counts. Meanwhile, the skills of all of the various disciplines related to the food problem are needed, as they have always been needed. While we search for new technological solutions to particular problems, and ways to get existing knowledge out to the farm, we need also understand the position of the peasant, not just at the farm level, but also at the national level, in order to develop policy alternatives designed to help meet the needs for more and better food. There is considerable room for improvement in performance, even given the present structure of advantage in most countries. Greater efficiency in the spread of information, credit and marketing, can be obtained through more organization of the peasants into groups. Models can be developed to show the payoffs to be obtained from various combinations of investments in

the rural areas. In some parts of the world, such as Africa, south of the Sahara, Ethiopia and the Indian subcontinent, the crisis is here, and priority must be given to those activities and investments which show the greatest promise of increasing food production in the shortest period of time. Other areas are not as hard-pressed and can consider more long-term infrastructure investments.

In many ways, the new colonization efforts in various Latin American countries offer excellent laboratories for a systems analysis of peasant agriculture. At the beginning, nothing is there, nothing can be assumed, all essential conditions of life must be created. All of the problems of the peasant emerge at once and demand solution or the project will fail. Here we can study the complex interrelationships between the technological, economic and socio-cultural variables. Colonization movements are not to be viewed as the solution to the food problem. Precisely because they are so expensive to get established, a long-run study of these projects will indicate the sorts of conditions needed to make peasant agriculture attractive enough to draw migrants into agriculture rather than to the cities.

The present low priority of peasant agriculture in the eyes of policy makers of most nations, and the small share of the national budgets devoted to this sector of the population make it difficult for congenial optimists like myself to believe that mankind will get through the next food crisis before tens, if not hundreds, of millions starve to death.