Applied anthropology and Brazilian agricultural development: some questions and suggestions

The purpose of this paper (1) is: a) to examine the implicit model currently being employed both by scholars and planners in analyzing and creating programs for the development of the Brazilian agricultural sector; b) to question the relevance and applicability of that model; c) to suggest an alternative derived from Brazilian culture history and ethnography; and d) to raise some questions about the future role of applied anthropology.

We shall argue that the major fallacy of agricultural policy making in this largest of the nations of South America is the application of a model of social reality derived not from Brazilian history and ethnography, but rather from the socio-historical tradition of North America and Northwestern Europe (2). Specifically, we shall maintain that the not necessarily conscious, but implicit use of the family farm model, as the means of organizing thinking,

description, and research on agricultural problems in Brazil, is perhaps the primary obstacle to both sound research and analysis and the establishment of viable programs for development.

The model of the farm operated by a nuclear family group — referred to either as a farm family or a family farm — derives from the shared experience of students of "rural" life in Northwestern Europe and North America. In these parts of the world (3) the unit of land settlement, and the exploitation of the environment, was for the most part either the isolated farmstead or the farm village (4). In both cases the social group that performed the productive activities on the land was the small nuclear family of husband, wife, and their children.

On the farmstead the nuclear household unit was an isolated group whose total round of activities resulted in what, in its economic aspects, may be considered a subsistence system. That is, the members of the family, using what was available on the land that constituted their farm, produced, distributed, and consumed the material goods and services needed for their collective sustenance and survival.

In the farm villages the economic situation was basically the same. In both cases the land and the basic social group — the isolated nuclear family — were empirically linked in a manner that made it difficult for the analyst to speak of the land (farm) apart from the social group that exploited it, or to discuss the activites of the basic social group independent of its land. In brief, farm and family were fused both empirically and conceptually in both social and economic analysis. Furthermore, the land served as the subsistence base for the material care and support of the members of the group that possessed and worked it. The family worked the farm and the farm in turn provided for the material well-being of the members of the family. Whether we were dealing with a subsistence peasantry or commercial operators, after the farms were incorporated into the national economy by means of the market, the farm provided for the subsistence of its occupants who, we repeat, were a structurally isolated, independent nuclear family.

Given this relationship between social organization and land tenure, any discussion of the welfare of the agricultural population and policies and programs for improvement and development can be focused on the farm and the farm family. The agricultural population may be conceptualized as the sum total of the members of the several nuclear families, each on its own farm. The welfare of all is the sum total of the welfare of each, which is to say, what the land of each provides in total. In-

sufficiency may mean that the farm is not provinding enough for its family. The reason for this may be that its size is not sufficient for the number of people in the family. Alternatively, the quality of the soil may result in poor yields. Possibly, other parties, like landlords, creditors, etc., may be taking a share that otherwise would go to the family. In these cases on the micro level, insufficiency may be reduced, or alternatively, the general welfare improved by increasing the produce of the farm of each independent farm family. More land, fertilizers to enrich poor soil, and/or the elimination of other liens are all possible means by which the welfare of farm families can be improved.

Implicit in all of this, of course, was the existence of a system of self-regulating markets (see Neale 1957) into which the produce from the land went in exchange for cash, which then could be used to obtain other goods and services in the market for the members of the farm family. On the macro level, conditions of the market for agricultural commodities i.e., those affecting prices also may be a factor affecting the well-being of farm families. Rather than increased production, manipulations of the market such as price subsidies, could be used in improving the well-being of the agricultural population.

Science and scholarship related to agriculture and agricultural problems developed in societies organized primarily in family farms. In fact, the pattern appeared to be so "natural" that it was implicitly incorporated as part of the basic assumptions on which the disciplines, pure and applied, that emerged from researches into agricultural problems came to rest.

When research and development work in the field of agriculture was being conducted exclusively in those parts of the world where the independent family farm dominated the sociological reality, there was no need to make explicit the unstated assumptions of the scientific and technical disciplines. However, it is the entrance of scholars and research workers from this tradition into countries like Brazil, and other parts of the developing world, that has made the specification of the implicit model of social reality a necessity.

Brazil is not a part of the cultural tradition in which man is adapted to the land in family farms. This is not to say that there are no isolated farmsteads worked by nuclear families. Instead, it is to say that they are the exception to the rule, and not the dominant pattern of adaptation that developed as Brazil became a modern national state. In spite of this however, development programs are being formulated, and policy is being made as if the model

implicit in the agricultural disciplines prevailed.

Perhaps the major danger is that it is so easy to superimpose cultural models, and the categories into which they are ordered, upon social situations in which they do not fit. Another way of saying this is that it is easy to view the world ethnocentrically. This is especially so if the observer avoids the details of social life and carefully selects the observations that he makes.

For an observer or scholar used to seeing a world ordered in farms and farm families it is not very difficult to abstract from the web of ongoing sociocultural behavior perceived in Brazil, or in any society new to him, data that can be organized by the categories, farm and farm family. In this way, every plot of land worked by a group of men may be called and thought of as a farm; and once so labeled, it is a simple matter to make the associated assumption that the group that tills the plot in question is a family, and by implication, an independent, structurally isolated group. Whether or not this conforms to the facts depends upon further observations. However, if no further observations are made it is more than possible that the specialist in agricultural problems will leave, assuming that since he has seen farms and families the total social matrix cannot be very different from that with which he is already familiar. He now can go back to his "real job," that of planning for the improvement of the life of those who work the land. And he will do this in terms of his model of what he believes the reality to be. If it should turn out that both the land and the people who work it are involved in a system of social relations that commits them to a series of expectations and obligations not included in the model of the family farm, planning that does not take into account these commitments, and the behavior that they bring on, will be far from effective. What is necessary then is a model of each social reality analogous to that of the family farm but including the relevant factors of each distinct socio-cultural system. It is this that we shall endeavor to begin to develop for Brazil.

The Portuguese occupation of Brazil was comparable to the British occupation of North America in that in both cases vast amounts of virgin lands became available to a population of immigrants. In North America, with the principal exception of the plantation dominated areas of the south, land, for the most part, was made available in family-sized holdings to each new wave of settlers on into the twentieth century. In Brazil, however, the land was given out in large parcels prior to settlement. The pattern was for the Crown to give immense parcels of land to individuals who then undertook the organization of settle-

ments. The settlements that resulted were the prototype of the plantations familiar in the West Indies and the southern United States. The objective of the settlement was profit and the primary task faced by the recipient of a land grant was to recruit and mobilize a labor force able to produce some item of wealth. Markets (overseas markets), prices, and profits were implicit, but the unit of production was something other than the nuclear family. As has been elaborated elsewhere (Greenfield 1969), it was an extended household unit of the Iberian type — perhaps it may be characterized better as of the Roman Type — that included the kinsmen, dependents and slaves of the founder and head. All authority and rights were vested in the head of the group, the *fazendeiro, senhor de engenho,* or plantation owner who had minimum responsibility for his dependents, both slave and free. The revenues from the collective venture were his, to dispense as he chose, with both slaves and other dependents receiving little more than his largess.

As the Brazilian colony prospered and developed, this form of organization came to be the primary means of adapting man to the land in the production of wealth. Through a series of economic cycles dominated by such diverse items as sugar cane, gold and diamonds, coffee, cotton, cacao, etc. (Leeds 1957; Wagley 1963; Poppino 1968) the Brazilian plantation system expanded in strength and importance.

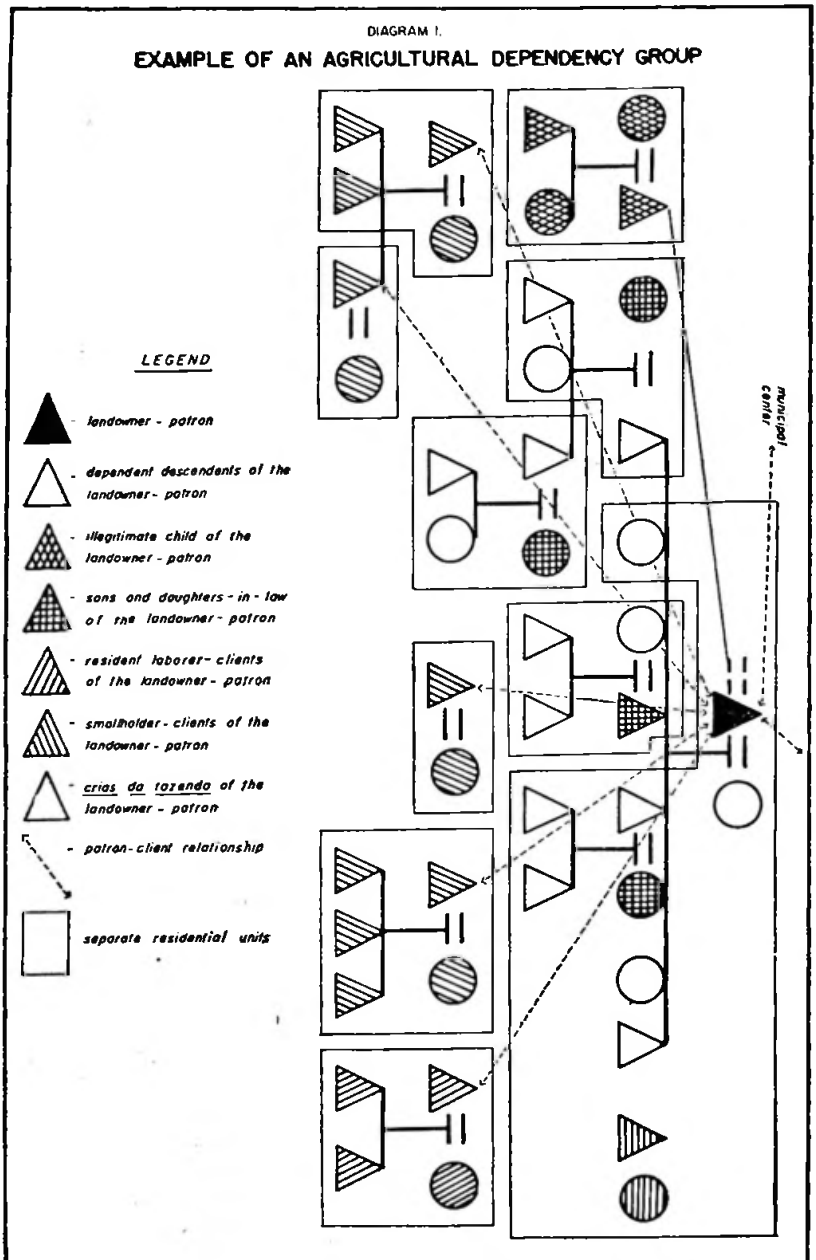
From the beginnings of the colonial period, the political-administrative unit in Brazil was the *município* (Avelar and Taunay 1965; Zenha 1949; Fleuss 1942). A *município* is a territorial unit containing an urban center and a hinterland service area. Both are part of the same administrative unit. Hence the rural-urban dichotomy, so meaningful in societies such as the United States, when examined in detail has relatively little meaning for Brazil.

For a county to exist autonomously, for example, apart from its city, or the latter to be autonomous of its county hinterland, as is the case in the United States, is not possible in Brazil. Social life is not separated meaningfully into an urban as opposed to a rural segment. Unfortunately, however, this too has been superimposed upon the analysis of Brazilian society as the context for the conceptual isolation of the family and the farm. In the model referred to at the beginning of this paper, farm and farm family were categorized as rural, and therefore independent and apart from all that happened in the distinct urban realm of life. In Brazil this is not the case.

The context for the analysis of Brazilian agriculture is the *município*. Within it there are large properties owned by in-

DIAGRAM 1.

EXAMPLE OF AN AGRICULTURAL DEPENDENCY GROUP



dividuals who are actively engaged in other commercial, financial, industrial, administrative, etc. activities that straddle both the rural and urban spheres. Their goal is profit, and as entrepreneurs they orient themselves wherever the greatest profits are to be found. In places where an economic cycle has occurred, their efforts generally have been devoted to the land during the boom phase, and toward other urban based activities after it is over. During the bust period they do not give up the land; instead, they hold it as one of many sources of potential wealth.

Decisions with respect to the use of the land, however, are made against a background of other alteratives. The maker of those decisions is an entrepreneur and not a farmer. He functions in a multidimensional world that results in many of the decisions made with respect to agriculture in a specific geographical area being the result of activities and decisions made elsewhere.

The few who own most of the land in Brazil decide what they are going to do with it as a consequence of factors, for the most part, independent of agriculture. It is only against the total range of options available to each individual that the decision-making process is to be understood.

During the colonial period the heads of the large estates were able to dominate and control the *municipios* which were the units of local government established by the Crown when the lands of Brazil were given out (see Greenfield 1968). In this way they were able to validate in law the traditional authority that they had exercised.

By the time Brazil became an independent nation in 1822, the extended household *fazendas* dominated the economy, and their heads controlled the political base upon which the nation was built.

Up to 1888 the plantations were worked primarily by slave labor. In that year, however, slavery was abolished and all former slaves emancipated. This was emancipation in the classic sense: The slaves were freed from the obligations of membership in the kinship group. Therefore among other things, the productive unit of the society was transformed.

By the turn of the century, a new system emerged in which the emancipated slaves, for the most part, were articulated with the household of their former masters by means of patron-client ties. As agricultural laborers they became parties to a complex system of social relations that covered most facets of their life. The employer-employee relationship was a minor factor in the complex set of reciprocal obligations that developed.

For the most part, laborer-dependents lived in a world of subsistence. They participated world of the market. Their landowner-patron was their link.

and he performed this activity for them as a part of a broad series of social and economic exchanges incorporated in the patron-client relationship.

The patron-client relationship in which protection and at times costly goods and services obtained from distant places are exchanged for labor and support, is not restricted to landowners and landless laborers in the Brazilian interior. It is also in the interest of the many small and medium-sized owners of land to establish such a relationship with a large property owner. Without the contacts or the funds needed to obtain many of the goods and services located in the distant urban centers, the protection of an influential patron is often the difference between survival and extinction. The package of valuables offered by each party will differ from the items included in an agreement between landowner and laborer; however, the reciprocal obligations will be just as significant. Medium and small landowners then also are part of the complex group — the members of which are differentially related to the head — that characterizes the agricultural scene in Brazil.

The group that exploits the land in Brazil today then is large and diverse. The landowner is still the apex. It is he who makes all final decisions. For the most part he is advanced in years, married, and the father of numerous progeny. On his property, and/or under his dominance, also are his adult children, his sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law. Illegitimate children and strangers, raised as *crias da fazenda*, augment the group. To these are to be added the resident laborers. They may be single individuals — which is rare — nuclear families, or extended family groups. Each lives in a separate dwelling provided by the landowner, but scattered over the *fazenda*. All may be considered part of the dependency group of the patron. Finally, there are the small and medium landowners who, for the most part, live on their own properties, but are very much a part of the group under the dominance of the landowner-patron. Several hundred persons or more would not be considered large in most parts of the country. The collective activities are coordinated through the person of the landowner, by means of the patron-client agreements he has with each of his dependents (see diagram 1). Also, it is he who links the group, individually and collectively, to the municipal center and the outside world. Institutionalized means of coordinating the activities of the many client-dependents of a single patron independent of him are weak, if they exist at all.

What we have then are large properties worked by diversified groups whose members stand in a patron-client relationship to the landowner who, independent

of these ties, is involved in a series of activities and relationships in the urban center and the world beyond the local community. In his performance of these non-agricultural activities he extends the dyadic patron-client relationship so that a network is formed. It is through these patronage networks that goods and services flow into the group on the land and labor, votes (until 1964 at least), and other items flow out in the dynamic that constitutes the basis of Brazilian social life. Agriculture and the land are only a part of that life, a part that is integrated into the whole in a manner different from the way it is in North America and Northwestern Europe. Recognition of this, we suggest, would be advantageous for future research, planning and policy formulation with respect to agriculture in Brazil.

By way of conclusion, we have an observation and some questions. Anthropologists traditionally have examined the social systems and cultural traditions of diverse societies. This paper has argued that the analysis of Brazilian society and culture indicates that the institutional substructure assumed by students of allied disciplines specializing in agricultural development is either rudimentary, or non-existent. Perhaps the major contribution of applied anthropology, rather than attempting to implement the programs designed by the economist, political scientist, rural sociologist, planner, or government policy maker should be to point up the culture-bound nature of many of the programs being offered. If we are right, and the social sciences employed in designing reform programs for Brazil, Latin America, and the developing world are culture-bound and take as givens certain aspects of the social systems of North America and Northwestern Europe, the programs that they inevitably must design require the transformation of developing societies so that their institutional systems conform with those taken as given by the planners and policy makers. This, of course, means that the developing, or third world, must develop the rudiments (or more) of the social farms articulated to the national economy by means of a system of selfregulating markets — before any real successes may be achieved.

But what is to be gained by Brazil being transformed into a society of family farms? The very idea, of course, is highly revolutionary, and would require a revolution to be accomplished. Now we hold no brief for the present organization of the agricultural sector in Brazil. It manifests some of the worst of inequities and injustices. If it is to be reformed, however, why must it first be transformed into a mold of the United States and Northwestern Europe? This is especially so when the family farm appears

no longer to be viable in these parts of the world. The trend is in the direction of larger units of production. Brazil already has a larger unit of production. Why then go through the anguish of transforming it into a smaller unit so that that in turn may be replaced with a larger unit? Why not start with the model of the present system and use it as the point of departure for reform and development?

Two tasks appear to be at hand for the applied anthropology of the next decade. The first is to point up the culture-bound nature of the disciplines that have been used in the formulation of policies and programs for the developing world. The second is to develop the models that may serve as the point of departure for more meaningful programs of reform and development.

This does not mean that the anthropologist will be listened to. In fact, we would predict that he will be loved neither by academic colleagues in the other applied disciplines, nor by the power centers in his own society — and it is assumed here that most applied anthropologists are citizens of the United States. However, if anthropology is to be applied at all it must be in terms of the broad cultural understandings that it can offer, whether or not the generally ethnocentric manipulators of people and power approve. Anthropology does have a contribution to make. The question is whether or not the professionals will have the courage to face the possible adversity that may descend upon them. Our discipline has reached the point at which considerable soul searching is necessary. Personally, we look forward to it, and to a new kind of applied anthropology in the future.

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2 We may add that the logical implications of the use of this implicit model in planning for Brazil has resulted in what many Brazilians and other Latin Americans refer to as the neoimperialism of the United States. As we shall see, there is more than an element of truth in this charge.

3 Actually we should speak of the culture area of Northwestern Europe and the temperate zone regions of North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, etc. to which the tradition has been spread by means of migration and diffusion.

4 There were exceptions, but the dominant pattern that became incorporated as the standard as these former Anglo-Saxon colonies became politically powerful nations was primarily the isolated farmstead.

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