

## THE BRAZILIAN NORTHEAST: A CASE OF DUAL SOCIETY?

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The economic condition of the Northeast is frequently discussed as a problem in Brazilian studies. Some view the region as one of "two Brazils" making up a dual society; others see the Northeast as a part of a regionally stratified, but essentially unified nation. These two views will be compared and contrasted in this article; also, I will present the case for what I think is the most persuasive interpretation of the Northeast problem.

### DUALISM VS. INTEGRATION

The dual society approach utilizes polar ideal types in its cultural and economic analysis. Great inequalities of income and differences in culture have led some writers to see two distinct and independent societies in Brazil: one being modern, dynamic, progressive and urban; the other being archaic, traditional, stagnant, and agrarian. Within this dualistic point of view, the Northeast is placed in the "archaic block", separated from the "progressive society" represented by São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

The dualistic concept is expressed among others by Jacques Lambert in *Os Dois Brasís*. For him, the Brazilians are divided into two systems of economic and social organization. These two societies did not evolve at the same rate, but are separated by centuries. The dual economy and the dual social structure which accompanies it are neither new nor characteristically Brazilian — they exist in all unequally developed countries.

According to the dualistic thesis, each of the two societies has its own characteristic dynamics. Thus, the archaic society, to which the Northeast belongs, originated in colonial times and today still conserves the same cultural patterns as in its beginning: personal and family (kinship) relations, rigid stratification of ascribed social statuses, and values based on traditionalism, which are said to constitute an obstacle to economically "rational" thought.

On the other hand, the modern society is dynamic and open to change; social relations are based not on a family level, but on impersonal contacts (secondary relations); the social structure is more flexible, the statuses being obtained by means of personal effort and expressed in economic achievement and level of education; finally, the values have a progressivist orientation under the economic point of view.

This idea of two societies coexisting simultaneously and independently in Brazil is opposed by another one which may be called "the integration concept". In accordance with this approach, the Northeast is an integral part of a nation that is essentially unified, since the two societies functionally interact throughout the country. Furthermore, the existence and interaction of the two societies are not limited to the Brazilian case, but constitute a patterned mechanism in which the developed and underdeveloped parts intermingle in the whole system. Frank expresses this point in his well-known article "The Development of the Underdevelopment" (1966). He believes that the entire dual society thesis is false, since most studies of development fail to take account of the economic and other relations between the metropolis and its economic colonies throughout the history of the worldwide expansion and development of the mercantilist and capitalist system. Consequently, most of the dualistic theories fail to explain the structure and development of the system as a whole and to account for its simultaneous generation of underdevelopment in some of its parts and economic development in others.

Contrary to the dualistic approach, that which is emphasized in the integration concept is not the analysis of the two contrasting poles at the ends of a socioeconomic continuum, but the *relationships* that exist between these two types and that bind them into a functional whole, as Stavenhagen says:

"...These differences do not justify the use of the concept of dual society for two principal reasons. First, the relations between the "archaic" or "feudal" regions and the "modern" or "capitalistic" ones represent the functioning of a single unified society of which the two poles are integral parts; and second, these two poles originate in the course of a single historical process." (1968, p. 16).

## THE IDEAL TYPES AND THEIR PATTERNS

Crucial to the dualist concept is the idea that underdevelopment is an original state, necessarily followed by development. According to Manning Nash (1963), the developmentalist transformation can take place in at least two manners: (1) substitution of the general features that characterize underdevelopment for those of development; (2) diffusion of cultural elements (values, capital and technology) from the modern to the backward areas. I shall analyse both of the above ideas with a focus upon the Brazilian framework, specifically the Northeast case.

To begin with, the establishment of polar ideal types and their general features has its roots in Max Weber's concept of particular ideal types — a view which was later more elaborated by Talcott Parsons in *The Social System* (1931). Hoselitz in "Social Stratification and Economic Development" (1963) tried to define the patterns which characterize the "developed type" as opposed to the "underdeveloped type". He argued that a developed society exhibits the pattern variables of universalism, achievement orientation, and functional specificity, while the underdeveloped one is characterized by their opposites: particularism, ascription, and functional diffuseness. Frank, in "Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment of Sociology" (1969), refutes the empirical validity of this typology by saying that some writers associate particularism, ascription, and diffuseness in underdevelopment with the extended family, the primitive tribe, the folk community, the traditional sector of a dual society, and with the underdeveloped countries and part of the world in general; however, he says that the connection is never made with the world nor with the contemporarily dominant social organization in the world taken as a whole.

The strategy utilized in the integration approach is, therefore, not to evaluate the patterns of variants of each "type", since it is said that they change in accordance with the particular cultures and with the circumstances dictated by convenience and interests of the dominant groups. The method used is the analysis of the interaction of the two societies on a regional, national and international level, and also, the way in which the dominant group acts to maintain the privileges of its position. It is within this point of view that Stavenhagen (op. cit.) makes a connection between the industrial society of Southern Brazil and the old latifundia owners who constitute the aristocracy of the Northeast. The following quotation expresses this point of view:

"It has often been said that there is a profound conflict of interests between the new elite (or the new upper class) represented by modern commercial and industrial entrepreneurs and the old elite (or the traditional upper class), which derives its prominence from the ownership of the land... however, much of

the capital coming from the archaic latifundia of Northeast Brazil is invested by their owners in more lucrative enterprises in other areas of the country". (p. 22).

It has been argued that the mere division of Brazil into regions does not offer a valid criterion for the localization of a determined type of society only in one area. In fact, the existence of well-defined economic and social classes diversifies the national culture in each Brazilian region and at the same time establishes chains among the various areas. This thought is exposed by Wagley in his book entitled *An Introduction to Brazil* (1963). According to this writer, differences in behavior are often determined more by social classes than by regional factors; the upper classes of the extreme North and the extreme South share more behavior traits with each other than they do with low-class *caboclos* (rural peasants) or *peões*, respectively. The distance is great between the *povo* and the middle and upper classes in any region of Brazil, and to understand something of this diversity one must understand something of the problem resulting from social classes.

Wagley goes somewhat further in his analysis of the class system in Brazil since he recognizes that the traditional class structure is changing in a significant and fairly rapid fashion. For him, new social sectors and even a new social class are appearing, and the quality of the relationship among all classes is being affected by the growth of impersonal, large-scale, industrial forms of wage employment, and by the demands of a mass society. The traditional lower class is splitting into an agricultural peasantry, a new factory in the field proletariat, and a rapidly expanding metropolitan lower class which includes industrial workers. A new metropolitan upper class whose power stems from the ownership of industrial plants and commercial enterprises is taking the place of the traditional elite.

#### DIFFUSIONISM AND THE BRAZILIAN CASE

The diffusionist idea, that is, the natural and continuous expansion of the cultural patterns from the developed areas to the underdeveloped ones, implies a process of acculturation. Some authors follow Redfield's concept of "rural" and "urban", classifying the first as archaic and backward and the second as modern and dynamic; then they go further by saying that the modern sector is essentially expansionist and consequently always brings development to the archaic sector. Accordingly, underdevelopment sometimes remains only because the old structure resists this diffusion.

The integration approach, however, responds to the diffusionist thesis, affirming that most of the time the "diffusion" is nothing more than the extension into the backward areas of monopolies maintained by the powerful sector of the society; furthermore, it is argued that the process of diffusion

has taken place *from* the backward *to* the modern areas, in terms of raw material and cheap labor. Referring to this idea, Accioly Borges (1961) writes that within the free play of the world economic forces that have shaped the course of the various countries, it has been the lot of the backward areas to organize their economy in such a way as to serve foreign interests rather than those of their own population. The fact that at one time three different phases in the evolution of society — slavery, feudalism, and capitalism — existed side by side, made it still easier for overseas interests to play this “extroversive” role, creating an extensive type of agriculture to produce exportable commodities, instead of intensive subsistence farming; building railways to link the economic centers with the ports of shipment rather than opening up explored territory.

The great challenge to the diffusionist thesis is made once again by Frank in his well-known metropolis-satellite approach, according to which the developed areas of the underdeveloped countries operate like a pumping mechanism, drawing from their backward hinterland the very elements that make for their own development. Also, the regions that today are more underdeveloped are precisely those that had the closest ties to the metropolis in the past.

The analysis that will be made about the Northeast and the economic cycles of Brazil will lead to a better understanding of the ideas mentioned above.

## THE NORTHEAST AND THE ECONOMIC CYCLES

Some authors use the approach of economic cycles as a focal point of their social studies of Brazil (Leads, 1957; Spiegel, 1949). In this respect, the Northeast inaugurated the cycles of Brazilian economic history and was the main center of communication between Brazil and the exterior for more than one hundred years. Wagley (op. cit.) mentions this fact:

“Each major cultural region of Brazil, and some of its subregions, had its heyday, and each is associated with an economic cycle — a boom and a bust. In a sense these regions reflect the economic history of Brazil. The oldest is the Northeast coast.” (p. 29).

While the Northeast maintained a monopoly on sugar cane, the cities of Recife and Salvador flourished as regional centers and a group of writers and politicians with a European education reflected the prosperity of the region. In the interior, or “sertão”, a subculture based on cattle developed: its function was to provide meat for the slaves and barons of the sugar mills (“engenhos de açúcar”) on the coast. They produced and exported what was in demand in that epoch.

By the middle of the seventeenth century the sugar plantations in the Northeast began to decay, due to the competition of the English, French and Dutch in the West Indies, who had markets in their home countries. With the decline of the demand for the sugar of the Northeast, this region entered into decadence. Moreover, the interior, where the meat subculture was localized, is today one of the Brazilian areas which displays the greatest amount of poverty and underdevelopment.

The Northeast case was repeated in each regional cycle; other economic booms, directed by external interests, appeared and disappeared: the gold in Minas Gerais, rubber in the state of Amazonas and, in this century, coffee in São Paulo.

The analysis of these regional cycles shows that each of them brought an epoch of growth and prosperity to the area in which it occurred; each corresponded at that moment to a foreign demand. At the same time, each regional boom left behind a backward economy. It has been said that, in Brazil, underdevelopment *followed*, rather than *preceded* development — which really questions the validity of the diffusionist hypothesis of progress. As for the social aspect, which is strictly related to the economic factor, some groups always benefited from the prosperous times. The social classes, according to what was demonstrated by Wagley, are spread throughout the country, each a bearer of different styles of life that do not depend on the regional factor *per se*.

## CONCLUSIONS

The inequalities of the Northeast, especially those which are mentioned in regard to the economic aspect, have caused a few writers to consider it as one of the “two Brazils”. It has been shown that this concept is false and does not resist a functional and historical analysis of the Brazilian case.

Those who try to explain the underdevelopment of the Northeast as a failure of a “traditional” society (viewed as a segment of dual societies) to become “modernized”, simply are neglectful of the structure and history of the underdevelopment system. Writing about the dualist approach as applied to the problem of the “favelas” of Brazil (“urban” vs “rural”), David Epstein makes the following reference to the Northeast problem:

“We may apply to dualist analyses of squatting the same criticism which may be made of dualist treatment of the relationship between the Northeast and the Paraíba Valley industrial region in Brazil . . . Emphasis on internal characteristics of social groups may lead to neglect or even denial of the historic interconnections between the factions which gave rise to and sustain the disparity between them”. (1969, p. 9).

Indeed, it was demonstrated that historically, the Northeast had its apogee and decline caused by external demands; internally, the "drainage" of the region continues in terms of human resources (cheap labor) and raw materials.

The Brazilian Northeast, analyzed under the "integration approach" shows that underdeveloped regions exercise the function of satellites of the developed centers. Therefore, instead of distinguishing two societies in Brazil (the Northeast belonging to one of them), it seems more accurate to determine the manner in which they are functionally integrated. The way this integration occurs generates contrasts in life styles and living conditions among the regions.

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