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SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION IN SOCIETIES
DOMINATED BY TRADITIONAL GROUPS

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In any study of planned social action, it is important to take into account right from the outset the ambiguous nature of the concept of planning itself. When considered within the framework of formal rationalization, the scope of planning is limited to the maximization of efficient action within existing structural inter-relationships which are regarded as data. An accepted or imposed system of values and an institutional framework account for these data, on the basis of which one may define general patterns of behaviour. The terms are established beforehand, and it is in relation to them that the patterns for rationalization are formulated. The current models of economic planning are included in this limited concept of planning.

However, planning may also be considered as a rationalizing technique in the service of a programme for social reconstruction. In this case the aim is actually to modify one or some of those factors which had previously been taken for data, and which now can be regarded as dependent variables. For example, the electoral system -- a decisive factor in the preservation of a specific power structure -- may itself be the target of political action. The problem then will no longer be to explain the result of political action on the basis of certain data, among them the electoral system, but rather to identify other aspects of the power structure which ensure the preservation of the electoral system. From then on, it becomes possible to direct political action in order to modify the power structure itself. In other words, instead of accepting the structural elements of the political behaviour as independent variables, one deliberately isolates a single structural element which comes to be considered as a dependent variable. The aim is now to identify the factors within or outside the model responsible for the behaviour of this variable, and to indicate practical methods for influencing its operation.

This type of social action, whose objective is to modify the structure of the power system itself, demands the mobilisation of means which more often than not, are far from conventional. In certain specific cases it is sufficient to define the problem to understand that it has no practical solution; in other words, that the required means are beyond the scope of the interested groups. However, though a practical solution cannot be found, it does not mean that the problem has ceased to exist. Not infrequently, political action limits itself to exposing the problem, thus throwing the door open to partial solutions. In this case, the objective of planning is to direct these partial solutions in such a way that they may lead to the same long range objective of structural change.

It is not always easy to establish a clear cut distinction between planning which aims exclusively at efficiency within an already accepted framework, and that which has for its objective the introduction of structural changes. Consequently, the role of planners as well as that of planning agencies is inevitably ambiguous. Quite often planning is expected to offer solutions to political problems without tackling fundamental issues at all, that is to say, the social conflicts which are an endemic part of them. All the same, this ambiguous role of planning sometimes constitutes a political weapon of no mean importance.

My purpose in this paper is to deal with some of the types of planned social action designed to influence decisions relevant to the economic process and to modify the structure of those bodies responsible for such decisions.

In societies which have achieved a high level of industrialization, the solution to the more acute social tensions arising from the economic process-- that is, the problems pertaining to the distribution of an increasing national income -- is rendered all the easier by the technological process itself,

which is a primary factor of development and of modernisation. The correctives to the social effects of the rapid accumulation of capital -- the increasing bargaining power of the wage-earning classes -- are supplied by technological progress itself, which is responsible for reducing the demand for manpower per unit of investment. In this manner, the acceptance of rapid technical progress and the rise in real wages become compatible with a relatively stable social structure, and with a gradual transformation of the institutional framework.

The situation is appreciably different in those countries which are developing with the aid of imported technology. The chief characteristic of these countries is the persistence and the intensification of a serious imbalance at the level of the factors of production, which manifests itself mainly in the availability of a considerable surplus of manpower. The social projections of this disequilibrium are evident in the rapid pace of urbanization which does not correspond to any significant absorption of manpower in industrial activity. The growing urban population, which is dependent on precarious forms of employment created directly or indirectly by the State, constitute the crux of serious social tensions.

Wherever technology developed pari passu with the accumulation of capital, the evolution of political institutions proceeded by absorbing into its power system the new social forces which were being formed. In the countries where the disequilibrium at the factors level persisted and was even intensified, and where the rate of urbanization was not proportionate to that of industrialization one does not see any appreciable evolution of the institutional framework. One can only see a loosening of the foundations on which traditional forces are based. Since a large proportion of the population continues to depend for survival on the availability of land, and since the

ownership of land is in the hands of a small minority, the pattern of political domination as found in the agricultural sector continues to play a major role. However, this important role tends to be reduced with the growing movement of population towards the urban areas.

Urbanization and the emergence of industrial groups supported by high-grade technical cadre, were responsible for effecting an appreciable change in the political structure. In the attempt to consolidate their position against the traditional forces, the industrial groups resorted to mobilising the urban masses. However, the community of interests of these heterogeneous masses and of the industrial groups did not extend very far. Since it was impractical to create employment in the modern sector of the economy for a large section of the population, the only way to establish contact with these masses was by offering them assistance from public funds. This welfare-type of policy, which came to be the basis of populism, would soon have to come in conflict with the interests of the industrial class, who attempted to transform the State into an instrument for accumulating the social capital necessary for the development of industrialization.

There is therefore a first phase, when the industrial groups can count on the urban masses to wrest some of the control of the State from the traditional groups entrenched in the agricultural sector. It is then that some of the political institutions are modernised, with the introduction of universal suffrage, of the secret ballot, etc... However, it soon becomes evident that the industrial groups have few interests in common with the heterogeneous and under-employed masses. These last come increasingly under the control of populist leaders, that is, the leaders who have no ideological allegiance, whether with regard to the existing social structure, or with regard to a specific programme for social reconstruction.

In this way, the industrial groups and the senior technical cadres whose interests coincide to a greater degree with the objectives of development and of the modernization of society, are not in a position to acquire power through channels open to political strategy. This political strategy is based either on controlling the passive masses who remain subjugated by the traditional forces, or in establishing contact with the active masses who demand a policy of social welfare, constituting the basis of populism. On the other hand, through their economic power and technical know-how, the industrial and professional groups interfere in various ways with the political process and retain partial control of the state apparatus.

Under such circumstances, the political process tends to follow essentially what may be called a course of tactical compromise. The industrial and professional groups align themselves with the landed gentry in order to prevent the populists from gaining control of certain positions. In other cases, an understanding is reached with the populists, in order to undermine a specific position held by the traditional forces. Once in power, the groups that have emerged as victors distribute among themselves the key jobs, and begin to impose the policy most convenient to them in those sectors over which they have gained control. The result is that certain sectors within the same administration pursue contradictory policies. For example, it is common to find that the policy governing credits follows a certain direction and the policy for establishing wages follows another; that the financial policy may be restrictive whereas the policy for public works may be expansionist, etc..

Generally speaking, the system of domination by the landed gentry found in the agricultural sector has under its control a large proportion of local authorities and of the legislative bodies. The populist influence is felt par excellence in those more important executive bodies which are directly

dependent on the vote. There thus emerges a new source of confusion for the State, namely the absence of an ideological basis or of a common operational policy in the chief branches of Government. The lack of a clear cut definition of political goals, the control of important administrative responsibilities by groups which do not participate directly in the political process, the paralysis of certain branches of the Administration as a direct consequence of delegating the power to make complementary decisions to groups with antagonistic interests -- the result of all this is that an important aspect of the political struggle for positions tends to take place within the power structure itself. In other words, there is a continuous link between political activity and the administrative bodies, more often than not the methods employed by the administration being the most important factor for the preservation of the power structure.

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The experience in social action which I have had the privilege of directing for over five years in the Northeast of Brazil, should be analysed in the light of what has been said above about the ambiguous position of the State in underdeveloped countries, about the lack of a clear distinction between conventional and unconventional forms of political action, and between political and administrative procedures.

On the basis of the first assessment of the socio-economic situation of the region, it was agreed that it would be necessary to go further afield than was possible by employing the conventional techniques of economic planning. Some parts of the social structure had to be considerably modified if they were to form the basis for an economic system with a definite potential for growth. For example, the agrarian structure comprising of large scale farms where feudal patterns of labour relations prevailed, and of small scale farms

in which investment of any type would be counter-productive, would have to undergo drastic change if the region were to have the type of agricultural basis essential for supporting industrialization.

However, to change the agrarian structure was a political objective without a practical solution in view, i.e. it could not be achieved by conventional political methods. It was therefore decided to break down the problem into its various components, each of which would be more accessible to some kind of practical solution. There thus emerged three different courses of action. The first sought to modify the acknowledged basis of the problem: it consisted in a systematic assessment of the resources of the region with a view to opening up new land for cultivation, whether through irrigation or through a policy of land settlement. The second envisaged the redeployment of public funds in order to cease reinforcing the structure of the large scale landholdings, or the latifundios. Finally, the third course of action sought to mobilise those forces which were active outside the power structure, with a view to undermining the supremacy of the large scale landholdings. I shall limit my comments to the third course of action.

A combination of wage-earning together with various feudal forms of labour relations predominate in the large scale landholdings in the humid zone of the Brazilian Northeast. The agricultural labourer is paid partly in cash and partly by leasing him a small plot of land where, with the help of his family, he grows food crops for his own consumption. The presence, side by side, in the sugar plantation, of factory workers who benefit from social legislation, and of rural labourers on partial wages but deprived of the privileges of social legislation, has led to the emergence of the Peasant Leagues, a movement whose objective was to work for the application of the existing social laws on behalf of the wage-earning rural labourers. As the

organization of rural labourers into trade unions was illegal, any attempt to organise them, even if it were only to insist on rights sanctioned by law, would be considered as subversive activity. The law conceded certain rights to the rural labourers, but there was no competent authority to force the big landlords to observe this law. On the other hand, the rural workers were deprived of the right to organize themselves to fight for the execution of the law. In this manner, the objectives for which the Peasant Leagues fought could hardly be called reformist in character, as they had already been approved by law. Nevertheless, in their attempt to mobilise the peasants, they were obliged to employ methods considered to be subversive and to express themselves in revolutionary terms. Actually, the Leagues were obliged to adopt tactics common to secret societies in order to recruit adherents and to circulate directives for action, as many of the landlords had at their disposal well equipped private police forces. Outside the large estates the Leagues were no more than ordinary organizations for legal assistance to rural labourers. The double face of the Leagues, both as bodies for subversive social activity on the land, and as modest agencies for deploying legal assistance in the towns, demonstrates clearly the phenomenon of the loosening of the foundation on which the traditional system of political domination was based. The same section of the population who are under the control of a privately maintained police on the big estates, and who are deprived of their elementary rights of association, gather together in the towns in groups which constitutes an important factor in the political infrastructure.

In contrast to the Leagues, which only fought for the execution of existing laws, the groups which were active within the administration were of the opinion that it was necessary to change the existing institutional framework with a view to modifying the agrarian structure. But, while the

Leagues were obliged to issue revolutionary appeals in order to mobilise the masses for achieving their modest objectives, the groups within the Administration had to content themselves with more limited technical means to tackle problems for which only a political solution was possible.

As the landed gentry own the best humid areas of the region which they confine to the cultivation of sugar to the degree convenient to them, they expose the region to a chronic scarcity of food, which renders the development of any other type of economic activity impossible. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the landlord succeeds in perpetuating his own class by thus obstructing the development of other economy activities, for he is thereby assured of a large labour force available at subsistence wages. Therefore the first concern of any development policy would have to be to force the landlords to forfeit a part of those lands which are under-cultivated, near the urban areas, for the production of food crops. As it would be more profitable to employ intensive labour techniques, this new agricultural enterprise would have to be organized on the basis of the family unit. Thus, the real objective of the group which worked within the Administration was to modify the agrarian structure by reducing the control which the landlords exercised on the land, while at the same time promoting the emergence of the type of agriculture designed to encourage the development of non-rural activities, depending on the elasticity of food supply. The control of the land allows the landlords a monopoly on credit facilities which the Government banks allot to agriculture. In this manner, official loans aid the consolidation of the landlord system and the landlords in turn prevent important funds earmarked by the Government for agriculture, from being utilised for achieving the rationalization of the agrarian structure. In order to break this vicious circle it was important to create a type of agricultural activity capable of developing, and outside the control of the

landlords. With this end, in view, the irrigation and land settlement projects were initiated, together with the development of a new type of agriculture in the humid region which was still under the control of the big landlords.

It is true that there was no coordination between the social action directed by the technical departments of the administrative bodies, by whom the agrarian problem was understood in terms of a development policy with the aim of mobilising urban groups, and the social action undertaken by the Peasant Leagues through unconventional political methods. All the same these activities constituted different aspects of the same political process, namely, the non-violent liquidation of an anachronistic social structure. The results obtained by March 1964, when the rural trade unions had already been legalised, amply prove the efficacy of the types of action employed.

Yet another example of the effectiveness of this combination of conventional and unconventional social action is the adoption of the Development Plan for the Northeast by the National Parliament in 1961. The specific objectives of this plan were extremely modest; they did not conflict in any manner with the existing social order. But the new administrative measures could have had important consequences for the proper functioning of the power system prevailing in the region. In effect, the Plan released a great proportion of the resources meant for investment in the region, from the control of agencies traditionally subject to local political interests. One of their chief means of support was thus withheld from the landlords, on the justifiable pretext that these investment funds were being employed for a development plan of broader application. In this manner, a simple reform of the administrative methods, based on irrefutable technical principles, concealed a political manouvre of far wider scope. The near monopoly of the political system which the traditional groups retained in the region, could be explained only by the fact that these groups controlled the agencies in charge of allocating federal government funds. On the other

hand, by consolidating the independent status of the technical departments of the federal administration, the influence of minority political groups in the urban areas would inevitably be increased. As a matter of fact it was precisely these groups who promoted the mobilization of the urban masses, and transformed the advocacy of a simple technical plan into a great political issue.

The case for the Development Plan of the Northeast was expressed in strictly technical terms, i.e. as a programme designed to benefit the entire population without advocating any change in the existing social structure, against which a number of arguments could have easily been advanced. The landed gentry whose interests were threatened, could not very well attack the technical basis of the Plan, and had, perforce, to conceal reasons for their opposition to it, as this were politically inadmissible. Moreover, their own arguments could have been brought forward against them. This conflict brought together in a common front all the urban political groups (industrialists, workers, students, etc.). However, even this unity was not adequate, for the landed gentry and their allies had a comfortable majority in Parliament consisting of their regional representatives. One therefore had to resort to the unconventional method of a full-scale political struggle, such as strikes, lockouts, walk-outs, etc. in order to mobilise the national public opinion and thereby secure the support of members of Parliament from other regions of the country thus revealing the wide gulf which existed between the people of the Northeast and their so-called representatives in Congress. The formal adoption of the Plan, after an 18 month campaign, thanks to the support of members of Parliament from other regions, constituted the first defeat of the landlord class in their conflict against urban political forces. It should be pointed out that this political struggle was not carried out by the usual political forces. The fundamental role was played by the urban groups of a more radical disposition, motivated by reformist

or para-revolutionary zeal and to whom normal political channels are usually closed.

This scheme, which is similar in nature to the one mentioned earlier, should be understood as an example of social action undertaken on a broad front, which on the one hand included the translation of important political ideals into technically neutral terminology by the Administrative bodies, and on the other, the translation of the moderate reformist content of those ideals into para-revolutionary symbols.

I refer to these concrete instances with the sole purpose of illustrating the thesis expounded above, according to which, whenever a State has ill-defined goals of an ambiguous character -- which is the case at present in traditional societies exposed to the effects of modern technology -- political action directed at changing the social structure tends to present itself as a continuous process, which extends from the most elementary administrative functions to unconventional forms of political action undertaken by groups who challenge the legitimacy of the traditional power structure. This peculiar situation which eludes simple definition, directly reflects a real situation in which the very foundation of the traditional system of political domination is in a process of desintegration, though no viable alternative means may have emerged to integrate those social forces which remain active within a new power system.

The very ambiguity of the language used in a normal political process that excludes important social factors, conceals another type of political action which is undertaken by unconventional methods, or which is transferred altogether to the administrative sphere. Thus, it is from within the administration itself that the industrial and senior professional groups exert a great deal of their political influence. It could happen, however, that one of these groups may avail itself of particularly favourable methods of approach as the basis for the action taken. This was precisely what happened in 1958 when a serious

drought revealed the inadequacies of federal government action in the Northeast of Brazil. Forced to initiate novel schemes, the Government found itself adopting ideals which tended to undermine the basis of the power structure which prevailed in the region. But once these ideals were expoused, there arose a political necessity to exert a strick control on the Administration, in order to prevent the pñan of operation from upsetting the foundation of the system of social domination. However, the way was opened for action by the dissident groups who found in the administrative bodies the means they required to achieve their goals.

The fact that the Administration may be partially controlled by industrial and professional groups, permits the establishment of focal points for initiating reform. Very often this initiative serves as a rallying point for groups which, as a result of their being in conflict with certain features in the established social order, do not have access to normal political channels. By campaigning for reformist objectives with the support of the Administrative sector itself, the dissident groups continue to loosen up the normal political procedure and at the same time justify their own position. On the other hand, as the initial objectives tend to be expressed in the much more radical terminology of these groups, the traditional forces are pressed by moderate elements from their own ranks to accept compromise solutions.

The structural reforms resulting from the different types of social action which we have analysed above, can be made to work in those societies political-ly dominated by traditional forces, in so far as these societies allow for the political participation of at least a sention of the population. This is generally the case wherever the place of urbanization results in the breakdown of the very basis of the power system, with the result that the system of traditional domination co-exists with another system which is amenable to the establishment of direct contact with the masses. In other instances, the traditional system of domination is perpetuated in the urban areas as a result

of the establishment of a military dictatorship. In this case the political horizon becomes narrower, and the different types of social action dealt with here are rendered totally ineffective.

The path of social reform can be taken in those traditional societies where the interests of certain minority groups, with access to the political process, can be translated into projects for social reconstruction favourable to development and modernization. This is a necessary though not a sufficient condition. The other essential condition is the existence of a democratic political process open to the participation of at least a part of the population. Only in this manner is innovation possible in the political procedure, by introducing unconventional approaches wherever the channels for conventional action are either insufficient or inaccessible. Often the role of the dissident groups, which challenge certain aspects of the existing social order, constitutes a platform on which to launch an all-out effort to achieve innovation in political procedure. It is the action of these groups that one owes the mobilization of intellectuals for political activity. The same may be said with regard to the mobilization of students, whose enthusiasm and sense of dedication constitutes a decisive factor in many processes of social reconstruction.

In order to summarize the aforesaid, allow me to go over the main points of my thesis:

1. In those countries where the introduction of modern technological methods of production intensifies or creates a serious imbalance at the factors level, a process of rapid urbanization is likely to take place, though the labour force absorbed by the industrial sector does not constitute a very large proportion of the urban population.

2. The emergence of the heterogeneous urban masses in the political process helps to break down the foundation of the traditional system of power, and

allows for the political ascendancy of new groups, particularly those of industrialists and of senior professional cadres, who in this manner are able to control a part of the political apparatus. The heterogeneity of the urban masses and their dependence on precarious modes of employment created by the State, give rise to political movements strictly directed towards welfare, and which are better known by the generic term of populism. Raced with the ascendancy of the populist movement, the industrial and professional groups, whose interests could have served as a basis for the formulation of a development policy, encounter increasing difficulties in their attempt to organize a political platform, and so seek to survive by tactical compromise, whether with the populist leaders themselves, or with the traditional forces.

3. In view of the inability of the traditionalists, and of the populists to offer any form of leadership during the phase of social reconstruction, and of the industrial-professional groups to establish a political platform of their own, the political process tends to be deprived of any ideological content. In the political sphere, the tactical compromise prevails, while some of the more relevant problems are transferred to the administrative sphere, which results in the delegation of the responsibility for making decision, which their very nature are complementary; to groups with interests often antagonistic to one another.

4. The political influence which may be exercised by the administrative sector through its power for making decisions, tends to favour the industrial-professional groups, who maintain important position of control in the financial and economic departments of the administration. As they are in position to translate approved laws into action, and to initiate the legislative process, these groups not infrequently succeed in substantially influencing all government programmes. Furthermore, the initiative which they possess in the financial-economic sector, giving a technical character to problems of political

significance, allows them to influence strategic sectors of opinion and to introduce a political procedure by unconventional means. The conditions which prevail at present in many under-developed countries are such as to permit the technical sectors of the administration to act as centres for the promotion of reformist action within the Government itself, and the dissemination of ideas that foster action by dissident groups, which in other circumstances may tend to adopt utopian schemes.

5. An indisputable condition for the viability of the type of social action described above is that the power system should be compatible with a flexible political apparatus, even if this is restricted to the urban sector of the society alone. But wherever the process of desintegration of the traditional system of power is arrested, as a result of an alliance with the military, thus subjecting the urban population to a tutelage identical to that which prevails in the rural sector, then any changes of success for this type of social reformist action is completely out of the question.

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