

PUTTING AN END TO WOMEN'S MARGINALITY IN BRAZIL

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Iza Guerra-Labelle, qui pendant beaucoup d'années a travaillé avec les paysans du nord-est brésilien d'où elle est originaire, présente cet article à l'atelier des femmes et la production alimentaire au Forum '85. Elle y décrit comment les changements dans les structures du droit de propriété depuis le coup militaire de 1964 ont forcé le Brésil à devenir exportateur de nourriture, ce qui a résulté en l'incapacité de la population de se nourrir. Elle soutient que des projets alternatifs pour les productrices de nourriture doivent tenir compte des problèmes du droit de propriété, de développement agricole et de l'exploitation des terres. De nouveaux modèles de développement, en contraste au système exploitatif actuel, doivent être créés pour riposter à la situation marginale des paysannes.

Everybody knows a little about Brazil's history as a big coffee and sugar producer and exporter. At the end of the 1920's, the coffee and sugar cycle was on the wane, and structures in land exploitation were modified. Patterns in land ownership began to change. We then had large "latifundistas" (large farm estates). When Brazil started to care about feeding her own people, properties were divided and distributed to a growing population. Between 1920 and 1964, the concern of Brazilian governments was to proceed with land distribution and to resettle the population in order to allow them to feed themselves.

From 1964 onwards, there is a break in the history of Brazil on the political and economic levels, as well as in the structures of land ownership. The 1964 military coup answered the needs of multinational corporations which, from then on, forced Brazil to become a food exporter, through the International Monetary Fund loan policy. So Brazil has become a food producer for Northern countries. Structures of land ownership changed and small properties gave way to "latifundias" once again and thus to mono-culture. Brazil has become an exporter of soy beans for cattle

feed in the North, coffee, oranges, and so on.

As a result, Brazil's population can no longer feed itself. For example, let us take the case of three States: Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba and Pernambuco in the Northeastern region of Brazil. In 1930, approximately 400,000 small holders owned about 90% of the land. Today 75% of the land is in the hands of 4% of the population. The majority of dispossessed peasants are forced to emigrate to urban centres. Men are leaving; women and children stay, and live on small government-owned plots of land adjacent to large properties.

We who work with women in the field of food production, must first answer these questions: "How can we produce food without land?" and "How can women living by themselves survive when they cannot produce on land that doesn't belong to them?" We, that is to say, intervenors who work with the support of NGO's, try and set up alternative projects with these women. As a first step, we sometimes obtain small portions of land after negotiations with governments and owners; but we then face the problem of the type of project to set up. If we are conscious of the nature of the economic and agricultural exploitation systems of the whole (which are the cause of poverty), we cannot reproduce them by using the same models of development.

You see the contradiction we are facing: we criticize the system, but we do not have the means to change it. We set up alternative projects with women, but we do not have a good model that allows them to change the marginality of their lives in relation to the established system. Up to now, all we have achieved is the setting up of marginal projects. We believe that women should participate in every level of society: political, economic and social. Whatever benefits they can gain from alternative projects in health, literacy, or social organization, we cannot approach, through these projects, the basic question of land ownership. We

must also add another question: "Which technology should we hand down to them?"

So, we have problems of land ownership, land development and land use; and alternative projects which often maintain women in marginality. Add to this yet another contradiction: that of two opposing systems – two models or two ways of thinking.

Every group action stands on two basic concepts: rationality and participation. Rationality can be analyzed differently according to the point of view of the modern system of capitalist development, or of the traditional system. According to the first, rationality depends on productivity and *individual* efficiency. There is no participation. One does not decide what one will do, nor how nor why. A boss does it. One has to be efficient, productive, clean and get good results.

In traditional systems, whether in Latin American – especially among Amerindian populations – or in Africa, efficiency is the expression of a *collective* work, not an individual work. There, effort is valued. One does not judge individual productivity, but the results of collective work.

The difference between these two points of view is even greater if one considers the concept of participation. Let us take the example of a group of peasant women here in Kenya, in Senegal or in Latin America. Before seeding, they will ask themselves what, where and how to plant. Then to whom they will sell the crop, at what price, and if the benefits will be entirely or partially collectivised. Participation takes place at every step of production, but only on a horizontal level. The great problem is that vertical participation does not exist. Women develop among themselves a horizontal participation but always continue to be marginalized in relation to central power. They do not have any decision-making power over the course of their own lives, their families', their group's, and even less over their country's.

I think that the predominant question



Fish, baby by Josie Cook (acrylic on canvas)

Credit: Photo by Marion Barling

that NGO's have to answer is how to reconcile these two systems so that women can continue to develop their social organizations—very valid since they always oppose destruction of the individual—and at the same time introduce appropriate technologies that must stay under their control and help them in their daily lives.

It is in this way, I think, that they will be able to integrate themselves in a modern world; that is, in a real political, social and economic participation. We

must find bridges to link these two ways of thinking. In order to solve the problems of land ownership and exploitation, we must have a good model of development opposed to the one already existing that makes peasant women the most marginal among the marginal people of the world.

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