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Visit to an Engenho

Recife,
Pernambuco.

31st. March 1966.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

For the last three centuries sugar has been the most important crop in the Zona da Mata in the North East of Brazil. Despite increasing pressure to diversify the land use, this very fertile coastal strip is still devoted almost exclusively to its production. A friend, the owner of a large sugar plantation in Pernambuco, invited us to spend a couple of days with him, to see for ourselves how a plantation is run, and how its workers live. From this visit my lasting impression is that life on an engenho (sugar plantation) has changed remarkably little in the past seventy years.

The sugar industry in Brazil was originally carried out entirely on the plantations themselves. Their size ranged from about four hundred hectares to several thousand, and the only commercial crop was sugar. The nucleus around which life centred was the casa grande, the home of the senhor do engenho. Nearby were the slave quarters and other outbuildings, the chapel, and the cane processing shed with its tall factory chimney. The unit was completely self-contained with its own shops and work shops. Since transport was non-existent, there was very little contact with the rest of the world.

The human relationships within the plantation were both intimate and intricate, but have been very adequately explained in Gilberto Freyre's book, The Masters and the Slaves. Suffice it to say here that the senhor was regarded as a being with absolute power and absolute rights. The rest of the population was not only completely dependent upon him for all their needs, but was also subservient to him.

Towards the end of the last century radical changes took place in two ways. Firstly, slavery was abolished in 1889. This threw out the whole economy of the engenhos, and they have never fully recovered from the shock. Secondly, at about the same time, usinas began to appear which took over the processing function of the engenhos. These were factories in the field equipped with what, at the time, must have been the very latest machinery. They were large, efficient and able to cope with the produce of twenty or more engenhos. They are much larger and less personal institutions than the plantations, and generally have available more capital resources. As engenhos came on to the market, they were gradually bought by the usinas, and today over half are owned by them, either rented out or run by administrators. The remainder are still privately owned, but with a few notable exceptions, all send their cane to the nearest usina to be processed.

At the beginning of the century, the whole system would have been more or less in keeping with the state of development of the rest of the country. But in 1966 _usinas_ seem archaic and _engenhos_ primeval. During this period there has not been one significant development to the industry in the North East. It is hard to see now how conditions can be improved and efficiency increased without interference from the state. The subject of land reform is in fact the political touch-paper in the North East. Any political discussion invariably leads round to the topic, and , although few would deny that the present situation, especially in the _engenhos_, is full of iniquities, the means of improving it depends upon one's political standpoint. This, in turn, is largely dependent upon whether or not one has interests at stake. One remedy is a more equitable distribution of land, but this is against the interests of landowners. They still have a great deal of political power, and are therefore in a position to prevent it. Another, slightly less controversial but hitherto not put into effect, is experimentation with other crops.

Various underground movements have been formed to take the land by force, but they have achieved nothing as yet, and are not flourishing at present. Their most active period was that immediately prior to the 1964 revolution, when Miguel Arraes was governor of Pernambuco. Since then, tension has been considerably reduced, although to a newcomer it is still all too apparent, and many reckon that, unless drastic action is taken soon, it is only a matter of time before violence breaks out.

At the start of the visit I was very struck by the terrible state of the roads. We were advised not to try and drive out in our Volkswagon mini-bus as it would probably get stuck _en route_, and we were instead driven out in the owner's Chevrolet pick-up truck. We were well advised. Nothing weaker than the Chevrolet would have arrived, and even so the journey of fifty kilometres, half of it over made-up roads, took well over two hours. The track - the word 'road' gives a false impression - was awash with bright orange mud and clay although Winter has not yet started, and we had to be pulled up hills no less than three times by teams of oxen who happened to be at hand. The Chevrolet was only two years old, but not unsurprisingly in the circumstances, already looked three times the age.

Outside the towns, all the roads in the Zona da Mata, except for the few paved trunk roads, are in extremely poor condition. They are almost all owned and theoretically maintained by the state or the local council, but since they run largely through privately owned sugar plantations, the owners' attitude seems to be that if the _usinas_ or _engenhos_ feel that the roads need reparing badly enough, they will do it themselves. The _usinas_ often have the resources to maintain the roads, but since their lorries can pass they do not think it necessary. Moreover, most of the cane is transported on their narrow gauge railways, which, burning waste from the cane, are much cheaper to run. The _engenhos_ do not usually have the means or the foresight to do anything about the situation. Any steps taken are generally of such a temporary nature that after a bad rain storm the improvements have been washed away. At present the social cost in terms of wear and tear on all vehicles using the roads is extremely high. However, it is not in keeping with the sugar industry in the North East, on the showing of the past forty years, to look to the future if a heavy capital outlay is involved, whatever the benefits to be derived from the investment in the long run.

The countryside of the Zona da Mata is most beautiful, and is covered with gentle rolling hills with wooded crests, the only remains of the mata. These, although generally small in area, are like miniature jungles. They have very high trees covered with dripping lianas and thick undergrowth, and exude an atmosphere of snakes and decay. The hillsides are covered with bright green cane reaching to a height of seven or eight feet. This makes a strong contrast with the ubiquitous reddish orange rich earth on the bare patches. The land appears to be planted exclusively with cane, but a certain proportion of it is devoted to rough pasture for beef cattle.

There were few signs of humanity as we drove along. The mud huts of the moradores (workers living on the site) are scattered, and are usually hidden beneath the banana trees that invariably surround them. The casa grande of each engenho was visible from the road, but most were in a sad state of repair, and many were obviously not inhabited. Although our visit coincided with the last few days of the harvest, I saw not one man cutting cane or working on it the whole time we were there. There was one man digging irrigation ditches, and several looking after cattle or driving tractors, but most were simply walking dejectedly along the road. Outside the central enclave of the casa grande there was a melancholy atmosphere.

As we jolted and slithered along, the owner explained how the engenho worked. His property consists of three engenhos worked as one, with a total area of over two thousand hectares. Only about 40% of the land is planted with cane: the remainder is forest and rough pasture used for cattle. One hundred and sixty moradores live on the engenhos, and another forty men are employed during the harvest on a temporary basis. The latter only work on the cane, but the former include the vaqueiros (cowboys), tractor drivers, mechanics, builders, odd job men, and the administrator who takes charge when the owner is absent. The administrator started life as a morador, but through his ability has gradually increased his responsibilities. He has now reached a stage where he is being given a share of the profits of the engenho. His brother is still a morador.

Cane is planted during the Winter from March to September, and is cut eighteen months later during the Summer. Throughout the year the cane has to be kept free from weeds and pests, and irrigation channels have to be maintained. The usina is responsible for transporting the cane from the boundaries of the engenho, for which locomotives are generally used. The engenho has to carry the cane to that point either by tractor drawn carts or solid wooden-wheeled ox carts. This senhor de engenho, I noticed, was making much more use of the less fertile land for cattle raising than his neighbours. He explained that on the less accessible and rich land it is a very profitable side line, although the threat of snakes biting the cattle is a worry.

The usina pays for the cane by the sack of sugar produced: this depends upon the type and the quality of the cane. The price paid is fixed by the Instituto de Açucar e Alcool, a national organisation responsible for selling all the sugar produced in Brazil, both at home and abroad. Theoretically, the usinas are paid 80% of the price on receipt of the sugar, and the remainder when it is finally sold. For the past five years, however, the I.A.A. has not paid the final 20%. Since they make a calculated allowance of 16% profit, the _usinas_, and hence the _engenhos_ are making a theoretical loss of 4% at present. Although no actual loss was being made in this case, perhaps this, together with the prohibitive cost of much necessary machinery partly accounts for the lack of modernisation. A tractor with implements, for example, costs about eleven thousand dollars, and even without implements costs seven thousand dollars. The massive Paulo Afonso hydro-electric power scheme has cables passing within a kilometre of the house. Yet the cost of installation alone was so high, that it was cheaper for the owner to buy a fairly large private motor to serve all his needs.

One of the attractive characteristics of most _casas grandes_ is their site. They very frequently lie in the shelter of a hill, looking down on the rest of the outbuildings, with the chapel standing alone on the summit of the hill. The focal point of the house is the wrought-iron terrace that serves the _casa grande_ as the kitchen serves the English farmhouse. It is there that the family sit surveying their terrain, and where the peasants visit them, cap in hand, receiving orders or making requests. The height of the terrace and the steps that lead up to it help to increase the social difference between the gods and their subjects. The house we stayed in was built seventy years ago by the present owner's grandfather, and had changed little in the intervening period. The high rooms were simply but comfortably furnished, had much wrought-iron, and had large wooden shutters. It was much as I imagine a modest Southern plantation owner's house. An incongruous looking television set and precariously suspended electric light bulbs were the only concessions to the 1960's.

Life within the house is comfortable but in no sense luxurious, and the frequently painted picture of the _senhor do engenho_ sitting around all day, drunk, watching his peasants slave in front of him and starve, was certainly untrue in this case. The economics of _engenhos_ are such that I think that it would be extremely difficult for any to do this unless he had money from other sources. With two hundred men to supervise over two thousand hectares, our friend rises at six, and spends the morning inspecting the progress of the crop and the state of the cattle. His lunch hour is often interrupted by workers wanting medical or other advice, since they know that this is the only time that he is at home. The afternoon is also spent on horseback, and discussions with his administrator and paper work take place in the evening. His wife, not having any children, spends her day visiting families of workers and the school, sewing, and running the house. She gets up considerably later, and admits that she is not over-employed. We ate well in an unsophisticated way, and almost all the food came from the _engenho_ itself. Only some meat was bought outside.

To me, the standard of living appeared to be much the same as on an average English farm, little more. However, it is easy to see why it appears like an unattainable paradise to the workers. For the legal minimum wage of under twenty-five dollars a month, they work a six day week from seven a.m. until four p.m. Their houses are provided free, and they are also given small plots on which to grow bananas and other crops. The huts are built of mud and sticks (_taipa_), usually unfinished and unpainted. The roofs are tiled, and have wooden doors and windows; the floors are earth. Inside, there are normally about four small rooms divided by walls up to eye level only. The furniture consists of bare essentials: these are a table and chairs, canvas beds, and a small ugly china cupboard. The kitchen has a clay slab for a wood or charcoal fire.

The sanitary arrangements, if any, are a coconut leaf shelter at the back, but are often non-existent.

Workers' families are not small, and the cost of food is not low. Meat costs over $1.50 per kilo, and their staple diet is farinha de mandioca, the rather coarse, tasteless flour made from mandioca roots, and feijão (dried beans) supplemented by fruit grown on their plot, or gathered wild. They also have a goat to provide milk. The children invariably have swollen stomachs, caused by parasites and an unbalanced diet. They are seldom clothed until they are five or six, and all are bare-foot. As we drove along, a pathetic family of four naked Indian children, all under six years old, stood shivering in the pouring rain. They waved, and called 'Merry Christmas', and asked our friend where their clothes were. He gave them twenty Cruzeiros (a cent), and said that he would bring them next time. Afterwards he explained that he had brought them some clothes at Christmas, and ever since then they had called 'Merry Christmas' in the hopes of getting more.

People age quickly, and by the time they are forty-five, they are already old men: very few live to be over sixty. Life has few pleasures for them. It is virtually impossible for them to improve their lot. They are almost all illiterate, unskilled and have no capital resources. There is little scope for earning more in the surrounding area, and the cities are already suffering from a high rate of unemployment from immigration. The only hope for most of them lies in reforming the situation on the engenhos themselves.

The relationships between the peasants and the senhor do engenho are much deeper and more complex than simply those of an employee and an employer. The latter is still the padrão of the former, and as such, brings his influence to bear on many aspects of the family life as well as their work. The responsibilities of the padrão do not end with the payment of wages and the provision of houses, but he also has to act as doctor and policeman, and to provide for their religious and educational needs.

In his capacity as amateur doctor, the owner is consulted on any medical problem, from wounds to serious fever. He keeps a supply of basic remedies in the house, and if these are not adequate, he sends the patient off to a doctor or hospital in the nearest town and pays for the worker's treatment. The health of all the peasants is obviously poor, and of the five or six who visited the house while we were there, not one came with a trivial complaint. The role of policeman and judge was much stronger before the revolution. Before then, the senhor do engenho dealt with any offence on the spot, however serious it might have been. Now, for any other than a minor offence, the criminal is sent off to the nearest police station after a whipping. Although the local police should occasionally patrol the engenho, I was told that never once has a policeman been seen on the property. Since the engenho has no telephone, it is simpler and quicker to send any offender straight off under escort than to wait for the police to arrive, which, in other cases, has been known to take several days. Much the commonest offences are knife fights between the workers when drunk, which frequently result in serious wounds if not death.

The engenho chapel, a very simple white building nestling under the casa grande in this case, held mass weekly until two years ago. However, the priest left, and since that time it has proved impossible to find another willing to come so often. Now, mass is celebrated three or four times a year for the major festivals, and for baptisms. Xango, the Afra-Asian cult, was also practised, but has been stopped by the owner as he considered that its effects were probably harmful, and certainly did no good; however, he suspects that it continues to flourish underground.

The best that can be said of the educational picture is that it is better than it was. Every employer of over a hundred men must, by law, now provide a school for the children of his employees. On this engenho, the school had been opened about a year ago, and had just moved from the chapel to an outbuilding. The teacher was a girl of about twenty, untrained, who was responsible for about twenty-four children. Out a total population on the engenho of over six hundred, this could not account for a very high proportion of the children. I pointed this out, and was told that term had only just started and that more would come later. The age of the pupils was from seven to sixteen, and a notable feature was the strong predominance of girls, who outnumbered the boys by two to one. I was told, with pride, that an evening class had just been started for men and boys out working during the day. They had installed electric light for this purpose. This sounded excellent, and I asked the size of the class. Only four people attended. What I saw of the school did not lead me to believe that much effective teaching was taking place. I passed the school, and all the pupils were outside singing. Half an hour later I returned, and they were still outside playing. There were no signs of books out on the communal table, and the blackboard had written upon it, so that there was no room for anything else, the name of the school, the name of the teacher, the standard to which she could teach (very low), and the date.

I have the impression that little love is lost between the peasants and the senhor do engenho. The peasants treated their master with a sullen, grudging respect, doffing their caps, and keeping thier eyes to the ground. They made no attempt to argue if they disagreed with anything. He on the other hand, addressed them gently but firmly, and with a curious kind of tenseness. He left little scope for misunderstanding or disobedience. Unfortunately it was impossible for us to talk openly to the workers, since we were inevitably associated with the owner. Compared with the fishermen on the coast, the workers on the engenho seemed extraordinarily surly and unwilling to make conversation. The fishermen were open and friendly from the start, but these men volunteered nothing.

We were given more opportunity to see things from the owner's point of view. His attitude towards his workers was that the present situation was far from ideal, but that they were too stupid to do anything about it, and were unwilling to help themselves. He told us that he had given all the houses a small plot of land that was more than large enough to grow all their fruit and vegetable needs, and they could even grow enough to sell. But they used them fot nothing but rough pasture and banana trees, and when he offered to help them plant other things, and to provide seeds the response was singularly unenthusiastic. One man, aged forty, had even come up to him afterwards and said that he had been poor all his life, and he saw no reason why he should become rich when he was an old man. This type of attitude is hardly encouraging, and this general feeling of apathy is, I was told, very common.

The feeling of tenseness between the senhor do engenho and the workers is real. This particular senhor do engenho lives very much in a world of guns. One of the first things he did was to show us the armoury in his bedroom. He had twelve firearms including Winchester repeaters, various types of rifle, and two hand grenades, one 'offensive' and the other 'defensive'. Before the Revolution he always kept the grenades in the car beside him. Even now he never leaves the house unarmed, and keeps a man whose only job, I was told, (and certainly I never saw him doing anything else) was to act as bodyguard and gunman. These precautions are probably justified. After the Revolution the list of landowners unlikely to sympathize with the Communists was found in their local party headquarters: our friend's name was third on the list of those to be killed.

During our visit, a daughter of one of the workers got married, and we were all invited to the wedding feast. The couple were married civilly in the local town. Church weddings are considered very expensive and do not alone have any legal force. We rode over on horses, wading through rivers almost up to the saddle, to attend the wedding lunch. The mud hut was decorated with blue and white paper streamers for the occasion, but there were few other manifestations of celebration. The bride and groom were sitting side by side in the front room, looking distinctly glum, and saying nothing. The former, although it had only been a civil ceremony, was in a long, rather dirty, white dress.The whole house, including the bedrooms, was filled with guests, both friends and relatives of the couple, who also said very little but rocked their infants in their arms. We were formally greeted by the family, offered our congratulations,and after twenty minutes of stilted small talk were invited to lunch. Since the table could not accomodate everybody at once, the party from the casa grande ate separately, taking its turn in the relay system. The occasion was marked by turkey in addition to the farinha and feijão. My appetite was not improved by seeing the washing up being done in a filthy muddy ditch at the back. Several bottles of beer and soft drinks were opened and put in front of us. At the end of the meal most of it was left, and to my embarrassment, after cursory thanks, the senhor do engenho told the hostess that she should not have opened so many bottles without being asked to do so. He did not say it jokingly.

The highlight of the meal was undoubtedly hearing Simon and me speak English to each other. The workers had never heard a foreign language before, and found it immensely amusing. They were also amazed that we could understand each other. Nobody appeared to be drinking, and the whole atmosphere was rather flat. Sometimes a dance is held in the evening, and on such occasions weddings are much livelier. In this case, the guests started to depart shortly after lunch, and we also took our departure. No thanks were offered by our friends. This seemed odd to me at the time,but the situation was clarified afterwards. The owner explained how he always liked to attend the weddings, baptisms, and other ceremonies of the moradores to which he was invited, to show that he took an interest in their affairs. He pointed out that many in his position would never enter the mud huts of their workers. For this reason, I suppose that our friend felt that the bride's family was sufficiently honoured not to need thanking. I am not at all sure that they would agree.

The *senhor do engenho's* position is extremely difficult, and it is probably impossible for him to be considered favourably under the present system. He is considered rich when he is in fact not very rich. This is much worse than being thought rich when one is rich. In the circumstances, bad marks tend to carry much more weight than good marks, and justice is often considered brutal. While we were staying, one of the temporary workers appeared with a request. As a favour, he had been lent one of the houses on the *engenho* for the duration of the harvest, so that he did not have to travel over from the town each day. While staying in it, he had planted crops, and had then discovered that his own, rented, house in the town had been given to somebody else. Therefore he naturally wanted to stay on in the *engenho* house as a regular worker. The request was refused, and the man left looking even more miserable than when he arrived.

The owner gave his reasons for this seemingly harsh treatment as follows. One of his problems at the moment is to reduce the size of his labour force without throwing men out of a job, and therefore he does not want any more *moradores*. He also said that he had made it quite clear that the loan of the house was only temporary, and that the man's town house would not have been removed if the man had explained this to the owner. The man should not have been so foolish as to plant crops in the hope of thereby establishing a permanent claim to the house. Finally, there is always the danger of setting a precedent, and it is sometimes necessary to be hard on one man if others are not to follow suit.

Our friend's treatment in general struck me as being rather too patronising, but it is easy to see how it came about after generations of slave labourers. Moreover, with their present state of education, the peasants are not in a position to be given very much responsibility. After two days of seeing the life on an *engenho* for myself, it became clear to me that the whole situation is very much more complex than politicians make out. It is difficult to see any solution in the short run. I left feeling sure of only one fact: that the life of the fisherman on the coast, although just as poor, is infinitely happier as he is his own master.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell

Fanny Mitchell.

Received in New York April 18, 1966.