

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The first of the two articles in this section appeared originally as an anonymous review article in The Times Literary Supplement of December 19th, 1968. With slight changes we reprint it here as a critical discussion of some of the intellectual myths and techniques which have been fashionable in studies of rural change.

1) BACK TO GRASS ROOTS

The name on the banners of the revolutionary students should be Chayanov, not Che; and this for three reasons. First, Chayanov's theory of peasant behaviour is central to any solution of the world's worst problem, rural poverty. Second, the study of that problem is itself undergoing radical change, in which Chayanov's pioneering work points the way from armchair speculation towards real theory based on measuring what farmers do. Third, rural development studies are transforming our understanding of the whole nature of social science, and revealing at once the scope and the limits of the extreme empiricism currently in vogue.

Alexander Chayanov, Russia's leading agricultural economist from the early 1920s to his arrest in 1930, was a heroic pioneer in the study of rural development, which more than any other area of intellectual endeavour holds the key to the future condition of mankind. One human being in three depends on farming south of the Tropic of Cancer. They live for the most part in racking poverty, hungry often and badly nourished always, seldom rising to a condition where they are openly manipulated or alienated, and thus seldom assisted by the well-nourished but parochial protesters of Paris or Columbia. It was Chayanov who revealed the links between this sort of mass rural poverty, the size and age-composition of the family, and the farmer's choice between income and leisure. He drew on the most thorough field study ever made of an impoverished agriculture: the 4,000-odd volumes of district (zemstvo) statistics collected in Russia in the late nineteenth century. His understanding of the irrelevance of Stalinist methods to rural welfare, and his use of western "marginalist" analysis to explain peasant behaviour, caused Chayanov to be imprisoned from 1930 to his death in 1939.

Dr. D. Thorner, a leading Indianist and economic historian, has produced scholarly editions of Chayanov's The Theory of Peasant Economy and of Harold Mann's The Social Framework of Agriculture. Their work, together with a useful textbook and a

valuable symposium on agricultural development, reveals an exciting picture. The conflict between data and dogma is joined at last, and one after another the pre-Copernican myths are tumbling down: the hopeless instability of exports of farm products, the unwillingness of stubborn and conservative peasants to respond to price incentives or to new techniques, the possibility of drawing workers from the land without reducing farm production, all these and many more armchair dogmas have been decisively refuted.

Progress in the study of poor farming cultures is still impeded, both by the lack of clear theory and by the incompleteness of data (especially at farm level). Behind these persistent shortages lie deeper causes. Absence of farm-level data is due to three dragons in the path of all understanding of social and economic development in poor countries: the urban-industrial attitude of most of the experts: their reliance on development through manipulation of big aggregates like Savings and Total Rice Output; and their belief in the transferability of assumptions about human behaviour from western factories to African and Asian family farms.

What is truly revolutionary in the grass-roots approach of Chayanov and Mann is its implicit claim to restructure our whole method of social inquiry, and thereby to enrich our (western) mode of culture. The study of rural development has long been deprived of a proper theory of how peasants reach decisions. This deprivation stems from an extreme empiricist rejection of three of the earliest doctrines of social inquiry: Leibniz's belief in the unity of science; Max Weber's belief in the need for empathy, for a sort of intuitive understanding of the behaviour of groups; and Friedrich Hayek's belief in the need for "reduction", for the replacement of statements about categories of persons -- classes of states or villagers -- by statements about individuals.

These doctrines make research very difficult. And modern social inquiry has thrown them overboard to get quick results. The unity of science is sacrificed to specialization, in the belief that the variables handled by (say) the sociologists are either constant or else have little effect on those handled by (say) the economist. Empathy is sacrificed to a form of behaviourism in which "He behaves as if he were a shrewd businessman" and "He is a shrewd businessman" are treated as identical. And the explanation of laws about aggregates (Saving, Class, and so on) by statements about individuals is held to be unnecessary, in that a man's freely willed decisions to "disobey" some social law - say, to buy more petrol, not less, when the price rises - can be dealt with by calling the law merely a statement of the probability of a certain sequence of events.

Such methods have produced excellent results. But in our study of peasant behaviour they break down with alarming

regularity. In most Asian and African villages some farmers are illiterate and others are not, so that one of the sociologist's traditional areas of interest - literacy - is a variable that affects the farmer's economic behaviour, and sociology and economics must be unified to be useful. Again, traditional peasants caught between subsistence and commercial cultures, and with many motives - security, profit, piety - find modes of behaviour compatible with many alternative explanations; purely empirical social science, which does not examine decision procedures but merely says that men behave as if they followed certain rules, cannot decide which rules really matter. Above all, the social researcher has so little inherent insight into the motives of poor peasants that his hypotheses go wildly wrong if he scrupulously omits to consider the individual psychology beneath his general social laws.

What then? To study poor farmers, must we abandon the whole battery of techniques of modern, highly specialized, anti-empathetic, behaviourist, aggregative social science? Must we plunge into a cauldron of novelties, at its centre individual psychology, around it ill-defined interdisciplinary studies, the whole permeated by outmoded ideas like "reduction" and empathy? At least we have to see the limits of the new techniques, and try to interpret more sympathetically the old ideas. On a proper clarification of the scope and limits of positivism in social science, further progress in the study of rural development depends.

But what has this to do with "western culture"? Why should the techniques of social inquiry, as applied to rural change, interest laymen? It may be readily accepted that concern with the behaviour and fortunes of Indians and Africans is a potential source of vigour for the cultural life of New York or Moscow. In literature, the enlargement and refinement of the reader's moral awareness have often been achieved by the illumination of old issues in new human environments. That is the procedure, for instance, of Henry James in The Princess Casamassima, D.H. Lawrence in Sons and Lovers and Patrick White in The Solid Mandala; it is quite natural to expect these novels about western workers to be followed by a singularly magnificent literature of the southern peasant. In the visual arts, too, we are accustomed since Gauguin to the impact of "primitive" communities on western views of what people look like. Similarly in the applied sciences: it is easy to see how the recent interest in plant-breeding for tropical soils, for example, could deepen our understanding of agronomy or even chemistry, as well as our ability to help poor countries to get richer.

The enrichment of culture, artistic and technological, by the study of the poor world's problems is plausible enough. What is not so plausible, at first glance, is the central place of behavioural science in all this. Fragmented into warring confederacies -

dozens of sorts of psychology or economics or sociology, some innumerate, others illiterate, all blind to one another - and without the true rigour of the physical sciences or the humanity and moral subtlety of the arts, how can social studies help themselves, let alone the culture in which they stand, so uncomfortably, between "real" sciences and "real" humanities?

Yet it must be tried, if our cultural life is to maintain a unified concern for major human problems. The bridging role of social science between the methods and concerns of (say) biology and literature is none the less valid for being platitudinous. Equally unavoidable is the guiding role of social scientists, especially economists, in planning against rural poverty in the southern world, and hence in trying to use scientific method to solve humanity's greatest moral problem.

It is always tempting to exaggerate the current value of the work of pioneers. Chayanov's work was based on figures from Russian (and hence non-tropical) farms, responding to the end of serfdom, and often with abundant land; the peasant to whom his theory applies, neither hiring nor performing wage-labour and doing no trade with the town, was even when he wrote an "ideal type" fast disappearing; he identified correlation with causation, has little notion of statistical significance or even graphical method, and seems to believe that exploitative rural credit is imposed from outside the village by "capitalists". To apply all this direct to India or Africa today would be absurd. Yet, when all is said, what an achievement is Chayanov's Peasant Farm Organisation! He analyses farm families by size, acres worked, and effort put in; he then shows how the balance between mouths to feed and hands to work, the desire for food and the desire for rest, account for both the amount of land worked by a farm family and the effort applied to that land. Chayanov had no real theory of risk or capital, so his attempt to apply this demographic approach to the decision to invest is unconvincing. But his realization that the family farm is a consuming and a producing unit, that it seeks a total of satisfactions and cannot be usefully seen as a capitalist firm seeking profit alone - this, even today, is a deep and original insight.

Mann's contribution is less profound theoretically, but filled with a practical man's urge to find out what peasants do. For many years British India's leading agronomist, his "hobby" was to produce the first quantitative studies of village poverty. - in England (1903), as in India. Again and again he anticipates modern findings, notably in rejecting the dogma of "peasant conservatism". Sometimes, indeed, as in his emphasis on peasant reluctance to experiment without assured irrigation, he issues valuable warnings that contemporary planners have too often neglected.

How do Chayanov and Mann compare with modern rural experts? At least the pioneers were aware of the dangers of studying simple peasant communities from the vantage point of technologically and statistically sophisticated urban centres. This, indeed, led to their belief that scientific method precluded the setting up, before testing, of clear hypotheses. Collect the facts and the theory will emerge later - this was Mann's avowed procedure in India, and also the approach of the zemstvo research from which Chayanov's theory was refined. Such an approach, while perhaps desirable when very little is known at all, is ultimately very wasteful - much more miss than hit. Yet at least their awareness of the problem of bias forced the pioneers into the villages for prolonged periods. They thus escaped the three besetting sins of modern social studies in poor rural communities. To avoid quibbles about definitions, let us invent words for these sins: Technism, Aggregism, Urbanism.

Technism is the belief that techniques, approaches or attitudes, physical or economic, can be transferred direct to a particular underdeveloped rural environment, whether from western agriculture or from a westernized research station in Nairobi or New Delhi. Mann in 1915, put the issue clearly:

"We must develop study of Indian agriculture, not as a branch of what is being done in Europe or America, but with a view which looks out from the eyes of our Indian cultivators, surrounded by the difficulties which they know and feel are real."

Even psychological work is impeded by technism; Dr. Elihu Katz's paper in Herman Southworth's and Bruce Johnston's symposium, Agricultural Development and Economic Growth, shows how the peasant's response to innovation, not his wishes and decision-procedures, has been the centre of research. John W. Mellor's clear-cut polarization, in The Economics of Agricultural Development, of farms into those with a static, old, peasant technology and those with a new, dynamic, innovating approach - and the over-sharp category-building into which he is led thereby - is a further instance.

Technism, while often a feature of American discussions of rural change, is not necessarily motivated by the wish to export a laissez-faire approach. Dr. Mellor places proper emphasis on the social inefficiencies that prevent farmers from translating their competence into output: "The peasant is accused of ignorance of which society is guilty." Like most of the contributors to Agricultural Development and Economic Growth, Dr. Mellor sees the state as crucial in introducing new inputs, incentives and techniques; like them, he underrates the possible contribution of such intervention to the improvement of traditional techniques. These, despite Chicago economists like Professor Theodore Schultz, have not been perfected by thousands of years in a "static

environment". In most of the poor world, population growth means that each son can expect to farm barely half the land area that his father farmed. With such rapidly changing conditions, traditional techniques must change too. For example, it pays to do more weeding - and hence to sow one's seed-rows farther apart - now that land has become scarcer and labour more plentiful. This is not learnt overnight.

Aggregism is the attempt to avoid small-scale field studies by confining analysis and policy to the manipulation of big aggregates. It is tempting; planners are in a hurry, most village studies are appalling, and fact-grubbing seldom appeals to the best researchers. But there is no avoiding it; the attempt to do so has led to almost incredible gaps in our knowledge. In many ways we know less about farming in India or Africa to-day than Chayanov knew about farming in Russia in 1870-1920.

Really frightening ignorance appears when we ask for estimates of return to various types of improvement. Dr. Philip Raup's fascinating paper in Agricultural Development and Economic Growth tells us of the great importance of land reform's "consequences for agricultural productivity", but he can cite not one single figure. Dr. Marguerite Burk and Dr. Mordecai Ezekiel, in a disappointing piece on food and nutrition, can tell us nothing about how much extra work or output we can expect from various forms of improved diet. And, critical as we may be of some of the attempts to measure the returns to education, they are surely preferable to the waffle of Dr. George Montgomery's paper on "education and training for agricultural development".

Aggregism and technism are secondary manifestations of urbanism. Urbanism is the belief, conscious or not, that a policy should be judged primarily for its effect on urban welfare, rather than on the welfare of the people as a whole. This view pervades the modern literature of rural development. In 1927, Mann saw how it damaged rural extension, and advised the Royal Commission on Indian Agriculture: "The man who approaches a body of cultivators must have previously gained their confidence I pin my faith to working with the cultivators on their land." Now, as when Chayanov wrote in the 1920s, "great family farm sectors are drawn into the capitalist system of the economy", and absurdly expected to behave like tenth-generation urban workers.

Urbanism nowadays distorts almost all aspects of rural development. On investment, Dr. E. M. Ojala's uninspiring paper in Agricultural Development and Economic Growth, "The Programming of Agricultural Development", cites without a trace of disapproval an F.A.O. source to show that typically planners have put barely 20 per cent of investment into farming; yet in a typical poor country 70 per cent of the people live off the land, and since they have so little capital to begin with, the yield of investment is usually higher on the farm than in the factory. New employment

opportunities also favour industry, as Dr. Mellor shows; but if migration to the towns is slow, this is hard to justify. Food supply is also geared to urban needs; Dr. Mellor acutely criticizes those who plan the structure of food supply solely in response to the pattern of growing demand, but misses the key point that it is the rich urban sector whose demand grows fastest, and hence the poor villager's food needs are neglected. This, indeed, explains the neglect of research into millet - a typical poor man's food - so acutely criticized by Mann. Urbanism also distorts price policy: Raj Krishna's paper, the best in Agricultural Development and Economic Growth, shows that peasants cut production in response to depressed food prices, even if these may keep urban workers (and employers) happy. The role of urbanism in education is innocently revealed by Dr. Mellor's advice:

"Ease of migration to non-farm jobs will also be greatly increased if the migrant is prepared. Formal education ... is of greatest importance ... in preparing a person for effective non-farm work and ... in providing the breadth of horizons needed to try a shift in occupation.

Small wonder if future urbanists have reason to criticize the remaining farmers for conservatism and stupidity!

We are beginning to learn which problems demand cooperation between disciplines. On the borderline between sociology and economics, for example, it looks as if conventional education is irrelevant to a farmer's success, but certain sorts of training (in numeracy or basic science) are not. This particular hypothesis requires a lot more testing; but the point is that interdisciplinary work is at last being generated by the need to solve problems, not by the childish desire to be interdisciplinary because it is "with it".

(The Times Literary Supplement Reprinted by permission)

The books cited in the article are:

A. V. CHAYANOV: The Theory of Peasant Economy, incorporating Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems and Peasant Farm Organisation, translated, introduced, and edited by Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay and R.G.F. Smith. 317pp; Richard Irwin. £2 17s 6d.

HAROLD H. MANN: The Social Framework of Agriculture: India, Middle East, England, edited by Daniel Thorner, 501pp. Frank Cass, £2 10s.

JOHN W. MELLOR: The Economics of Agricultural Development,
403pp. Cornell University Press,(London: Oxford University
Press,) £4.

HERMAN M. SOUTHWORTH and BRUCE F. JOHNSTON (Editors):
Agricultural Development and Economic Growth, 608pp Cornell
University Press. London: Oxford University Press, £5 14s.
