

# GEOGRAPHERS CONSIDER DEVELOPMENT

*LATIN AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT: A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE.* By ALAN GILBERT. (New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1974. Pp. 366. \$3.50.)

*THE CHANGING FACE OF NORTHEAST BRAZIL.* By KEMPTON E. WEBB. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974. Pp. 205. \$20.00.)

So many theoretical and empirical studies of underdevelopment, by economists, sociologists, and technologists, have appeared in recent years. Almost invariably their advice to governments, politicians, and agencies emanates from a study or studies of much statistical data, investigative surveys of social or economic groups, settlements, or resource sectors. And no one can deny the value of an examination of the symptoms of the all-too-prevalent malaise of social stagnation, poverty, and backwardness characteristic of the underdeveloped Third World. Their analyses, however, are often bewilderingly contradictory and frequently appear to be attuned to the support of a particular theory, philosophy, or solution derived from the case studied. In fact, the widespread belief in technical assistance to overcome underdevelopment has too often resulted in a manipulative approach "on a limited basis, leading to 'crash programs' and 'impact programs' that have more an onomatopoeic and semantic effect than true substance" (Webb, p. 179).

It is refreshing, therefore, to find two geographers considering development and/or the lack of it with the basic tool of the geographer's trade, namely comprehensive spatial analysis; and the reader is left in no doubt that both strongly adhere to this comprehensive view, rather than the narrow specialist's view, as the best way of assessing how the components fit together and of providing the basis for evaluating trends and predicting outcomes.

Alan Gilbert's book, as its title implies, is an admirable geographical perspective on the spatial processes associated with developmental change. In undertaking this task, the author reviews and summarizes the extensive social science literature relevant to the spatial problems of Latin America within a systematic framework, illustrated by innumerable case studies from all parts of the continent. This is done by means of a lucidly written text, some seventy maps and tables, and thirty pages of a well-researched bibliography. It is thus an invaluable addition to the factual material now available on the complexities of Latin America's developmental problems; at the same time, it raises, in a stimulating fashion, fundamental questions on the nature, value, and objectives of developmental change.

The diversity of the Latin American scene, both among countries and within its individual nations, provides an admirable canvas upon which to delineate the ways in which governments have attempted and continue to experiment with policies designed to effect such developmental change. Yet, finally, one is left with a sense of frustration, skepticism, and even pessimism as to the real extent and value of the achievements in the struggle for the future devel-

opment of the continent. This is an unusual statement for this reviewer, who, in thirty-five years of contact with Latin America, has had an abiding optimistic faith in its progress towards a fairer social, cultural, and economic order.

While many continental, national, and regional indices portray growth and improvement in a variety of social and economic areas, Gilbert's book raises on page after page questions as to who are the beneficiaries. A few examples must suffice. In the first place, because of its widespread nature, is the need for agrarian reform. Yet, despite the Alliance for Progress, the Charter of Punta del Este, the Cuban Revolution, and a plethora of legislation, the evolution of a more equitable system of land tenure has been painfully slow and has, in fact, been obstructed at every turn by the united power of landowners, foreign enterprises, and conservative politicians. Where some progress has occurred and some improvements have resulted in social relationships within the society, substitute forms of economic dependency have often been the accompaniment.

Second, although there is a copious literature attempting to laud the benefits of the primate city, there is increasing evidence that primacy (and not least in Latin America) is a major handicap to development, adding to a nation's list of problems the evils of traffic congestion, water shortage, population overcrowding, and air pollution—often attempted to be solved by schemes far in excess of the overstrained budgets of developing nations. At the same time rural neglect and the creation of a socially divided society are the common by-products of Latin America's metropolitan growth. In a similar way, while too much has always been expected to flow from industrialization and import substitution, there is ample evidence that industrial change has tended to benefit the richer and urban regions and so contribute markedly to regional income divergence.

The maintenance of high birth rates in most of the republics, accompanied by the dramatic fall in mortality rates, tends to nullify the otherwise considerable achievements in social and economic welfare. Apart from religious beliefs, the inability to read, material poverty, and the lack of alternative opportunities maintain these high fertility rates usually in the regions most suffering from pressure of population on limited resources. Even where out-migration occurs, largely to the primate city or other urban areas, and some relief on population pressure is obtained, the result is not wholly beneficial, in that the selective migration of younger, more educated members of the community has a negative effect on production and opportunities for economic expansion.

I quote these few examples to give a deliberately skeptical viewpoint of the achievements of many developmental policies, whereas Gilbert states more objectively the pros and cons. But in his introduction the author hopes that his book "will stimulate readers both to question the purpose of developmental change and to think about the alternative kinds of society which could be produced in Latin America" (p. 16). This he has certainly done; and he provides ample material for considering whether the regional disparities that exist in most Latin American countries will only widen under the existing social and economic system, and that the only long-term solution must be structural and revolutionary in character.

None of the present policies is doing much to permit Latin America to break out of the old neocolonial constraints and to begin to solve basic problems such as starvation, unemployment, and extreme inequality. I have just returned from a visit to China and one cannot help contrasting the healthy, lively, and purposefully occupied people of town and country there with the palpable misery and wasted lives characteristic of so many parts of Latin America. It is inevitable to query whether the Chinese plan of narrowing gaps between industry and agriculture, city and countryside, intellectual and manual labor is not a better recipe for development than the orthodox operation of a high capitalist socioeconomic system that often widens the gaps in these same areas. In other words, my skepticism of present-day governmental and developmental trends in Latin America is derived from Gilbert's question—development for whom (p. 16)?

Kempton Webb's study of Northeast Brazil similarly faces the paradox of much effort and little result in the quest for "development," adequately summarized in his statement that "the student of Northeast Brazil . . . cannot help but conclude that little has come from all these efforts and that, in many ways some Northeasterners are worse off today than they were before the development efforts were begun" (p. 1). As in Gilbert's continental analysis, the emphasis is strongly spatial, a classic geographical survey of a much-studied region, in which the author interprets the physical and cultural landscape of the Northeast and traces the origins of its grave social, economic, and political problems that are so intimately entwined with its physical and ecological problems, all within a long and complex historical fabric.

Although the picture Webb paints, in many respects, is a grim one, the reader must admire the skill with which he uses the concept of landscape evolution to explain the cultural and physical changes to which the region has been subject—and, unlike some other studies of the Northeast, he has analyzed not only the *mata* and *sertão*, but the distinctive areas of the *agreste*, the *brejos* and *serras*, with all their diversity, dynamic qualities, and agricultural opportunities. With the added advantage of having been able personally to assess the changes taking place over some twenty years, the author is able to claim that in the *agreste* there has been "a greater relative proportion of gain for the greatest number of people" (p. 152), and in the *brejos* and *serras* there are "as yet unrealized qualities that could go far in improving the standards of living in Northeast Brazil" (p. 167). Yet it is in precisely these areas that a projection of settlement and land-use trends augurs an accelerated destruction of the environment and resource base. Brazilian farmers have traditionally tended to destroy the very areas to which they have been attracted. To quote Webb: "The corollary of this is that the more 'developed' a society becomes, the less apparent control it can exert over the ecological balances of its living space" (p. 180). Bearing in mind the institutional, social, and technological resources at Brazil's disposal, one wonders if they can be sufficient to meet such a challenge.

Throughout his thorough treatment of this intriguing region, Webb is constantly posing two questions: What are the negative influences and factors that have held back the greatly desired development? Why are we not able to

break the circles of cause and effect that have left the Northeast the largest underdeveloped area of the largest developing country in the entire Western Hemisphere? Once again, most of the blame for the region's problems and misery is placed upon "the social and cultural factors that have conspired over four hundred years to maintain a fabric of human, economic, and social relationships that have not allowed the majority of Northeasterners to improve their lot" (p. 85). The weight of history has always been on the side of the property owner. Any threat to the existing order has been traditionally repulsed. But "in this day of radio and television, rural workers have a clearer idea of what the world could give them and of what other more fortunate people are enjoying" (p. 175). Yet the gulf between landowners and workers is widening, and one must inevitably ask how long will such a large segment of the population remain unsatisfied. Since the advent of Brazil's military government, the lid has been placed upon the popular dissent of the *Ligas Camponesas*, but "the important point is that the basic problems have remained and become intensified, and the fact that we do not hear or read so much about them now does not mean that they have decreased in importance" (p. 4).

It is certainly no accident that the decade of the 1970s has, for most of Latin America, become the decade of military dictatorships, for only in this way was it possible to check the evolutionary sequence of structural change and the fundamental development of a more just society. This has been the normal method to maintain the status quo in most of the Central American republics, where the social and economic organization resulting from their plantation economies has generally stifled political expression; but the emergence of repressive dictatorships in the former democracies of Uruguay and Chile is a backward lurch in the struggle for a structural change from the conditions and mores that for over three centuries have inhibited Latin American development. That historical legacy in all its economic, social, and political manifestations—traditions, values, patterns of behavior, colonial dependency, *latifundia*-*minifundia*, military intervention, inefficient and often corrupt administration, illiteracy, urban-rural dichotomy—still pervades so much of the continent that the surprise should not be that the pace of change has been so slow and halting, but that so much has been accomplished despite the handicaps.

This is poor consolation, however, for Latin America's rural sector. Alan Gilbert adequately sums up the situation: "The process of economic growth has by-passed them, and the development of industry, electric power, roads, housing, and so on has centered on the cities. In many cases development policies have not only neglected the rural areas, but have actually harmed them" (p. 128).

Indeed there are so many inadequate answers to Latin America's underdevelopment, so much neglect of its deprived population, such uneven planning, that there is no doubt, despite its heterogeneity, Latin America shares to the full the Third World's frustrations. How long its people will contain their impatience is an open question.

GILBERT J. BUTLAND

*University of New England, Australia*