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## **Carpentry and Passion**

### **Family Secrets the Economy Is Unaware Of**

*by*

*Víctor de Athayde Couto*

*Translated by Laurence Hallewell*

This article discusses the limits of the concept of the family on the basis of observations from two case studies involving rural families in the Brazilian Northeast. It attempts, in the first place, to show the limitations of research on the home that assumes the family to be a nuclear one: a married couple and their unmarried children. It goes on to develop a critique of the economic approach that treats the family as exclusively a unit of production and consumption. It concludes with observations about the family in the communities of Gericó and Valente, which are located in two quite different microregions of the state of Bahia. Families in these rural communities have proved to be more extensive and more complex than that of the model originally adopted, both with regard to who belongs to the family and with regard to these families' organization and objectives, which go well beyond the limits of mere units of production.

#### **THE HOLY FAMILY**

In the Western Christian tradition it is not uncommon for the "family" to be confused with the Holy Family of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph. Despite the trinitarian formula,<sup>1</sup> even this Nazarene carpenter's family had more members than are normally spoken of—James, Lísia, Joseph the younger, Judas, Simon, Lydia, Justus, and Samuel—without being any the less holy. José Saramago (1991) has claimed that the only thing St. Joseph and the Old Testament's Jacob had in common was large families:

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Jacob had seven sons and three daughters, and Joseph had seven sons and two daughters, giving the carpenter the advantage of having brought one less female into the world. But Jacob, even before God had doubled his possessions, was the owner of 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 pairs of oxen, and 500 she-asses, in addition to his countless slaves, whereas Joseph had the one jack-ass we know of and nothing more. Because Joseph's income did not extend to hiring or buying any help, he had to get his sons to do his farm work as a filial obligation laid down in the Talmud. And in addition to being required to feed his children he had to teach them a trade, for failing to do so would have been tantamount to bringing them up to be brigands.

This was how the old formula of father-mother-children functioned. With the passage of time this formula has gone out of fashion, with the result that the children are thrown into the street to become criminals. This is why Brazil has a problem of so many children and teenagers born outside the traditional pattern, to unwed mothers, with no biological father present to provide the safety net of responsible fatherhood and no social position, protection, or even food on the table. Such children end up in the streets, a threat to the public peace, the *pax brasiliensis*, and themselves prospective victims of its absence. As Ribeiro (1995: 205–206) has written:

It is normal among these socially marginalized children for each one to try to grab for himself, no matter from whom. Rather than establishing families, they just have casual affairs. Life comes to be based on matriarchy, with women bearing children to a succession of assorted males. Despite her wretched life-style, each heroic mother cares for her children and, even if she has to go hungry herself, finds something to put in their mouths. Having no other way to survive, she goes out with them to rummage through garbage heaps and beg on city streets. It is simply unbelievable that Brazil, which so loves to talk about its Christian family, has no eyes to see and admire such extraordinary women on whom the entire life of the poor is based.

Even in the Holy Family it is difficult to fit in the role of the biological father, since we do not know what the role of Joseph (the breadwinning father) was, from the moment when God mixed his semen in with the Saint's. Basically, who is Jesus' real father? Who indeed is Jesus? With similar uncertainty about his own paternity, the child of the poor goes out into the world in his teens, finds a godfather or "street father,"<sup>2</sup> and becomes, from the standpoint of the *pax romana*, a criminal. In a short time Jesus realizes that the street father is the devil disguised as a shepherd, but he never loses the reference point of his first 12 years lived according to the Jesus-Mary-Joseph model. As a good son, he keeps the Secret of the Night for as long as is necessary and never returns home, bearing for all his eternal life the weight of the divine question: "What is a family?"

There are at least four possible approaches to an understanding of what constitutes a family: the Secret of the Night, Fire, Blood, and the Carpenter's Workshop. For Jesus, the first and most important was the Secret announced and shared only with the mother, for the earthly father is always the last to know what the heavenly father has started. The mystery was revealed at *home*, a sort of materialization of the *hearth* that represented the family; it did not happen on the street, in the synagogue, in a fishing boat on the lake, in the marketplace, or even in the workshop adjoining the house, which for Jesus was simply another possibility even though some economists would regard it as the first and indeed the only one. For them the family *is* the carpentry business, a production unit in which the family members earn their living—a living based on the work contributed by every one of them.

The second and third elements, in order of importance, are Fire and Blood. Let us put Blood third, because no one knows whether the Blood of Jesus is the same as the blood flowing in the veins of his eight siblings. Their paternal bloodlines, although sacred and all inoculated by Joseph, have perhaps not been similarly mixed with those of the Almighty.

The Fire<sup>3</sup> warms, comforts, and differentiates the raw and the cooked. It identifies, unites, and reunites the family group through the taste of Mary's cooking, which from their first meal together has been a reference point, distinguishing them from the outside world. The fire in the hearth, whether in the house, the tent, or the yard, represents and identifies each individual family with its own way of being. The hearth is also the statistical unit for population and housing censuses and the basis of tax collecting.<sup>4</sup> Jesus' first childhood awareness of the family, focused on the Jesus-Mary-Joseph threesome around the hearth, now moves on to the wider notion of the *bo*, one of the many forms of wider cooperation and collective organization of tasks within an extended family sharing a hearth.<sup>5</sup> Such a family's membership embraces different sorts of kin, extending to all those linked by marriage (*voli*). The womb-based *voli* is the type of *bo* uniting the greatest number of individuals. In the modern world, Meillassoux (1964) encountered this form of kinship among the Guro of the Ivory Coast and noted its makeup. Guro men link their parents, the relatives of their children's husbands and wives, their parents-in-law, their maternal grandparents, and the husbands or even the fiancés of their sisters and daughters and make virtually no distinction between kinship by blood and kinship by marriage. A prospective son-in-law will often seek to impress the father of his betrothed by bringing his kinsfolk and neighbors to join the workforce of the family cooperative.

To sum up: It helps us understand the family if we look upon the home as having four possible bases—in declining order of importance, the Secret of the Night, Fire, Blood, and the Carpenter's Workshop. The traditional

approach of rational economists (cf. Weber, 1971 [1956]) is to consider the family a unit of production and consumption, adopting the nineteenth-century families-enterprises-governments model based on the circulation of the blood. Families, businesses, and government, confronting the outside world, form other models; as they take on other adjustment mechanisms with regard to wages, interest rates, and exchange they assume new identities. Inasmuch as developing such models revives the trinitarian formulae of earlier times, economists with less orthodox approaches are beginning to raise a basic question about the family's role in creating something that they, fortunately, are reluctant to call "capital." This is a sort of *family property* made up of a material element (land, property, fixtures and fittings, tools, livestock, etc.), virtual elements (money, insurance policies, contracts, services, etc.), and a component that, while it has no concrete form, is nevertheless essential to the family group's existence: that of kinship, together with culture, solidarity, religion, memory, identity, customs, laws, norms of conduct, and, insofar as group members are aware of it, the holy Secret.

This Secret and the home's four walls are found in the architecture that expresses the economic opportunities and the psychological needs of individuals and groups at any given moment of their history. This is why it is so important for the political power itself to control the materials, the order, and the functions of housing (under the aegis of the planning activities that we categorize as "urban," "domestic," "familial," etc.) in order to ensure its domination. Hence, the opposition between the home and the outside world, between private life and public life, between the Secret of the Night (Bourdieu, 1972: 52) and the light of day is, at one and the same time, both true and false (like feminine and masculine, night and day, fire and water, etc.), with the first of each of these oppositions always splitting into itself and its opposite. "In the end, the house itself splits up according to the very principles that mark it off from the world outside."

The Carpenter's Workshop is merely where socially necessary work gets done, whereas the Fire is universal, found everywhere: in the mother's kitchen, at her table, at evening gatherings around her hearth, in her bed, in her milk, in her womb. Bachelard (1986 [1938]) reminds us that man finds his true nature not in work but at the joyful fireside. There is greater spiritual excitement in conquering something beyond our mere material needs than in just securing what we have to have. Man is a creature of desire, and what he finds useful is something more than what is merely necessary.

Although the market is increasingly crammed with superfluous merchandise, not everything superfluous can be turned into trade goods. Perhaps it is here that the limit of capitalism lies, although this has perhaps yet to become

obvious even in the most advanced consumer societies. In Japan and other of the Asian tiger economies, even the great corporations and financial conglomerates are real families.<sup>6</sup> The impulse motivating such families has no bounds, even though some needs may be fulfilled even by the market itself. Only the elimination of desire can claim to offer a chance of happiness: "I have no desires, therefore I am happy."

Marx himself (1974 [1867]), referring to primitive accumulation (the crucial process of separating workers, especially peasants, from their means of production), called the new proletarians people *sans feu ni lieu* (with neither hearth nor lodging), keeping the expression in French even in his original German text.<sup>7</sup> But it is precisely in agriculture—even in the most developed societies—that the family<sup>8</sup> resists, proving Marx wrong. He predicted that, of all the fields of human endeavor, the impact of large-scale industry would be most violent and revolutionary in that of agriculture, destroying the subsistence farmer or cutting him off from his traditional society and eventually replacing him with paid employees.

Cépède (1964) sees things differently, asserting that the peasant resists transformation into a wage earner.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon has given rise in the United States to interpretations of it in terms of a "new household economics." This approach adopts the family as a prime unit of economic decision making but is not interested in it as a way of managing an inheritance, much less in its nonmaterial side. This is where conflicts arise between the logic of production and that of inheritance. Even changes in laws and regulations have limited impact on the family, whose decisions are based less and less on economic or legal considerations. The relationship between the landholder and his family is a mystery to both the economist and the lawyer and seems to defy any rational analysis.

Another school, which first appeared in Chicago in the 1970s, looks at the family as something worth analyzing in terms of the value placed on time spent rather than on work done and on what this school calls *affective capital*, for example, the affective relation with the land itself (Becker, 1977, revisiting Marshall, or Alfred).

What has always appeared straightforward seems now to be unraveling into new simplicities that, taken together, create a new complexity. Kötter (1970), for instance, warns that the relation between science and politics in the field of agrarian problems is influenced by two important factors: the profound complexity of the problems and the steadily increasing intrusion of the state. One hopes that, in the context of the third industrial revolution, economists will begin to reassess the old concept of the "productive sector" (which does not mean eliminating it forthwith) and consider the process of

*dematerialization*, that is, restoring the social basis of capital—a process that was already clear in relation to family property, especially in the less orthodox analyses that took account of sociology and anthropology.<sup>10</sup>

Lamarque, coordinating an international research project on family farming in five countries (Canada, Brazil, Tunisia, France, and Poland), has found a similar pattern in the semiarid part of the Brazilian Northeast. In this region “the family group often includes several generations and even collateral relatives with their respective spouses and children, constituting the basis for a complex community structure” (Lamarque, 1993: 206) in which “when any family member takes on outside employment, this is less a case of the individual’s own initiative than a family strategy, aimed at the reproduction of the whole domestic group” (212).

Graziano da Silva, coordinating the Rurbano research project on new rural worlds in several Brazilian states (Couto Filho et al., 1999: 6), takes as his unit of analysis

the extended family, which includes not just the nuclear family (husband and wife and such kinsfolk as do not belong to any other nuclear family), all their relations (even if some of these constitute other nuclear families) and their hangers-on. A hanger-on in this sense is anyone who, although not related by blood or marriage to anyone else in the family, does not pay for his bed or board, generally maintaining some bonds of solidarity.

### THE WOMEN OF GERICÓ

Aziz (1995), in her study of women’s work in the community of Gericó in the Recôncavo region of the state of Bahia, notes that the distribution of time and tasks there runs from daytime to nighttime (the outside world in opposition to the home), from hoeing crops to gently rocking the baby to sleep in its cradle—a distribution that needs little planning and provokes no surprises. There would be nothing remarkable in this routine were it not for these women’s fortitude in their struggle for land free from landlord and government. Nor can anything be hoped for from an absent state, its absence confirming its indifferent and agonizing presence. The women of Gericó, taking over responsibility for organizing and for the struggle, seem to connect national power and the local collective through a dependency that is inseparably both economic and political. According to Linz (1970), the predominance of one or the other (economics or politics) creates different types of society and provides the rural community with a particular identity that ranges from a demand for independence, through expressed initiative, to an apathy that leaves all problems to be solved by the state.

Comparing localities where agrarian reform has made land available with state help for the new owners with a community such as Gericó, where there has been no state involvement, Aziz finds that the very absence of help has been one of the reasons for the peasants' being more actively involved and aware, state involvement tending to produce apathy and dependence on public services. Those living in settlements that have received no state help either are related or have been friends and neighbors for upwards of 30 years. This has given them time to develop a feeling of unity and solidarity—a quite considerable *affective capital*. The free exchange of services based on kinship and neighborliness, a practice entrenched among poor families, still surprises those who encounter it for the first time. In reality, the fact that they are neighbors means that they depend on each other in case of need, especially in parts of the country where communications are still inadequate. Cooperation and rescue can only come from neighbors, and “neighborliness” is, unquestionably, a large part of “brotherliness”—a word with practical rather than emotional overtones, implying above all an economic ethos. Where exchange becomes the norm, it is accepted that “brothers do not charge each other for what they do,” which denies the application to their dealings of the “rational principle of the market” (Weber, 1971) and all the other adjustment mechanisms we call “macroeconomic.”

I am not, however, denying the need for public policies with regard to subsistence agriculture; I am merely attacking their overrational formulation. The concepts of modernity and tradition are so pernicious for research as to make it subjective (Galjart, 1971). The tendency has been to simplify the situation by defining these concepts only by the implicit antithesis we attribute to them. But if modernity is defined, say, as having the capacity for continual reform, is this not also a characteristic of any authentic tradition? These two terms—“modern” and “traditional”—mask the existence of very different types of farmers who may well be innovators in some fields and reluctant to change in others. The real mistake is in underestimating the farmer's *passion* for his land, his family, his vocation. Indeed, the value of the family's inheritance, its birthright, belongs to a kind of market in which “things are not measured solely by price.”<sup>11</sup> This birthright has a symbolic value that simply has no quantifiable cash equivalent; “this is where we enter the realm of love and dedication” (Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Guigou, 1982: 920).

How long does love last? We cannot be sure that this generation will not be the last with a real love for the land. Of 25 mothers interviewed in Gericó (every one of them earning her livelihood directly from her work on the land and most of them aged between 30 and 40), only one manages to get her daughter to go with her out to the fields. All these mothers are in agreement that “teenage girls have no interest in field work; they only want to know



about town life.” Even though the exodus from the countryside is a tendency confirmed in every census, it will all depend on whether the state adopts a policy of strengthening family-based farming (which does not exclude other rural occupations) with programs specially aimed at young farm people along the lines of the Food and Agriculture Organization/Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (FAO/INCRA, 1995) proposal. Within the community, other factors, such as marriage, can also encourage future families to stay on the land. Young men who are interested in farming will want to follow their fathers’ profession if the soil is of high quality (*massapê*) and lies in an area where rainfall is adequate (the Recôncavo), and there is access to markets in nearby town centers. Nor can definitive conclusions be drawn about the expectations of young women when they still take the community of parents, neighbors, and friends as their chief reference point. In this respect it is worth comparing the situation in Gericó with that of communities in the sisal-growing area of the semiarid outback of Bahia.

### THE OLD MEN OF VALENTE

From a recent FAO report (1995) prepared with the help of the Federal University of Bahia’s Research Group on Family Farming, we know that the farmers of the sisal-growing region of Bahia are gradually getting older as a group, mainly because of the failure of any younger farmers to replace them. The 53 farmers interviewed<sup>12</sup> agreed that, although their position had been strengthened by working together in their cooperative association, they saw little future in sisal growing, not just because of the present crisis but mainly because their sons lacked any interest in staying on in the industry. Their association, aware of this problem, was developing a program to settle families on the land with such incentives as solar-powered electricity, access to television, long-term credit for the modernization of farming methods, and the building of a local school directed toward local needs. According to Groppo (1994) and Dufumier (1995), farming and production systems are being distorted by this exodus of the younger generation. Many farming communities nowadays are made up of just children and old people. Many of the latter are too aged and infirm to work or retirees living on pensions. Others are subsistence farmers (although they may grow small fields of sisal to use in the local exchange economy), using obsolete farming methods. The children are their grandchildren, often left behind by parents who moved away from the village when they were still young and do not always manage to send money back for them with any regularity. Thus the pensions of the old people have become the principal means not only of their own survival but of

that of the children, too. Besides their pensions, they receive some irregular benefits from social security programs and programs of emergency help during droughts and other such aid, the result of local electoral policies in the outback.

The 53 respondents were very homogeneous in their origins, ages, and the farming methods they used. According to the FAO report (1995):

Many of the farmers were born in Valente, and the rest came from other counties within the micro-region around Serrinha [a Bahian country town located at 11°38'S, 38°56'W—Translator's note]. In fact, most of the interviewees belonged to four large, close-knit extended families. Most of those in our sample range in ages between 40 and 55, with the six family heads being over 60. The word "family" as we use it here also includes the complex household group of various generations and collateral kinsfolk. The group's survival strategy always includes migration. Their migrations occur in waves, are generally short-term, and are driven by such push-factors as drought or such pull-factors as the chance of finding work outside one's home county or both. Families with more than three children still dependent on their parents are rare, and we found no cases of teenage sons still working regularly on the family farm. Most of them live in town, where they take advantage of the public transport provided by the local authority<sup>13</sup> to take them to school.

Ivo S. G. is a family farmer in Covas, one of these Valente counties, in the heartland of Bahia's sisal region. Over 50 years old, he has less than 1.75 hectares (4½ acres) and seven children. Five of these (three sons and two daughters) are still single; their ages range from 11 to 20. His two married sons and the eldest unmarried son, who is 18, work for other small farmers in the county. The whole family has lived "in town" (i.e., in the county seat) for more than ten years. None of his children want to remain small farmers, for they see their father as "struggling to beat a livelihood out of the earth, with no chance of making a decent living." Similar stories were repeated many times by the other respondents.

According to Bergmann (1969), the family as a workforce is a social entity defined by a symbiosis between economic activity and the home but almost never precisely defined in law. Its shape varies considerably, both in space and over time. All the same, as a survival strategy, the family can surprise us by the originality with which it can respond and adapt to many different economic systems. This is perhaps why politicians can never decide whether to preserve it, destroy it, or change it.

With the growth of industry and of cities, the emerging societies feel the effects of socioeconomic change and seek to restructure themselves. The new relationships between human beings and technologies coexist with a system of personal relations based on narrow social units. Relationships

based on goods are differentiated and broadened in an enduring process of dematerialization. This restructuring affects in the first place the family, especially psychologically, in the almost desperate way in which those shut out of the process seek to survive, adapting their values, showing their solidarity, and reproducing despite threats from the *pax brasiliensis* and its family planners. Is this *affective capital* or an invisible inheritance? Their solidarity comes more from the Secret of the Night than from the Carpenter's Workshop.

Oliveira and Silva (1994: 46) manage to reveal the mystery of the family in a short passage reporting on interviews with child prostitutes from the poorest regions of the back country of the Brazilian Northeast:

Maria A. S., who looks 14 but insists she is 17, says she was invited by Mrs. X. to work in her retail store. "She promised me a job and somewhere I could stay, paying for my lodging after I got my wages. When I got here there was no store. I wanted to go back home, but she said I would first have to pay her back for my bus fare and my board. So I had to stay. Now I have come to enjoy what I do. Mrs. X. is like a mother to me. I have been lucky and earn well. Men like going to bed with me. Mrs. X. has shown me how to please them. And none of them are your yokel farmer types. They are all well off, can buy me expensive drinks and pay the price the house charges them. I get nice clothes, perfume, and makeup, and can still send money home to my family." When asked whether they know she is a prostitute, she says no, but Mrs. X. who is close by, retorts, "Your parents do not know: that is, they *pretend* not to know. But how could you be sending them so much money if you were working in a store?"

Behold, the Secret of the Night, behind four walls, deep in the palm-thatch hammocks, where Maria's mother and father dream and ask themselves, What is a family? And is not our little Maria also a child of God—or of Mary Magdalene?

## NOTES

1. Discussing the three types of income—from agrarian property, from paid employment, and from capital ("factors" commonly known among economists as land, work, and capital)—Marx calls Chapter 48 of Book 3 of *Capital* "The Trinitarian Formula."

2. In the Northeast, a "street father" is someone who gets street children to take part in his own survival strategy—determining the spots where street vendors, drug dealers, and beggars may operate, offering them both protection and intimidation, beating them up and cherishing them, and, above all, teaching them survival skills.

3. The *foyer* (Latin *focus* or hearth) is the *atrium* or central room of the house.

4. The *fogal* (hearth tax) is a tax levied in Portugal on each household.

5. The term *bo* is specifically unifocal in the sense that a single kitchen serves all the members of the group or extended family.
6. In Brazil, the family basis of bank management has made mergers and acquisitions (as a way out of the present financial crisis) quite difficult. This is an important field of study for the sociology of organizations and particularly of business corporations.
7. Our contemporary world is replete with expressions such as *sans foi ni loi* (with neither faith nor law), (Sartre) and *sans toit ni loi* (with neither roof nor law), playing on the words *feu* (fire), *toit* (roof), *lieu* (place), *foi* (faith, belief), and *loi* (law, customs, norms of behavior). The best translation into Portuguese would be *sem eira nem beira, nem ramo de figueira* (with no land and no roof over one's head, not even a fig branch), the last element symbolizing, with the extreme felicity of a proverb, everything nonmaterial.
8. As a unit of management of an inheritance, simultaneously something material, virtual, and spiritual.
9. According to Cépède (1964: 30), only one farm worker in four in the United States, for example, is a wage earner, despite that country's having developed a typically capitalist economy. Some 96 percent of American farms are family-owned and worked.
10. "The economist, when facing questions about the family, property ownership, inheritance, etc., always appeals to other human sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, or psychology, in the hope that they may supply the answers" (Guigou, 1982: 880–881).
11. Lévi-Strauss, paraphrasing Marx, says that although land has no value, it does have a market price, since it has a practical use (cited in Guigou, 1982: 925).
12. The farmers interviewed all owned shares in the revolving fund of the Valente cooperative, which includes the neighboring counties of Queimadas and Santa Luz.
13. These local authorities, *municípios*, while roughly corresponding in geographical extension to Anglo-American counties, are largely equivalent in function to town councils because their administrative concerns and policies tend to center on the county seat and disregard the needs of the surrounding rural areas. —Translator's note.

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