



PROJECT MUSE®

Viabilidade de Sistemas Agropecuarios na Agricultura
Familiar na Amazonia (review)

Stephen George Perz

Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 3, Number 1, 2004, pp.
123-125 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2005.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/177869>

Conquest. Most of the land was then largely abandoned and not until the latter part of the twentieth century was it reoccupied by Highlanders. Newcomers to the zone have altered much of the ceja vegetation in the valley. Soil erosion has become rampant. Settlers from the highlands have no deep folk knowledge or experience of how to use the land without harming the resource base. Another issue that the data raise is the meaning of isolation in a Andean peasant society. Remoteness from markets and services is born with equanimity, an Andean pattern of isolation that in North America has always been judged to be intolerable.

Beyond the information provided, I was struck by seven aspects of this book: (1) By bringing together an array of factual information on a defined area, the study enriches the characterization of place; (2) It has made me appreciate that, when dealing with little-known places, hard-gotten empirical facts are more valuable than facile pet theories or a priori assumptions; (3) By integrating past and present land use, one's understanding of both the nature of a place and the landscape changes that have occurred there are enhanced; (4) Personnel and institutions from North and South (two Danes and three Peruvians) can successfully collaborate in both research and publication; (5) A bilingual text potentially broadens readership to include not only academics, but also development agents and other interested members of the Peruvian public; (6) A lavish iconography, some of it polychromatic, vividly captures life and landscape; and (7) Books filled with factual information need an index, which this one lacks, to facilitate usefulness to a variety of readers.

Even for geographers not concerned in the least with northern Peru, *Los valles olvidados* provides perspectives to ponder. In an age of armchair lucubration, the book is a needed reminder that large parts of Latin America remain poorly known, and the fieldwork on regions remains the basis for understanding lands and peoples. It demonstrates how determined researchers—even a blond foreign woman—can take charge of a rural research agenda in the farthest reaches of the South America without vehicular transportation, electricity, climate records or detailed maps. It also shows how, in contrast to the narrow specialist focus that now dominates geographical studies, a wide-eyed Sauerian approach with an emphasis on history and inductive knowledge is still the best way to “push back the twilight” about our world.

Daniel W. Gade
Department of Geography
University of Vermont

Tourrand, Jean-François and Jans Bastos da Veiga (eds.) **Viabilidade de Sistemas Agropecuários na Agricultura Familiar na Amazônia.** Belém: Embrapa Amazônia Oriental, 2003. 468 pp., maps, tables, figures. Paper (ISBN 85-87690-18-3).

In environmental studies and many other cross-cutting areas of research, terms like “multidisciplinary,” “cross-national collaboration,” “policy-relevant science” and others are frequently employed to describe what we need to do more often. I happily grant that such approaches are indeed needed, but they are easier said than done. Indeed, they raise hard questions about disciplinary cultures, sensitivity to contrasting needs among collaborators from different countries, and the political environment surrounding the

study of a "hot" topic. All of these challenges apply to research on land cover change in the Amazon making this a salient if difficult subject of multidisciplinary, cross-national and policy relevant research. One result has been that too little work on the Amazon meets these challenges.

A worthy attempt in this direction is this volume edited by Jean-François Tourrand, a French cattle veterinarian, and Jonas Bastos da Veiga, a Brazilian agricultural scientist. This anthology is ostensibly the result of a workshop held in 1999, but appearances can be deceiving. *Viabilidade* (and other recent publications by these authors and their collaborators) is the result of roughly a decade of collaboration led by French and Brazilian institutions. The 1999 workshop led to a series of subsequent meetings, called the *Jornadas Amazônicas*, which are designed to cross disciplinary boundaries in treatment of current, policy-relevant problems related to human use of land in the Brazilian Amazon. The model implicitly suggested in all this is that environmental research that addresses the challenges noted above requires long-term commitments and some serious organizational work. On that count, this publication and the *Jornadas* should be counted as indicators of success.

But of course such an appraisal begs the standard questions about the innovations of the agenda being advanced and the quality of the research conducted. As the title of this volume indicates, the key concept concerns the "viability" of landuse, in this case for smallholder family farms. This topic is an important one, given that the Brazilian Amazon has in recent decades been a target of development plans and colonization programs, and because many colonization projects were abandoned by the State, leaving farm families to in effect fend for themselves. Now, after hundreds of research studies, it is high time to take stock.

Crucial here are some strategic decisions about research design and organization, and the size and quality of Tourrand and Veiga's cast of co-authors. A strength of this book is that it offers comparative case studies of old and new frontiers in the Brazilian Amazon, namely the "Bragantina" region, settled since the 19th century, and the Transamazon highway, colonized under State direction during the 1970s. Such comparisons are too rare in the Amazonian literature, and this one provides substantial time depth for assessing the viability question, for landuse continues in the Bragantina after a century of settlement. Another strength of this book is the large number of collaborators involved (33), as well as institutions (12) and countries (5), and the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds represented. There is a technical component, led by agronomists and veterinary scientists including the editors. But the real core of *Viabilidade* is in its economic analysis of various production systems and attention to themes such as product prices, credit, state agricultural policies, etc. For those readers who find purely technoeconomic approaches too narrow if not naïve, there is also substantial attention to social issues including migration histories, informal social support and community organizations and politics. As a result, through the twenty chapters of *Viabilidade*, one finds a wealth of recent data from studies largely conducted during the late 1990s concerning such topics as pasture management, markets for milk, the politics of smallholder credit programs, and responses to price fluctuations in key products.

The introductory chapter provides a panorama of issues that arise in the context of a discussion of smallholder viability in the Amazon. Tourrand, Veiga and René Pocard Chapuis pursue issues related to the embeddedness of production systems (e.g. land availability and out-migration prospects), means to instill sound agricultural practices (e.g. education and technical assistance), diversified vs. specialized production systems (e.g. agroforestry vs. an emergent focus on cattle), and prospects for family agriculture in regional and national markets (e.g. competitiveness given a scale disadvantage and diffi-

cult access). While by no means exhaustive, this list is plenty to provide a manageable but still multidisciplinary approach to research that evaluates and bears implications for policy as well as local community initiatives.

After the first chapter, these key themes are treated to varying degrees, though the viability issue remains ever-present, if sometimes implicit or narrowly defined. The questions of sound agricultural practices and markets receive the most attention, perhaps not surprising given the predominance of agronomists and economists among the collaborators. But this does afford fairly detailed comparisons as one moves from a chapter on the Bragantina to one on the Transamazon colony of Uruará. So, whereas land and forest cover have become scarce in the Bragantina, producers there still have much better market access than in Uruará, though farms in both locations continue to face difficulties with respect to access to technical knowledge, which must therefore be addressed in different ways. Such nuanced observations, while available in *Viabilidade*, must however be distilled from a careful reading across chapters, for there is little by way of synthesis. This is no simple task, and the lack of a concluding chapter that brings this project together is a real hindrance to drawing out the key comparisons, the lessons learned, and the policy proposals. Another weakness is the lack of cross-disciplinary integration in many chapters, something that also must be done by reading all the Bragantina chapters or all of the Transamazon chapters to weave together a more complete picture.

These problems are less difficult to manage for the issue of cattle, for the shift toward ranching among smallholders is evident in both study sites and dealt with in some fashion in virtually every chapter. The combination of limited labor and capital along with unstable fortunes for other agricultural options has made cattle a pre-eminent component of small-farm landuse systems in the Brazilian Amazon. The multifaceted significance of this trend for forest clearing and household welfare is not lost on the collaborators. To their credit, they do not shy away from pointing out the benefits of cattle (e. g. a capital stock, a stable income stream, and possibilities for diversifying into milk) as well as the costs (e. g. expanding forest clearing and land degradation, high costs of pasture recuperation) and limitations (e. g. low quality produce, limited income per hectare). This provides a portrait of the challenges facing producers, communities, researchers and policymakers concerned about the viability of landuse in the Amazon for a key constituency. We could dwell on the techno-economic slant, the reliance on data from few study sites, or the lack of a synthetic chapter. But it seems to me much more important to take this work as an example of what indeed we need more of: an eminently multidisciplinary, cross-national collaboration of fairly long-term on an issue of importance to many interested parties. I've rarely seen collaboration coordinated on this scale, and it serves in many ways as a model that can be used with other study sites and other research issues.

Stephen G. Perz
Department of Sociology
University of Florida, Gainesville
