

THE SHOOTING GALLERY IN A PARADISE LOST

MY CONNECTIONS with Guatemala go back before my birth. My uncle emigrated from Europe and settled there in the early 1940s. After World War II my parents also left the Old World and moved to Guatemala. I was but a year old then, and spent my early childhood there before we emigrated to the United States.

I returned to Guatemala for visits in 1973, 1975, and in February 1981. The country has undergone substantial changes in development over the past 30 years, but in many ways not much has changed for centuries.

Before the Spanish conquest the Mayan Indians had achieved one of the most magnificent civilisations the world has ever known. In their territory ranging from southern Mexico to northern Central America, the Mayas erected ceremonial sites marked by elaborate palaces and steep pyramids built of stone. These "Greeks of the Americas" developed an hieroglyph script and a number system that they used to track the planets and create an incredibly accurate calendar. A remarkable feature of the their civilisation is that many of its greatest centres were located in what is now a thick jungle that has overgrown their monuments.

The Mayas reached a cultural peak at about 800 AD and then rapidly abandoned their ceremonial sites. This decline has puzzled archaeologists, who have come up with various theories. Henry George noted the fall of the Mayas in *Progress and Poverty*:

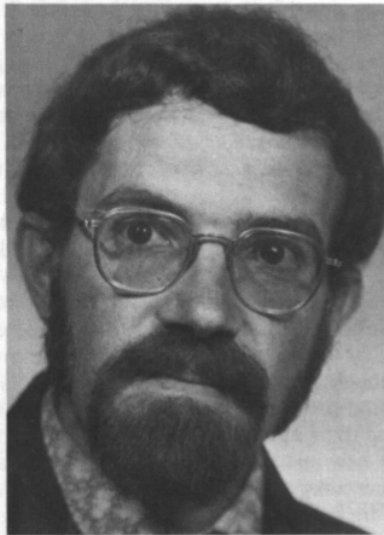
"Could we find the key to the records of the long-buried civilisations that lie entombed in the gigantic ruins of Yucatan and Guatemala, telling at once of the pride of a ruling class and the unrequited toil to which the masses were condemned, we should read, in all human probability, of a slavery imposed upon the great body of the people through the appropriation of the land as the property of a few — of another illustration of the universal truth that they who possess the land are masters of the men who dwell upon it."¹

From what evidence remains, we gather that the Mayas had a theocratic hierarchical society and there probably was a widespread peasants' revolt. In some archaeological sites I

saw stellas (stone markers) where the heads had been defaced and others which had been toppled in antiquity, and then reassembled in odd positions. Revolutions are nothing new in Central America!

Latin American Notebook

BY FRED FOLDVARY



BUT THIS was not the end of the Mayan civilisation. The cities of the Yucatan flourished and in Guatemala the high mountain region to the south became a new centre of Mayan culture. These continued until the brutal conquest by the Spanish in the early 1500s. The Spaniards not only subjugated the Mayas into a feudal serfdom, but also burned their books and killed their leaders.

The legacy of the Mayas continues in the highlands, where the Mayas have kept their languages, their colourful local clothing, and some of their religion. The outdoor markets are brimming with produce and handicrafts. The area is rather densely populated, mostly with Indians whose small plots of land manage to feed the country. Though some seem to live adequately from their farms or handicrafts, many

Indians, with little or no land, have to work on the coffee, cotton, and banana plantations of the south coast and eastern part of the country, for a meagre subsistence.

The small farmers own 88% of the farms, constituting 14% of the farmland, while the large landholders own 2.1% of the farms and 72% of the land, large areas of which are kept idle.² Another source claims that "there is a close relation between the land shortage and the low farm wage ... [which] forces the *minifundio* [small farm] peasant to hire himself out cheaply to the *latifundio* [plantation] farmer."³

THERE IS some homesteading. The government is distributing lands in the Northern Transversal Strip to landless peasant farmers. This is an area stretching across the country between the mountainous south and the hot, flat jungle north, which is sparsely populated. According to *The Guatemala News*, grant recipients must pay the government up to Q500 (equal to US \$500) within 20 years. Five to ten hectares may be granted if the land is good. Roads are being built through the region, and the government is attempting to communicate news of the project to the Indians.⁴

Land redistribution has had a stormy history in Guatemala. In 1944 the Revolutionary Party, led by Arevalo, won the elections and expropriated large landholdings. The government also set up co-operatives. These policies were continued by his successor, Arbenz, who also tried to reduce the holdings of the United Fruit Company. He was accused of being a communist by some of the military, the church, large landowners, and the US government. In 1954 Arbenz was toppled and the new government returned the lands to the previous owners.

In the ensuing years a guerrilla movement that festered in the eastern mountains has spread to other parts of the country. There are reports or claims that many Indians suspected of contact with the guerrillas have been killed. Labour leaders, professors, students and liberal politicians have been shot. The opposition in turn has murdered soldiers, police, businessmen and con-

servative politicians. It is often difficult to really know what is going on and who is responsible. The average Guatemalan would simply like to go about his business in peace.

The Mayan Indians make up about 50% of the population of 6m. Another 40% is of mixed Indian and caucasian ancestry. These *Ladinos* generally form the working and lower-middle classes, and have largely divorced themselves from the culture of their Indian ancestors.

GUATEMALA City teems with activity, with stores full of goods and other vendors hawking their wares from sidewalk stands and outdoor markets. The city swarms with shoeshine boys, men selling lottery tickets and hot dogs, and women selling fruits, tamales, and corn on the cob. (All delicious!) The streets are clogged with bicycles, cars and smoke-belching buses. And then occasionally one sees an open truck go by, manned with soldiers carrying rifles, who seem ready to use them upon command, a reminder to those who would upset the established order.

Guatemala City also has a plentiful supply of beggars. Some of them are crippled and live a pitiful existence from the coins they manage to collect. Yet even they have not lost their Mayan dignity – often in exchange for a coin they offer a blessing.

For the tourist, if he stays out of the current hot spots, a visit to Guatemala is still pleasant, safe, and rather inexpensive. A decent hotel can be had for \$5. In Guatemala City a

bus trip is 5c and if you don't wish to eat in a restaurant there is food galore in the streets from vendors. A piece of fruit or a tamala costs 10c. I was pleased with the apparant lack of sales taxes, but later I found out that Guatemala has all the usual taxes – income, social security, and real estate, as well as a gross receipts tax paid by the shops. According to one source, "tax collection" is "7.3 per cent of the domestic product," but "the largest haciendas pay taxes of [only] six per thousand" (0.6%) "on landed property." The bulk of the taxes seems to come from the tax on consumption.⁵

In Guatemala City I visited the Universidad Francisco Marroquin, a private university that emphasises the free market economics of the "Austrian" school. Their library has a Spanish translation of *Progress and Poverty*, though the predominant teachings are from Ludwig von Mises and other Austrian economists.

WE FLEW to Flores, the main town in the northern jungle area. This town was the last stronghold of the Mayas, not conquered until 1697. From there we went by bus to Tikal, the largest of the Mayan ruins. The jungle background gives the pyramids and palaces of Tikal a dramatic setting, and it is impressive to realise that when the ancient Mayas lived there, the land was settled for miles around, the excavated part being only the ceremonial centre.

From Flores we rode another bus to the Belize border. Our bus was

stopped by the army three times; each time we had to get out while our luggage was searched, the men frisked, and passports examined. There had apparently been some trouble in the area.

On the way to Belize I was surprised at how cultivated was the area surrounding the road. Typically we would see a thatched roof one-room house, chickens running around, a couple of pigs, some banana trees, a field of corn, and the inevitable little boy standing by the door watching the bus go by, wearing only an undershirt.

Belize, which was a British Colony, presented us with an entirely different culture. Though English is spoken, we could sometimes barely comprehend the "Creole" dialect. Most of the population is black, with some Indians, Mayan and Carib, and some Europeans and those of mixed ancestry. Unlike the reserved Mayas, the Belizians are very high spirited. Again, I was surprised at how extensively the area by the road to the coast was cultivated: I had expected to see nothing but thick jungle.

After returning to Guatemala, we travelled to Copan, a few miles over a rough road across the border into Honduras. There we visited the ruins famous for their carvings. Honduras is criss-crossed with mountains and is less populated than Guatemala, but the farmers there also work on small plots or large plantations.

In Guatemala City there is a unique relief map of the country, some 50 metres across, with the height of the mountains exaggerated.

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MORE DETAILS LATER

Enterprise Zones: how landowners cash-in on benefits

REPORT BY P. E. POOLE

ENTREPRENEURS wanting to set up shop in Britain's new enterprise zones have been shocked to discover that the fiscal advantage of not having to pay property tax is wiped out by higher rents.

"For the landowners - private, local authority and the state - are taking the view that the firms there can afford higher rents because they are exempt from rates," report Chris Tighe and James Tucker.

The zones were established in last year's Budget to transform Britain's industrial wastelands and encourage new capital investment.

No free ride from railways

WHO OWNS the fresh air - and the daylight - that we all need?

Frank Turnbull, the director of an electrical company, believed that it was free.

Until British Rail sent him a letter informing him that he would have to pay £50 for the light that pours through four small windows of the wall that his company owns in East Ham, London.

J. D. Jones & Co., a family firm created in 1880, owns the land on which its factory stands. In 1932, they built an extension which placed the four windows just two feet from the boundary of the railway land.

The railways could have blocked the light by building an advertising hoarding on the boundary of their land.

They decided that they would charge a rent for the light and air passing through the windows!

A peppercorn rent of 13p. was agreed upon - until this year, when the railway's surveyor revalued their property rights in the light at £50.

Mr. Turnbull was furious. "They are taking us for a ride," he declared. "Britain is a free country - at least, air is free."

"There should be a gentleman's agreement about these things. We don't mind paying a peppercorn rent, because British Rail want to protect their legal rights."

"But they should not be allowed to arbitrarily make a profit out of it. What could a person do if he depended upon the light? I would rather brick up the windows than pay the new rent."

Following adverse Press publicity, a British Rail spokesman announced: "There has been an error. We are not revising the rent."

He explained that the original rental agreement was reached because the company wanted to instal windows overlooking railway property - on which they might one day want to build.

So the rent was charged to remove all doubt that the company "enjoys its light by our consent."

● A COMMON LAW rule dictates *cujus est solum ejus est usque ad coelum et ad inferos* - "to whom the land belongs to him it belongs all the way to the sky and to the infernal regions."

"But the people most likely to make a profit out of the scheme are the landowners. Land values in Enterprise Zones are rising, rents are soaring and the developers are set to make a killing."

This response was predicted in *Land & Liberty*.² The Government has not only recognised the land values effect,³ but even condones it. For a Minister at the Department of the Environment has declared:

"As I said, it does seem to me that the extent to which rents rise inside enterprise zones to allow for the lack of rates may well reduce the sharp differential at the boundary... So long as the result is to bring the zones into development, increased rents seem perfectly acceptable."⁴

The DoE has commissioned a firm of land economists (Roger Tym and Partners) to monitor the zones. One of the topics that may be studied is "the extent to which the local property market is able to adjust to allow private investment to take place in the EZ's."

One of the businessmen who could offer some sharp-tongued advice is shed manufacturer Keith Grant.

He wanted to take advantage of the 10-year

rates-free offer by moving his business just a few yards to a unit within the Gateshead zone in N.E. England.

But he was shocked when his landlords, the Estates Corporation, quoted a rent of £2.40p per sq. ft., almost 50% more than the rent agreed on his present nearly identical premises last December.

Businessmen interested in the Swansea zone in South Wales have also discovered that their profits are not to be boosted at the expense of the land monopolists.

An Environment spokesman said: "We would expect those fortunate enough to own land to share some of the benefits with those who are deriving benefits from rate-free periods."

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3. 'Enterprise zones & The Rent Effect,' *Land & Liberty*, Sept./Oct. 1980.
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Real water runs over the course of the major rivers into the "oceans," and small pennants identify the volcanos of the highlands. Gazing at the map, I thought of the paradise the fertile country could be if the people could simply stop shooting at one another. But peace will not come until the Mayas regain an equitable share of the land that was once theirs. As it is written in the *Popol Vuh*, sacred book of the ancient Quiche highland Mayas, "Truly here shall be our mountains and our valleys... May the people have peace, much peace, and may they be happy; and give us good life and useful existence!"⁶

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5. Galeano, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.
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VILLAGE BUYING SPREE

INDIA'S farmland owners know how to consolidate the riches which have been brought by the "green revolution."

Their prosperity, however, is reported to be creating a "crisis of success." For example, new jobs have been attracted to the Punjab, and this has threatened to raise the wages of farm labourers.

The landowners, however, have vigorously promoted a solution to this "problem" - they are importing cheap labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

And to make sure that the benefits of the "green revolution" remain with them, they are keeping up the pressure on the politicians.

"Farmers do not have to pay income tax and from time to time the State government remits other taxes in frank pursuit of the farm vote," report Michelle Misquitta and Kevin Rafferty.*

And what do they do with their extra riches? Invest in job-creating machines in the urban sector for the benefit of the landless rural workers?

Not all of them, at any rate.

"The question of size of landholdings and capitalist farming is relevant to the Punjab because one of the profitable - and strictly illegal - investments that some Punjabi farmers are making is in land in neighbouring states. In some cases farmers are buying whole villages of land, which is potentially more fertile than their Punjab farms, at a tenth of the price."

*India's Punjab granary faces crisis of success,' *Financial Times*, 1. 7. 81.