

Obstacles to land reform

who are likely to be most influential in political circles.

It seems clear, then, that land monopoly lies at the root of much of the economic tribulation as well as socio-political chaos of a large part of Latin America. It is also theoretically likely that a shift to a physiocratic solution would help to resolve many of the most grievous problems of the area. It is by no means clear that such solutions can be put into effect, except possibly in the Dominican Republic where many influential people understand Georgist proposals and where a number of very dedicated and competent individuals, some of them under Georgist influence, may be found at various levels of government.

Once such a programme could be put into effect in one Latin American republic, and kept in place long enough to have a beneficial impact, it is conceivable that others of the more advanced countries would take interest and try similar experiments.

Otherwise, it would appear that the obstacles to such a turn of events in Latin America require much more discussion among advocates than they have thus far enjoyed.

REFERENCES:

1. Actually, the first measure among ten advocated by the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was, "Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes". (New York: International Publishers, 1948), p. 30. This was curious since land itself was only rarely mentioned elsewhere in the *Manifesto*, which instead stressed industry, the "bourgeoisie", "capital", the "proletariat", and other concepts that remained undefined. Despite their lack of any introductory explanation, Marx and Engels thought it important to focus on land as Priority No. 1.
2. The term "single tax" was used by Robert Turgot (1727-1781; *impôt unique*), Blas Infante Perez (1885-1936; *impuesto único*), Henry George (1839-1897) and all other leaders of the movement when it had its greatest impact in the United States and around the world. It does seem to express the idea that there should be only one tax, on land values, not just the addition of such to all other taxes.
3. See Luis E. Aguilar, *Marxism in Latin America* (Rev. ed., Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978); Donald L. Herman, ed., *The Communist Tide in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973); Rollie E. Poppino, *International Communism in Latin America* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press [Macmillan], 1964); William Ratliff, *Gaстроisim and Communism in Latin America, 1959-1976* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976); William E. Ratliff, ed., *Yearbook of Latin American Communist Affairs* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, annual); Robert Wesson, ed., *Communism in Central America and the Caribbean* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1982).
4. R. A. Gomez, *Government and Politics in Latin America* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 19.
5. On Mexico, more in the same vein may be found in Kenneth F. Johnson, *Mexican Democracy: A Critical View* (Rev. ed.; Praeger, 1978), pp. 166-167, 236-237 *et passim*.
6. Busby, *Latin American Political Guide*, 3rd ed., 1958; 16th ed., 1975.

EL SALVADOR

Landless go hungry

FROM 1838 (break-up of the Central American federation) to at least 1920, political life in El Salvador was marked by struggles between the so-called liberals and conservatives, which kept the country in a state of almost chronic agitation and produced no less than thirty different presidents, some of them at the rate of two or three per year.

Between two short intervals of relative peace (1919-1927 and 1945-1979), Maximiliano Hernández Martínez ruled from 1931 to 1944 as an unusually brutal dictator who also dabbled in superstition and magic.

After 1950, a sort of semi-constitutional stability interrupted by one successful revolt turned military presidents in and out of office every six years until 1979, when everything went to pieces because of elections which were unusually fraudulent, even for El Salvador. Currently, of course, the country is being even more drastically torn apart by civil war which is characterized by extraordinarily vicious violence from both the extreme left and the extreme right.

In 1980, the transition government of José Napoleón Duarte promulgated a *ley básica* (basic law) which was designed to get one third of El Salvador's 1,715,000 hectares of cultivable land into the hands of 210,000 landless peasant families. The civil war and socio-political turbulence have thrown the whole reform programme into chaos. Utilizing terror, violence and murder, former landlords have tried to reoccupy "their" estates, and the frightening conditions of the

countryside drive peasants off their new lands and into either the arms of the Marxist guerrillas or into the cities.

Until recently, there was much truth to the popular conception that "fourteen families" — of course, each one encompassing many people — owned most of the land and therefore ruled the republic through their military surrogates. The rest of the population of four and a half million could either come to terms with one of those families, or survive by begging, brigandage, or emigration.

In a valuable study, Professor William H. Durham argues that the so-called Soccer War of 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras was not necessarily caused by a scarcity of land which impelled Salvadorans to flock into Honduras, but by the distorted distribution of land in El Salvador.¹ More specifically, his point is that with introduction of coffee and cotton as commercial crops in the late nineteenth century, land became more monopolized than previously, Indian communal land was absorbed into the big new estates, and that this transformation converted agriculture from basic food needs to export crops.

In the middle of this century, the effect has been to drive landless and hunger-stricken Salvadorans into other countries, especially adjacent Honduras; but for precisely the same reasons, Honduras was not better able than El Salvador to take care of these thousands of desperate migrants.

1. Durham, *Scarcity and Survival*, pp. 38-51.

HONDURAS

FROM 1838 to 1933, Honduras underwent almost uninterrupted turbulence among military and other factions calling themselves Liberals and Nationals (conservatives).

Then there was the sixteen-year dictatorship by General Tiburcio Carias Andino (1933-1949), followed by three civilian presidents (1949-1963), with an intervening revolt and military junta in 1956. This period was followed by the dictatorship of General Osvaldo López Arellano, who seized power in 1963. He was overthrown in 1975 "for the honour of the nation" when it was revealed in the United States Senate that he had accepted a bribe of \$1,250,000 from the United Brands Company (formerly United Fruit) to keep down the export tax on bananas.

Had not this indiscretion become so well known abroad, he might still be dictator-president.

After another military regime, Honduras has been under constitutional civilian presidency since 1982. But this was increasingly subject to military control by the commander-in-chief, Colonel Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, until he was ousted from his position under orders from President Roberto Suazo Córdoba, sent into exile on April 1 of this

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year, and replaced by none other than Brigadier General Wálter López Reyes, a nephew of Osvaldo López Arellano.

Honduras has acquired something of a reputation for less than usual land monopoly in her almost inaccessible hill country, where very poor farmers are said to depend for their livelihood. However, fewer than one third of all farms contain between five and 500 hectares, to provide some sort of decent living for their owners. This is admittedly a better situation than those in Guatemala or El Salvador, but one which is far from providing satisfactory sustenance for more than a small portion of her agricultural population.