

# LAND & LIBERTY

Ground rules for a sustainable society: p.45



## LAND REFORM

## A Matter of Life or Death

Hundreds of millions of people are needlessly dying from starvation or suffering from malnutrition. Easier access to land would transform their plight. The cause of land reform, then, is a moral as well as technical issue. But for many technocrats at the international agencies, land reform usually just means a technical challenge: a more economical use of a scarce resource. To the landowners of the Third World it is a dangerous concept which has to be manipulated to mean anything other than what it *ought* to mean. For starving peasants, land reform means

the difference between life and death. Some peasants, like those who died in the massacre at Panzos, in Guatemala, sacrifice their lives to promote the cause of land reform. They have little to lose: their lives are bound for premature termination *without* fundamental changes in land use, income distribution and tenurial rights. *Land & Liberty* investigates the need for land reform, examines the obstacles to it, and proposes what appears to be the ideal solution: an annual tax on land values.

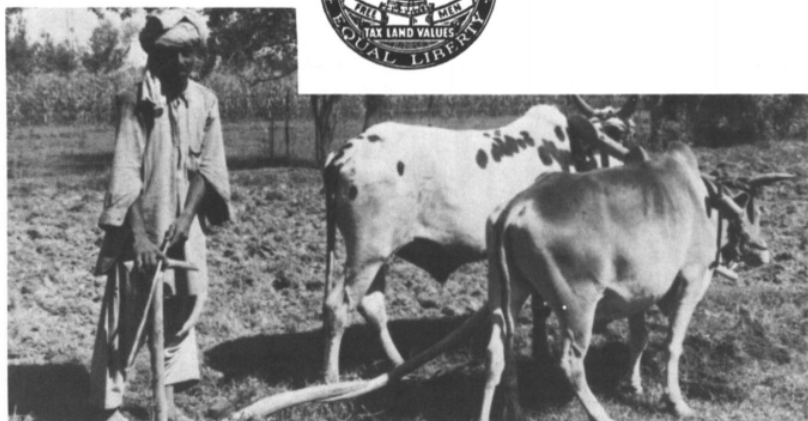
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# Land & Liberty

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## LATIN AMERICA: P.34

**CHRIS BAKER** reviews the history of the attempts in Latin America to overcome the land tenure obstacle to economic development.

## PERU: P.36

**P. E. POOLE** examines a case which supports the view that dictators rather than democratic politicians are more successful at implementing reforms.

## PHILIPPINES: P.38

**PAUL KNIGHT** traces the rise to power of Madam Marcos, who now has bureaucratic control of metro-Manila.

## EL SALVADOR: P.38

**COLIN GREEN** reports on the violence which broke out after the military junta announced its plans for large-scale land distribution.

## GUATEMALA: P.40

**FRED HARRISON** collates the data which discloses that murder is employed systematically to dispossess peasant owners of land that is rising in value.

## TAIWAN: P.42

**ARCHIBALD WOODRUFF** outlines one of the most effective post-war programmes of land reform, and defines the five lessons to be learnt by reformers.

## COLOMBIA: P.48

**FRED HARRISON** summarises the background to the recent crisis in Bogotá, in which 16 Ambassadors were taken hostage.

## ECOLOGY

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## PHOTO CREDIT

THE MASSACRE at Panzos: page 41. The photograph is published courtesy of the Copenhagen-based International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, who state of its quality: "It isn't very good, but who can take perfect photos in such a situation?"

**C**ONCERN with the slow pace of economic and social development in Latin America led in the decade of the 1950s to the assertion that land tenure patterns had constituted a major obstacle to progress. This recognition gained embodiment in the signing of the Charter of Punta del Este in 1961 when, prompted by US concern with the insurgence of Left-wing guerrilla movements and the example of the Cuban revolution, Latin American governments pledged themselves to adopt agrarian reform laws and comprehensive changes in land tenure patterns.

Two decades later the discrepancy between expressed intentions and actual performance is striking.

There is little doubt that, following the promulgation of such laws in the 1960s, the continent has witnessed a successful and wholesale emasculation of reform attempts. As we enter the decade of the 1980s, into the age of the micro-chip society and beyond, elements of the feudal system and poverty on the land are still with us. What has happened to the mighty dreams of improvement held aloft in the early 1960s?

**A**GRARIAN reform, like other aspects of social change, is not the result of a rational plan but of interacting social forces, personalities and clashing interest groups. In the words of Professor J. K. Galbraith:

"A land reform is a revolutionary step; it passes power, property and status from one group in the community to another. If the government of the country is dominated or strongly influenced by the landholding groups – the one that is losing its prerogatives – no one should expect effective land reform as an act of grace."

Would-be reformers seem to have failed to explore how social change through the 'democratic process' actually happens, having, perhaps, adopted the attitude that change via reform would follow smoothly upon the 51% election victory of the 'reform party' or upon recommendations of international experts or the offer of finance. There is a certain myopia in the viewpoint that the adoption of a reform law equals implementation. In Latin America the colonial tradition of *se obedece pero no se cumple* ("one obeys but one does not comply") is still true today!

To understand the inefficacy of the agrarian reforms throughout Latin America it is essential to understand the relationships between economic power, social status, and political influence which form the Latin American 'characteristic.'