

LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTIONS

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The land question has dominated the history of political and social struggles...

In a previous article (Do revolutions work? July-August 2011) I suggested that the French, Russian and first Chinese revolutions were so violent and costly that, if there were indeed any net benefits, they were disappointingly short-lived. Later revolutions, for example the land redistributions in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and, after 1976 in China, were nonviolent, almost costless, and led to extraordinarily high rates of economic growth. But these societies now face rapid urbanisation, real estate corruption, and rising inequality. The reason is that land redistribution is appropriate to rural land only. I then argued that, in all these cases, the revolutionaries had ignored advice freely available from JS Mill, Thomas Paine, Friedrich Engels, and Henry George. This advice was that the public collection of all land rent could achieve

social justice and economic efficiency with minimal cost and without disturbing property rights of ownership and use. Recent events suggest that such a reform would also reduce the real estate speculation that appears to lead to global financial collapses.

There are three regions of the globe that have long suffered violent and costly revolutionary upheavals. The United Nations calls these: Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and Caribbean. In the March-April issue I predicted that those upheavals sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa would be successful only if they addressed the huge imbalances in the ownership of land and natural resources. In the present article I will now ask the question "Do Revolutions Work?" for Latin America.

The first peoples of Latin America had crossed the Bering Strait from Asia and worked their way down. On a Boy Scout camp in Guyana I once paddled a dugout across the lake to visit an Amerindian tribe and see the wild boar they had just shot with bows and arrows. In my high school classroom sat the descendants of the other "tribes" that had virtually replaced these vulnerable Amerindians. We came from Britain, Portugal, Spain, Africa, Bengal, and China into that region the World Bank calls "Latin America and Caribbean".

Conquest. "Latin America is the product of conquest. Conquest is the seizure by others of the sole basic economic resource, land" (Calvert). The land question "has dominated the history of political and social struggles since independence and looks set to do

so well into the twenty-first century." (Calvert). From the start "Land was the major economic resource, the major determinant of social status, and the major source of political power in Latin America....Owners of large tracts of land quickly became the wealthiest people in a given community dominating all aspects of life through their influence on agriculture, government, the Church, and the local economy." (Chasteen). "Without access to land, hunters and gatherers cannot find food and crops cannot be grown". When new immigrants arrived they "found that no land was available to them. It had simply been distributed amongst existing large landowners" (Calvert).

Slavery. In Brazil and the Caribbean slaves were imported from Africa to work on sugar estates. With very cheap labour you can profitably grow sugar, then chop down forests, and then dig up minerals. So those who own the land live in town, delegating management to plantation overseers, usually of mixed race and brutal. By the time I was a schoolboy in Barbados the penalties were less severe. Caught stealing sugar cane by an overseer with a large cutlass all I got was the leather strap.

Internal conflict. Revolutions, coups, wars of independence and civil wars were all fought over land and natural resources. Right wing military governments and juntas became skilled in kidnapping, torture and murder. Chile had five revolutions in one year, and Colombia went through a "War of a Thousand Days". There were upper class white warlords, called Caudillos helping to maintain white people at the top of the social hierarchy, while blacks and indigenous people stayed at the bottom. Where the military was always on the move, soldiers rode horses while wives, prostitutes and children had to walk to the next camp, as camp followers. Today women and children are still following their men, but into distant camps

The public collection of the rent of land achieves social justice and economic efficiency without disturbing property rights.



devoted to deforestation, mineral and energy extraction.

External interventions. From Europe and the US came gunboats, transnationals monopolising the extraction of food, minerals and energy (Most Bolivian miners in the foreign owned tin mines died before the age of 30), large scale military aid for Latin American armies and the training of their officers in counterinsurgency in the School of the Americas. America's United Fruit Company became the largest landowner and greatest financial power in Central America.

Then came the CIA, and well-meaning but often harmful organisations known as the World Bank, the IMF and the NGOs. In the country that I grew up in transnationals extracted and shipped out sugar, gold, diamonds, timber and bauxite. My high school French teacher later entered politics, assassinated his way to the top and got the CIA to destabilise the economy so he could take over the presidency.

A few case studies. In 1900 Argentina's natural resources put it at the richest country in the world (Australia was a close second). But a string of right wing governments and pressure groups kept this wealth in the hands of rich rent-seekers (are

there similar dangers in Australia?). In Belize an oligarchy of wealthy settlers once owned 80% of the land, 50% of the slaves, and a monopoly on all trade. While travelling in Spain in 1997 I picked up the following newspaper article: "The Pope John Paul II recently demanded of the President of Brazil "una inmediata reforma agraria" for a country where 90% of the arable land is owned by 20% of the people while 20% live in the most "complete miseria" (La Gaceta, Salamanca, octubre 11, 1997). While I still wait patiently for further news on this I noted that the governor of Amazonia had proposed "a chain saw for each family" and "they razed an area the size of Belgium...the smoke blew east to Africa and south to Antarctica." In 2010 the Guardian Weekly printed a suggestion that Guatemala's poverty was due to high VAT and indirect taxes. Next month they printed a letter from David Smiley suggesting that if the correspondent had googled Guatemala land reform, "she would have found that two percent of the population owns 70% of all productive farm land, suggesting a somewhat different reform." Paraguay was once invaded by Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, all in search of scarce resources. This invasion wiped out half of Paraguay's population and 80% of its men.



Slums. Across the world, over-urbanisation is creating capital-intensive country-sides and labour-intensive de-industrialised cities. In Latin American cities are growing at a rate twice as fast as that of population, and most of that is in slums. The resultant overcrowding has led to the absurd situation in which a square metre of slum is more profitable than a square metre of other types of real estate. For re-development evictions then follow, 139,000 in Rio de Janeiro. Those slums built on steep land are catastrophically prone to slope failure and landslides, those bordering rivers are vulnerable to flooding. Slums are also particularly vulnerable to fire and earthquakes. As a result of all this Latin America now is "A proletariat without factories, workshops and work, and without bosses, in the middle of the odd jobs, drowning in survival and leading an existence like a path through embers" (Davis).

Reform generally is a dangerous occupation. For example, Chilean President Allende was killed so his land reforms could be reversed. Argentine death squads interrogated, tortured and "disappeared" 20,000 reformers. When Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador, said "When I help the poor they call me a saint, but when I ask why they are poor they call me a communist" they gunned him down while he was celebrating Mass. Reforms often benefit the rich. For example, the neoliberal reforms of the Chicago School of economists lifted Chile's economy but left it with a distribution of wealth amongst the most unequal in Latin America. Reforms can be avoided as when a famous Spanish landowner said "I obey but I do not comply". Reforms can also be misguided, as when Peru's Shining Path was following that of Mao which led to the death, by starvation, of 45 million Chinese. Elsewhere in Latin America

revolutionaries have tried to follow Stalin down similar paths to failure. It is ironic that, while four out of five Latin Americans now live in cities, and the rest work for agricultural and mining transnationals, reformists are still advocating land redistribution, which brings me to my conclusion..

My conclusion remains the same for Latin America as elsewhere. The public collection of the rent of land achieves social justice and economic efficiency without disturbing property rights. Australia has done this successfully, in its local government rating scheme, for over 100 years. Land sites are registered under Torrens Titling, then valued and taxed by local governments. The present rates, which are very low, could be raised, compensation coming from corresponding reductions of inefficient taxes on labour and savings.

MAIN SOURCES with Dewey

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