

# CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN RURAL LATIN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay seeks to explore the relationships between agrarian structure, social relations, State policy and violence in the Latin American countryside. Particular attention is given to the impact of agrarian reform and counter-reform experiences on rural conflicts and violence. A contrast is also drawn with countries which have not undergone any significant land reform. The cases discussed are Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and various Central American countries. The complexity of the issue is acknowledged and a plea for more comparative studies is made as this may provide a way forward in the understanding of the causes and consequences of rural violence in Latin America.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Revolutionary violence may contribute as much as peaceful reform to the establishment of a relatively free society and indeed was in England the prelude to a more peaceful transformation (Moore, Jr., 1996:20).

During the last few decades violence has escalated to extraordinary heights in Latin America being the most violent decades of the 20th century and perhaps even of its entire postcolonial period.<sup>2</sup> For example, it is estimated that as a consequence of violence over 150,000 persons died in Guatemala (1968-96), over 75,000 in El Salvador (1979-95), 44,000 in Colombia (1963-98), and 30,000 in Nicaragua (1982-98) and in Perú (1981-95) (Allen, 1999: 5). Furthermore millions of persons have been forcefully displaced due to the violence. Most of this violence has not been of an emancipatory kind. On the contrary, its purpose was to prevent the empowerment of the subaltern groups and to reinforce the power of the dominating groups, especially in those situations where it was being challenged from below. To what extent this oppressive violence has been able to prevent the democratization of society cannot yet be ascertained at present as these are still evolving processes. What can be established with some certainty though is that those in power are extracting a high price from those subordinate groups seeking to gain basic human and democratic rights, including the right of a decent livelihood. Thus the violence in Latin America in the last quarter of the 20th century has been marked by its oppressive character contrary to the liberating violence referred to by Barrington Moore in the above citation.

A high proportion of the victims, and especially of the displaced population, come from the rural areas. Thus it is important to analyze rural society so as to understand the social origins of violence in Latin America and especially if a resolution to this problem is to be found. Of course, especially in this age of globalization, it is im

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<sup>2</sup> Latin American social scientists were late in researching the problem of violence, and especially rural violence, in their countries. For example, Degregori (1992) observed the paucity of research on rural violence in Peru and castigates in particular Peruvian researchers for waking up to this major phenomena so late. He also laments that the few studies existing at the time of writing (1991) were largely written by foreigners (mainly US Latin Americanists, especially political scientists). But, in turn, Starn (1991) castigates US anthropologists for 'missing the revolution' of Shining Path in Peru. More generally, Warren (1993) laments the delayed and limited interest shown by anthropologists in national conflicts and violence, and the lack of analysis on the cultural dimension. However, in recent years analysts in Latin America and elsewhere have begun to remedy this research deficit. It is thanks to their research that I am able to write this paper.

possible to ignore the multiple and close relations which exist today between the rural and urban and, at the same time, the country's interrelationships with the rest of the world. Although this essay centres on the rural this does not mean that these other dimensions have no bearing on violence. In particular, it explores to what extent there is a relationship between agrarian system and rural violence in Latin America. Notwithstanding that there are undoubtedly a series of mediations between land tenure structure, landlords, peasants, conflicts and violence this paper proposes that a significant relationship exists between them. These connections are examined from an historical perspective in which the global processes of transformation are privileged. Factors such as the political regime, the market, technology, the crop (for example coca) and the actions of the State also have a significant bearing over the type of conflicts and violence in the countryside. Nevertheless the degree of influence of these factors varies to a great extent according to the characteristics of the agrarian structure and the existent social relations. In particular the impact of agrarian reforms on rural violence is examined by considering the cases of Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and some Central American countries.

In the conclusions some initial comparative insights are presented. I am all too aware that these need to be developed further but hopefully they might constitute a starting point for a comprehensive comparative analysis. The purpose of this paper is more limited and should be viewed as exploratory. Nevertheless it is a necessary stage for comparative studies which have been conspicuously lacking in recent decades. Studies of rural conflict and violence have so far largely focused on a particular country. It is my belief that comparative studies by providing a wider analytical framework and context can make an important contribution towards a better understanding of the increasing complexity of the causes and consequences of rural violence in a particular country. In the case studies examined in this paper I have ventured to find those aspects of rural conflict and violence which highlight certain similarities and differences between them and thereby have implicitly used the tentative comparative framework outlined in the conclusions.

## 2. THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF RURAL VIOLENCE

Already in 1928 José Carlos Mariátegui (1955: 27) wrote that the indian and peasant question in Peru had its roots in the land problem. Paraphrasing Mariátegui, I argue in this paper Latin America's rural violence is largely rooted in its unequal and exclusionary agrarian system. Thus tackling the structural aspect of rural violence involves radically transforming the agrarian system so as to achieve greater equity and democratic participation. Hence, the following questions arise: to what extent has rural violence abated in those Latin American countries which have implemented agrarian reform programmes? And, has rural violence continued or even increased in those countries which have not undertaken a significant agrarian reform? I am aware that rural violence has multiple causes and many facets but it is my contention that without endeavouring to solve the land problem rural conflicts and violence cannot be fundamentally resolved. It is not by accident that the recent pacification processes in countries like Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala have resorted to land distribution as one way of resolving the armed confrontations and intense social conflicts in those countries.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, which was characterized by decolonization and the beginning of the Cold War, the peasantry played a significant role in the socialist revolutions in Third World countries like China, Vietnam and Cuba. This prompted scholars to devote attention to the study of peasant movements, rebellion and revolutions.<sup>3</sup> Such emancipatory movements were often accompanied by violence from both those seeking change and those opposing it. The irony and tragedy is that although the peasantry often paid a high price in terms of loss of life, injury, displacement, and economic hardship for their participation in these major transformations they rarely achieved their desired objectives nor promised emancipation. This does not mean the peasantry made no important gains but that most accrued to other classes or groups.

While in some European countries the peasantry achieved significant gains

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the classical texts are by Moore, Jr. (1966), Wolf (1969), Migdal (1974) and Paige (1975). All these studies are comparative and historical in focus dealing with major structural changes. Except for Moore, Jr., they all include cases from Latin America. Authors who deal specifically with Latin American peasant movements, rebellions, resistance, uprisings, insurrections or revolutions are Landsberger (1969), Stavenhagen (1970), Huizer (1972), Stern (1987), and Huber and Safford (1995), among others. There are, of course, many other important books on this topic but they deal with specific countries and do not attempt comparative analysis and generalization across the region.

through their violent struggles, such as the abolition of serfdom, ownership over land and certain social and political rights, the Latin American case presents a less encouraging outcome.<sup>4</sup> But such an evaluation might be premature and certainly goes beyond the confines of this paper. What I want to highlight though is that in certain historical situations social and political violence has led to progressive changes which have improved the condition of the peasantry. The question which needs to be explored is to what extent this also applies to Latin America. Generally violence has been directed against the peasantry to ensure its subjugation and exploitation for the benefit of the dominant classes. This paper only deals marginally with this wider historical issue but it provides the underlying general context for more specific issues. Hopefully future research will throw more light on this broader and more complex but fundamental theme.<sup>5</sup>

Rural violence has been endemic and persistent throughout the history of Latin America. The conquest and colonization of Latin America by the Iberian countries has probably been the most dramatic and violent episode in its history. The agrarian system

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<sup>4</sup> Is the peasantry just the cannon-fodder for the achievement of domination by other groups or classes and is it absurd or contradictory to affirm that the emancipation of the peasantry might involve its disappearance? Marx (1961, orig. 1887) thought that the peasantry was a transitional class destined to disappear through the process of capitalist modernization of agriculture which entailed the proletarianization of the peasantry and thus its disappearance. And Moore, Jr. (1969: 29, 30), writes with reference to England: 'Perhaps the most important legacy of a violent past was the strengthening of parliament at the expense of the king. ... The other main consequence was the destruction of the peasantry. Brutal and heartless though the conclusion appears, there are strong grounds for holding that this contribution to peaceful democratic change may have been just as important as the strengthening of parliament.'

<sup>5</sup> What is required today is a Barrington Moore type of analysis for Latin America which studies in a comparative manner the social origins of dictatorship and democracy and the role played by landlords, peasants and violence in the making of modern Latin America. Such a project has, of course, to tackle the critiques of his theoretical framework as well as incorporate, where appropriate, the insights provided by new theoretical developments since he published this classical text in 1966. Surprisingly Barrington Moore's *opus magnum* has had little influence and few followers in Latin America (Baud, 1998). However, there have been some fine studies on particular countries such as on Mexico by Womack (1972), Knight (1986), Tutino (1986) and Katz (1988), on Colombia by Fals Borda (1964) and Zamosc (1986), on Bolivia by Rivera Cusicanqui, on Peru by Degregori (1992, 1996) and Stern (1998). But these studies lack the ambition for wider theoretical generalizations by engaging in comparative analyses and/or adopting an historical perspective which is not limited to a particular brief historical event but is able to discern longer term patterns of change. I would like to see for Latin America more studies like that of Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966) but also by such authors like Wolf (1969), Paige (1975), Migdal (1974), Scott (1985) as well as the less specific rural texts by Tilly (1978) and Skocpol (1979). The book edited by Huber and Safford (1995) comes closest to a Barrington Moore like project for Latin America, although earlier attempts at a comparative analysis of peasant movements in Latin America have to be acknowledged, such as by Landsberger and Hewitt (1970) which unfortunately remains an exception as it was already published 30 years ago.



which emerged from the Iberian colonization has been a major source of conflict and violence in the countryside. Large landed estates were established by force and violence during the Spanish and Portuguese conquests in which peasant communities lost their lands and many were subjected to servile relations. This system is dominated by landlords who owned vast latifundia or plantations thereby monopolizing much of the best land and establishing a variety of tenant and labour relations with the peasantry which enabled the extraction of an economic surplus from them. Forced labour on estates as well as slavery on plantations were common in the early colonial period. Peasants had to pay rents to landlords by providing unpaid labour services on the landlord's estate and in some cases also paid rents in produce or even money for gaining access to some of the land or pastures of the estate. Much of the indigenous peasantry has been displaced and organized into communities which are largely confined to marginal regions and lands.

The large landed estates dominated the agrarian economy and society from the colonial period to the agrarian reform period of the 1960s to the 1980s (Chonchol, 1994). With the emergence of lucrative export markets, first of plantation products such as sugar, tobacco, cocoa, coffee, and cotton, slavery was a common way of obtaining labour during the colonial period. Violence was endemic in such harsh and repressive labour systems, leading sometimes to indigenous and slave rebellions. A second wave of exports, this time of wheat and livestock products, during the second half of the 19th century further extended the dominance of the *hacienda* system. Landlords were eager to gain advantage of the new lucrative export markets of the emerging industrial nations of Europe and the USA. They expanded the estate's frontiers and further transformed independent peasants into tenants or wage labourers as demand for labour increased. This in turn unleashed new forms of peasant protest as well as reviving old ones. This time peasant demands centred on the high rents tenants had to pay, seeking a reduction in labour services, less onerous sharecropping agreements or better wages and working conditions. Indigenous communities continued their struggle against the usurpation of their land but with little success as the boundaries continued to shift in favour of the estates. Such protests were often repressed either directly by armed gangs in the employ of landlords or by the military and police. Peasant actions were generally peaceful and their demands were expressed through petitions, the judiciary, strikes or land invasion,

and everyday forms of resistance. Only in extreme cases have they participated in revolutionary wars such as in Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua during this century.

It is only with the Great Depression of the 1930s and the subsequent import-substituting-industrialization process that the economic and political predominance of the landed oligarchy began to wane in Latin America. But the centrality of the large landed estates for an understanding of rural conflicts and violence is such that Eric Wolf (1973) distinguishes three phases in the history of the peasant movements in Latin America, each phase being linked to a particular stage in the development of the *hacienda* system. The conflicts as well as the type and degree of violence vary in each phase. It is the third phase which is of particular relevance for our analysis. Here peasant struggles, while becoming more varied, centre principally around demands for agrarian reform expressed sometimes through land invasions of estates and for the right to form trade unions, better wages and working conditions. Since the Second World War these types of protests and demands have become more common. Demands for agrarian reform are expressed through peasant struggles in countries such as Mexico (already at the beginning of this century), Bolivia, Guatemala, Cuba, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Brazil. In all these countries radical agrarian reforms were implemented, except Colombia and Brazil which have only witnessed minor reforms so far. However, in Brazil this might still escalate towards a major land redistribution. But these struggles and agrarian reforms are generally part of wider processes of political change. Sometimes it is these wider political changes which give peasants an opportunity to express their demands and occasionally achieve some success. Thus the alliance with urban groups is important in determining the degree of success or failure. In turn peasant struggles themselves also influence the direction of the political changes in the country.

Distinguishing phases of peasant protest and patterns of development within a broad historical and theoretical framework, either within a structural-functionalist modernization or marxist paradigm, has been much criticized since the 1980s, especially by post-modernists and post-marxists. Such broad generalizations were eschewed in favour of more local and actor-oriented studies which emphasized identity and everyday life experiences. There has been a shift from structure and macro to actors and micro. While some of these new paradigms in the social sciences add new and fresh perspec-

tives to social phenomena it should not, in my view, detract from efforts which seek to understand the broad patterns of development and change. It is necessary though to avoid the dangers of determinism, unilinearity and single progressive patterns in these wider comparative studies which should be sensitive to the insights provided by post-marxists and post-modernists. Such exercises are useful as they help us to understand the broader forces which have shaped the past and are conditioning the present.

In short, the colonial and post-colonial agrarian system was highly exploitative and oppressive. Under such conditions peasants had major grievances, especially the peasant communities which had lost their best, if not all, their land. The expansion of the estates at the expense of community lands continued in some regions of Latin America into the middle of this century. Tenants also had many grievances concerning the high rents they had to pay and their precarious position. With the spread of wage labour new grievances emerged concerning the low wages and harsh working conditions on the estates. Thus it comes as no surprise to find that such an unequal and exploitative agrarian system is a fertile breeding ground for violence. As mentioned this system was imposed and maintained through violent means on a conquered and colonized population but it was also contested by violent means by those who were oppressed. Every so often peasants rebelled against this oppressive and exploitative agrarian relation such as the Tupac Amaru rebellion in the 18th century in Peru and the many slave revolts in the Caribbean islands and Brazil (Genovese, 1979).

### **3. THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND AND VIOLENCE**

It is a well known fact that the Cuban revolution in 1959 and Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union a few years thereafter provoked a major rethinking of US policy towards Latin America. Rightly or wrongly the Cuban revolution was interpreted as largely an agrarian revolution in which the peasantry played a prominent role. US policy makers and the Latin American elite feared that the Cuban example might encourage further guerrilla movements and peasant insurrections throughout Latin America. Like Cuba these might succeed in overthrowing the dominant class and spread socialist regimes through the hemisphere. Cuba had a relatively modernized agrarian system considering that capitalist relations of production were fairly advanced as evidenced by the high incidence of wage relations in the countryside - indeed it had the highest pro-

portion of wage workers within the total rural labour force in a country in which the rural population was proportionally one of the smallest in Latin America. In short, the question arose that if a guerrilla movement in which the peasantry played an active role could succeed in one of the most urbanized countries with the most proletarianized rural labour force in Latin America, it would be even more likely to do so in countries with a more rural, indigenous and peasant environment.

The US administration under John Kennedy took the initiative in launching the Alliance for Progress. This was seen as a joint programme between the USA and Latin American governments which aimed to bring about the modernization of Latin America through reforms so as to avoid possible socialist revolutions. One important aspect of this enterprise was to encourage Latin American governments to undertake land reform programmes. For this purpose the US regime was willing to provide substantial financial as well as technical assistance. It was argued that one of the major sources for rural conflicts, rebellion and revolution was to be found in the highly inegalitarian and authoritarian agrarian system which condemned much of the rural population to poverty and exclusion.

Indeed many Latin American governments designed agrarian reform programmes, whether influenced by the Alliance for Progress or internal factors (Thiesenhusen, 1989). Several questions arise in this regard. To what extent was the agrarian reform the result of internal pressures, especially by the peasantry? Did peasant organizations, peasant movements, and peasant violence play any significant factor in this process? Did the agrarian reform succeed in bringing about the social and political incorporation, i.e. overcome the peasantry's traditional marginalization from the social and political system, and thus reduce conflicts and violence? Or, on the contrary, did the agrarian reform open a Pandora's box and lead to further political and social instability and violence?

### **3.1 Chile's Agrarian Reform and Violent Counter-Reform**

The Chilean case is a good illustration of the implementation of a relatively non-violent agrarian reform despite its radical character. Unfortunately it is also a clear case of an agrarian counter-reform which was imposed by an authoritarian State through state directed violence with some sporadic violent revenge actions by landlords

themselves (often with the support of the police). Many peasant leaders were murdered and often their bodies were never found becoming part of the thousands of 'disappeared' persons of the military dictatorship which ruled Chile from 1973 to 1989. Also thousands of peasant activists or supporters of the Allende government who had become beneficiaries of the agrarian reform were forcefully expelled from the reformed sector having to fend for themselves for a livelihood.

In Chile during the agrarian reform period from 1964 to 1973 few fatalities were recorded as the number of violent deaths probably did not exceed a dozen. This is remarkable when considering that about half of the country's agricultural land was expropriated from landlords and capitalist farmers and that many peasants took direct action in a largely successful attempt to speed up the expropriation process by engaging in widespread farm seizures which had escalated from 13 in 1965 to 1,278 in 1971 (Kay, 1992: 140).

However, after the military coup which overthrew the socialist government of President Allende, the fatalities spiralled into the thousands in the countryside. Peasant activists, trade union leaders, beneficiaries of the agrarian reform, and indigenous people were the principal victims in the countryside of the repression unleashed by the authoritarian state. Torture, detention without trial, disappearances, imprisonment for political reasons, and widespread terror became the norm. It was a class war in which repression had the clear purpose of destroying the peasant movement as part of the wider aim of the military government of crushing any possibility of a resurgence of a revolutionary movement which dared to challenge the power of the bourgeoisie and of the capitalist system in Chile. While in some instances landlords took an active part together with the military and the police force in hunting down certain peasant leaders (especially those who had been involved in the take-over of their farms) this happened only in the initial phase of repression. In general, violence was controlled from the top by the State, the armed forces and, in particular, the secret police which was under the direct command of President General Pinochet who was also the head of the army.

The peasant movement was disarticulated by the state and the once influential peasant trade unions, whose membership comprised over two thirds of all the agricultural workers by the end of the Allende government, became a shadow of their former selves (Kay, 1992: 139). But the landlord class was also forced to accept some changes

as often only part of their properties were returned and the remainder was sold to peasant beneficiaries or to other groups. Over a third of the expropriated land was returned by the military government to their former owners, less than half was distributed to some of the agrarian reform beneficiaries and the remainder was sold by tender to capitalists (Jarvis, 1992). Almost half of the former agrarian reform beneficiaries did not receive any *parcela*, as these new peasant family farms were known. These resulted from the privatization and subdivision of the collectives and state farms of the reformed sector. Landlords, like other farmers, also had to face the competitive winds of the new neoliberal policy which drove many landlords to bankruptcy and resulted in the emergence of a new class of agricultural entrepreneurs who were able to exploit new export markets, radically transform their production pattern and be innovative.

The counter-reform in Chile also gave land to peasant *parceleros* fulfilling a long-held peasant aspiration. However, these *parceleros* are a minority of the peasantry and subsequently many sold their *parcela* as they could not keep up their payments for the land or for some other reason. It is estimated that about half of the *parceleros* sold their farm during the late 1970s and the 1980s and thus only one quarter of the former agrarian reform beneficiaries have been able to become peasant farmers (Silva, 1992). Nevertheless the parcelization process was a significant factor in stabilizing the countryside. With the agrarian reform and counter-reform a new agrarian structure emerged in Chile. The *latifundio* has either been expropriated or transformed into a modern capitalist farm and accounts for less than half of the land they once possessed while the peasant farm sector has doubled the area under its control (Jarvis, 1992). Although the neoliberal policies, ushered in by the military government and hardly modified by the subsequent democratic government, have led to a new process of land concentration, especially in the forestry sector, the agrarian system is today less unequal and more varied as compared to the pre-agrarian reform period (Hojman, 1993).

Land conflicts and rural violence in general have abated since the transition to democracy in 1990 (Gwynne and Kay, 1997). It is highly unlikely that mobilizations such as those during the agrarian reform period will ever be witnessed again. But in the last few years mapuche indians have invaded some farms claiming ownership rights or some other ancestral right and demanding that the government expropriate these farms to their benefit. Indigenous groups have also been protesting in recent years against the

encroachment of large forest plantations into their areas both on account of the deleterious environmental consequences and because access to their lands has been made more difficult. They are also demonstrating against the construction of a huge dam in the Alto Bío-Bío region which is displacing pehuenche indians from their lands (Namuncura, 1999). This issue has still not been resolved.

Despite Chile's agricultural export success there remains an unresolved problem which is the indigenous issue. There are, of course, other pending problems to be tackled but it is this issue which has resulted in the largest rural mobilization since the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973. In June 1999 some 3,000 Mapuche Indians arrived in Santiago after marching more than 600 kilometres to demand that the government recognize their land rights and their constitutional status as an ethnic group. The march was organized by the "Council of All the Lands" and started in Temuco which can be considered as the Mapuches' capital. This march is the culmination of a series of protests, mobilizations and land occupations by indigenous groups in southern Chile over the last few years. These mobilizations have largely been peaceful resulting so far in no fatalities although dozens of people have been injured and arrested. The reaction of the authorities and the police has been relatively restrained. According to Ricardo Lagos, the recently elected president, the mapuche problem arises from their lack of land and their marginalization from the benefits of the country's remarkable economic during the last 15 years or so. While the indigenous communities had 500 thousand hectares of land in 1973 in 1990 they only possessed 300 thousand hectares.<sup>6</sup> But in the early 1990s the new democratic government introduced legislation which gives some new guarantees to the property rights of indigenous people making it more difficult for capitalists to purchase their lands and thereby curbing any further alienation of their territory.

### **3.2 Peru's Violence Before and After Shining Path**

In the early 1960s rural conflicts and peasant demands for agrarian reform intensified in Peru. In the wake of the Cuban revolution guerrilla movements also made their appearance in Peru. One of the most notable peasants movements at the time was

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<sup>6</sup> "La Tercera en Internet" accessed on 22.6.1999, <[www.tercera.cl/casos/indigena/noticias/noticia8.html](http://www.tercera.cl/casos/indigena/noticias/noticia8.html)>

led by the Trotskyist leader Hugo Blanco who was largely active in the valley of La Convención. Under his able leadership tenants refused to pay rents to landlords and demanded the expropriation of their estates. However, this insurrection quietened down a few years later when the Belaúnde government largely acceded to their demands by expropriating many of the estates and redistributing the land in private ownership to the former tenants. President Belaúnde's 1964 agrarian reform was clearly designed for political purposes and was confined to only those areas where rural conflicts were most intense. By distributing land to the insurrectionary peasants the government hoped to buy social peace as well as have a free hand in repressing the incipient guerrilla struggle. He succeeded on both counts.

Meanwhile General Velasco Alvarado's radical and sweeping agrarian reform, after an initial relatively quiet period, led to further violence as many peasants were against the direction taken by the agrarian reform. There was resistance to the statist and collectivist character of the agrarian reform but above all there was opposition by the indigenous peasant communities who protested against their partial, if not full, exclusion from the land distribution process. Peasants from these communities began to invade the newly created state or collective farms demanding that part, if not all, of the land should be transferred to them. Violent clashes ensued resulting in many deaths and hundreds of wounded persons. It is this dissatisfaction of the members of the peasant communities (*comuneros*) which Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) would exploit so ruthlessly and violently.

Peru is a clear, though tragic, illustration of an agrarian reform policy which while solving some problems also opened the way for new grievances and conflicts in the countryside, as well as leading to the emergence of the Shining Path guerrilla movement. The agrarian reform by destroying feudal-like relations and the political and social power of landlords and capitalist farmers (*gamonalismo*) left a power vacuum which the State and/or the peasant organizations were unable to fill. The collectivist character of the agrarian reform was not suited for much of the country as it overlooked the importance of the *hacienda's* internal peasant enterprises (tenants and sharecroppers) and did not address adequately the problem of the external peasant enterprises, i.e. the land shortage and historical grievances of the peasant communities. This led to much disillusionment with the agrarian reform, which together with the power vacuum,



offered the opportunity for the rise of Shining Path.

It was only when peasants from indigenous communities revolted by invading land belonging to the reformed sector and the collective and state farms faced increasing economic difficulties that the government started to transfer some of the reformed sector's land to peasant communities and to parcelize the remainder for the benefit of the existent beneficiaries, i.e. subdividing it into peasant family farms (agrarian reform *parcelas*). However, these measures came too late and were also insufficient to prevent the rise of Shining Path. While the peasantry had a secondary influence on the initial design of the agrarian reform, which was from the top down and of a state capitalist corporatist type, it nevertheless unleashed the largest peasant movement ever in Peruvian history thereby significantly changing the outcome of the agrarian reform.

Despite all the agrarian reform's imperfections and failings, some of which could have been avoided, it was a necessary and crucial step for addressing the underlying causes of rural violence in Peru. But the disastrous violence unleashed by Shining Path was very expensive in terms of loss of human life, destruction of villages, communities and livelihoods as well as provoking a massive displacement of rural people, largely to urban centres.

### *The rise and fall of Shining Path*

Thus in the Peruvian case the agrarian reform unwittingly sowed the seeds for an intensification of violence and probably the greatest violence ever experienced in Peru since the colonial period. The slogan of the revolutionary movement throughout most of Latin American was 'Land or Death' during the 1960s. In Peru hundreds of thousands of peasants and rural workers joined organizations which succeeded in pressurizing the State to expropriate hundreds of thousands of hectares. Only 166 persons died between 1958 and 1964 as a result of clashes in the countryside which is less than those who died in the first ten days of August 1991. While 166 deaths are 166 too many this figure has to be compared to the over 20,000 people who died as a consequence of political violence during the 1980s (Degregori, 1992: 413). Furthermore, it is estimated that up to the early 1990s over 200,000 people have been displaced by the war unleashed by Shining Path (*ibid.*: 419).

Of course, the agrarian reform cannot by itself be blamed for this violence as

other factors contributed to it, such as Peru's entrenched racism and marginalization of the indigenous population. It is these deep seated resentments and frustrations, particularly of those *comuneros* who had become depeasantised and deindianised which Shining Path was able to mobilize in the first stages of their violent trajectory from the 1980s to the mid-1990s (Favre, 1984). Shining Path offered a new identity and mission to the sons and daughters of *comuneros* who, thanks to the various reforms of the Velasco government, had been able to improve their education and, in some instances, gain access to provincial universities but had then been unable to secure an adequate job and were thus frustrated in their upward social mobility. These youngsters became a fertile recruiting ground for Shining Path which used them to gain access to, and support from, indigenous communities.

Nevertheless, it is my view that without this fatal flaw in the design and implementation of the agrarian reform Shining Path would never have been able to develop into such a deadly force. This is corroborated by the fact observed by many researchers that in those areas where the agrarian reform did redistribute land to the peasant communities, either during the initial expropriation process or, more often, after *comuneros* had invaded the collective or state farms, Shining Path was unable to make many inroads. Researchers have also noted that those communities and reformed sector farms which were well organized and/or which had close links with urban-based political parties, largely of the civilian (non-insurrectionist) left, were best able to resist the incursions by Shining Path (Degregori 1992).

Although the agrarian reform in Peru has a major responsibility in the subsequent violence it is my belief that it was a turning point in the country's history and an essential, though far from sufficient step, for beginning to resolve the agrarian and indigenous question which originated with the Spanish conquest and acquired new dimensions over the centuries. The agrarian reform was a critical precondition for this historical task. However, Shining Path would never have been able to achieve such prominence and wreck so many lives if Velasco's agrarian reform had not been fatally flawed. Instead of only marginally incorporating the peasant communities in the land redistribution process they should have been at the centre of the agrarian reform from the start.

Recapitulating then, there are a number of reasons why Shining Path initially

succeeded in gaining control over large areas of rural Peru. First, there was the unresolved land issue of peasant communities. Second, the continuing discrimination against and poverty of indigenous groups. Third, the social and political vacuum arising from the destruction of the oligarchical order and the weakness of social and political institutions, in short a weak civil society. Fourth, the large availability of a new type of young cadres composed largely of students, many of whom were sons and daughters of indigenous peasants, as well as of the more traditional type such as local teachers. Fifth, the initial organizational and ideological capacity of Shining Path's leadership. Sixth, the inappropriate action taken by the State to combat Shining Path which further aggravated the situation. For example, the disastrous military response using violent counter-terrorist measures which involved mass violations of human rights. In the years 1988 to 1991 Peru had the highest figure of 'disappeared' people in the world (Starn, 1996: 244).

Peasants were often caught in the crossfire of the battle between Shining Path and the State violence of the armed forces and the police. Some *comuneros* and communities at first supported Shining Path which tapped into their grievances and promised a new future. In is a matter of debate as to whether its maoist ideology and/or the thoughts of 'President Gonzalo', as Shining Path proclaimed the ideas of its leader, were an advantage or hindrance in gaining the support of some peasants. This mixture of maoist ideology with the ideas of Guzmán, or his *sui generis* interpretation of Maoism certainly was a potent force in the recruitment and absolute unconditional dedication of its cadres to Guzmán's leadership. It also allowed them to justify and enabled them to enforce those dreadful violent acts.

However, once the armed forces and the police abandoned their brutal counter-terrorist actions and started to change their attitude towards the peasantry by seeing them as possible recruits in the fight against Shining Path, instead of terrorists, the situation began to shift in favour of the State. Thus in the years 1983 to 1984 the number of civilian casualties in the hands of the military declined by more than two thirds (Starn, 1996: 244). When the balance of forces began to shift in favour of the State and the *senderista* peasants began to suffer heavy casualties many active and passive supporters of Shining Path shifted their allegiance to the State or became neutral.

While the government of Fujimori claimed the credit for defeating Shining Path, especially after capturing and imprisoning its leader in 1994, a less partisan analysis

acknowledges a series of factors which contributed to the decline and eventual defeat of Shining Path. Although it is still active in some regions, largely in the Huallaga valley coca producing region, it is only able to launch sporadic and minor actions which no longer threaten the stability of the country. Furthermore, in mid-1999 the last leader of Shining Path, Ramírez Durand (Feliciano) was captured and put behind bars. The remnants of Shining Path are no more than a glimmer of their former menacing selves.

In accounting for Shining Path's defeat, there is first, the increasing disillusionment and alienation of many people with Shining Path's dogmatism, rigidity and use of violence. This ideological rigidity led them to make mistakes, yet to be unable or unwilling to learn from them. This particularly lost them support in the peasant communities. Shining Path closed rural markets, displaced, often through violent means, the traditional leadership in the peasant communities and imposed their own young cadres as new leaders, used extreme violence in meeting out 'justice' and used violence in an increasingly indiscriminate manner thereby employing the same terrorist tactics which the military had used initially and which had claimed many innocent victims (Starn, 1996: 243).

Second, Abimael Guzmán, known to his supporters as 'Presidente Gonzalo' is no Tupac Amaru, Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, 'Che' Guevara or Fidel Castro. He certainly lacks the charismatic and wider populist appeal of the leaders mentioned. Although initially the Shining Path organization which he created was able to recruit a new frustrated, deindianized, and marginalized intellectual group of indigenous origin whose mobility was blocked, his authoritarianism, dogmatism and brutal actions in the end sowed the seeds for his capture by the security forces and the demise of his organization.

Third, the inability of Shining Path to protect those communities which had been sympathetic to it from the counter-terrorist method adopted by the police and the military. Thus many communities were no longer willing to risk the lives of their members for an organization which had promised much but was unable to defend them from the human rights abuses of the State's 'law and order' forces.

Fourth, the existence or formation and development of the *rondas campesinas* in many highland communities. The *rondas* are a sort of vigilante committees organized by members of the communities themselves. They already existed in northern Peru

before the emergence of Shining Path and had been formed to prevent cattle rustling (Gitlitz and Rojas, 1983; Starn, 1991; Huber, 1995). When the government realized that it could not defeat Shining Path on its own it encouraged the formation of organizations similar to the original *rondas*, so-called Civil Self-defence Committees (*Comités de Autodefensa Civil*, CDC) throughout the central and southern highlands. The *rondas* became a key element in defeating Shining Path, a fact which has only belatedly been acknowledged by many observers. Degregori (1999) and Starn (1991) were among the first social scientists to highlight this point. 'The great paradox of the *rondas* is that, originating from the violence, they sowed the basis for the peace' (Pérez, 1992: 474, my translation), although they also indulged at times in violent methods themselves (by having internalized some of the violent methods used by the militarized police).

Finally, the changing strategy of the government and the military towards the *rondas*. Instead of seeing them as potential terrorist organizations sympathetic to Shining Path they began to realize that these were genuine grass-roots associations which were attempting to defend the livelihoods of their members and compensate for the shortcomings of the State in terms of its inability to protect them against rustling and crime, to administer justice as they saw it and to provide essential services. With the changing attitude by the government towards the *rondas* the military began to establish links with them and provide them with weapons (albeit in limited numbers and of the most simple kind). In some areas a military-*rondas* or rather military-CDC alliance developed which, however, after the waning of Shining Path were largely discontinued by the communities in question (Starn, 1996: 244-245).

In summary, following Degregori and Starn, the key actor behind the defeat of Shining Path was the peasant communities who had also been the principal victims of Shining Path and initially of the security forces as well. This is to argue against the Peruvian government's claim which credited exclusively the armed forces, the police and the intelligence services for defeating Shining Path.

It was only once Shining Path had been defeated and people could visit again the areas which had been under its control that the true extent of the havoc they had created became evident and the difficult task of reconstruction and recuperation could

begin.<sup>7</sup> In the areas where Shining Path had been most active, as in Ayacucho, the changes brought about in the countryside by the years of violence has been profound. The counter-insurgency actions by the armed forces were also at first responsible for this upheaval. Complete villages had been destroyed or abandoned and whole local economies and social networks disrupted or uprooted. Non-government organizations (NGOs) had to abandon their social and economic development projects (Smith, 1992). The death toll was extremely high, almost amounting to genocide, as was the number of the displaced population and refugees (Coronel, 1999). If the death toll in Ayacucho for the years 1980-1993 is projected nationally then instead of the 25,000 dead 450,000 would have died in Peru as a consequence of this civil war. In the rural areas of Ayacucho the population fell by almost a quarter between 1981 and 1993 (Degregori, 1996: 16).

#### *Coca, Shining Path and Violence*

When discussing violence in Peru reference has also to be made to the relation between violence and drugs. Peru and Bolivia, and now also Colombia, are the main coca producing countries in the world. Coca farming is a crop which binds together poor peasants from the South and consumers from the rich North through a whole network of illegal national and international agroindustrial, commercial, financial and 'security' agents. These activities have shaken the political foundations of the State in countries like Colombia, undermined democratic institutions in Peru and other countries, spawned 'narcoterrorism' (as well as narcocounter-terrorism), and produced new and shifting alliances between peasant growers and insurrectionist organizations like Shining Path in Peru.

A lucrative market option open to poor peasants in some regions is the illegal cultivation of coca. The upper jungle regions and semi-tropical valleys of Peru, Bolivia and Colombia are particularly well-suited to growing coca, which thrives on poor soil, is labour intensive, and can be cropped five times a year. The rapid expansion of coca production since the 1970s is due to the rising external demand for cocaine by the rich countries of the North on the one hand and to the failure of successive governments to

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<sup>7</sup> For one of the first analyses on the recuperation and reconstruction of the destroyed and abandoned villages in the Peruvian highlands following the violence, see Wilson (1997).

provide adequate income opportunities to peasants on the other. Furthermore, the implementation of market- and export-oriented neoliberal policies since the 1980s has given a new (though unintended) boost to the expansion of the coca economy (Léons and Sanabria, 1997). In Peru the rural poor migrated to the jungle region in search of the 'white gold' swelling the number of those who had migrated earlier as a consequence of the crisis of the highland rural economy. This migration has had negative ecological consequences and it is estimated that coca alone is responsible for much of the deforestation of the Peruvian amazon region.

The social and political costs of illegal coca production far outweigh the economic gains it provides. Among these social and political costs are the promotion of political instability, corruption, violence and crime, the erosion of the state, civic institutions and moral values, and the human drama of drug addiction. Even though some of these factors cannot be quantified in economic terms, they are certainly dramatic enough to call for governments and international institutions to seek a solution beyond mere repressive measures which only intensify the violence. The cultivation of coca has provided employment and incomes to thousands of poor peasant farmers who therefore are very reluctant to give up its cultivation. However, coca eradication and crop substitution programmes have so far been largely unsuccessful as governments and international agencies are unwilling to foot the bill for making alternative crops to coca a more profitable proposition for peasants.

Peru used to be the most important supplier of coca for the manufacture of cocaine but in recent years it has been overtaken by Colombia. This reflects the more effective campaign of eradication of coca cultivation in Peru as compared to Colombia. While in Peru the government has been winning the war against Shining Path and other organizations which were protecting the coca cultivators, the reverse has happened in Colombia where the State has increasingly lost control over parts of the country.

Poverty led many peasants to embrace the illegal cultivation of coca which had been cultivated for centuries for ceremonial occasions and for reducing the pains of hunger and working at high altitudes in the Andean mountains. But the illegal cultivation of coca has by far surpassed its legal cultivation for ceremonial, medicinal and other purposes. At first the Colombian drug maffia played a key role in the spread of the illegal cultivation of coca. Later Shining Path and other guerrilla organizations got

involved under the pretext of eradicating the exploitation of the peasantry by intermediaries and promising a better price to peasant cultivators as well as offering protection against the State security forces and its coca eradication campaign. In return they taxed cultivators and other intermediaries by safeguarding the transportation of the coca. This enabled Shining Path to finance their purchase of arms and dynamite as well as their armed guerrilla forces. Thus the phenomenal expansion of the illegal cultivation of coca and the associated drug business has led to a major increase in rural violence comprising peasants, traffickers, Shining Path and the State which attempts to eradicate the illegal cultivation of this crop. Corruption has become widespread among the armed forces and the police, often reaching the highest levels. Clashes between the security forces and Shining Path have occurred in the Huallaga valley where Shining Path still maintains a presence.

### **3.3 Colombia's Enduring Violence**

Colombia, rightly or wrongly, conjures up in the minds of many an image of perpetual violence. It is seen as the Latin American country where violence has been the most widespread and persistent. Indeed, Colombians themselves refer to one of their historical periods, the 1950s and 1960s, as the age of *La Violencia* (The Violence) (Fals Borda, 1969). They could not foresee, though some probably feared, that the 1980s and 1990s would turn out to be an even more violent era. The manifold aspects of violence in Colombia and its changing characteristics throughout the country's history make it difficult to analyze and comprehend. Violence in Colombia is a complex web of interacting, multifaceted, and evolving violent acts. Its causes and manifestations are multiple. It is thus not surprising to find that interpretations about violence in Colombia tend to differ more markedly than those of other Latin American countries.

Given the intensity of the violence and the terror it is difficult for researchers to elicit information from victims. This is largely due to fear of reprisal but also to the trauma such violence produced. The State itself has not been particularly interested in recording the many incidences of violence. Part of the reason lies in its own involvement in many of the acts of violence, largely perpetrated by the armed forces, the police and paramilitary groups which are often linked to the State. Also in some regions of the country the State hardly has a presence because their remoteness makes it too costly and



above all because well armed guerrilla organizations and/or groups linked to the illegal drugs business, the *narcotraficantes* who control the cultivation of coca, manufacturing of cocaine and its marketing, dominate large parts of the country.

Thus in Colombia the linkages between the land problem and violence are particularly complex. Even though these linkages are less straightforward as compared to other Latin American countries and despite the varying interpretations as to the causes and consequences of violence in Colombia many authors agree that the land question is a major factor in explaining the country's violent history.

Meertens (1997) provides an interesting periodization of Colombia's violence. The first period is characterized by the upsurge of violence during the 1930s. During these years Colombia witnesses a growth of peasant organizations and actions, particularly in the rich coffee-growing areas. Through their organizations peasants demanded the abolition of feudal-like, oppressive and exploitative labour-services which tenants had to pay to landlords who were owners of large landed estates (*haciendas* or *latifundia*). They also campaigned for the right to cultivate coffee on their tenancy and to acquire property rights. The government in its attempts to diffuse peasant-landlord conflicts, which were often accompanied by violence, enacted a *Ley de Tierras* (Land Law) in 1936 which sought to modernize the traditional estates, to provide land titles to those smallholders who had not yet legalized their occupation of a piece of land (often land which belonged to the State) which they had cultivated for many years, and to redistribute land to tenants by expropriating those estates which were considered to be inefficient as much land was left uncultivated. However, this legislation backfired as landlords proceeded to expel tenants, often by violent means, and as the government did not have the resolve to confront landlords.

The second period is characterized by *La Violencia* from the late 1940s to the 1960s during which there was a dramatic escalation of homicides affecting particularly the countryside. Between 1946 and 1966 the number of deaths exceeded 200,000, i.e. 1.56 percent of the total population was slain, which amounts to 2.8 percent of the population aged 15 years or over. Colombia still had the highest violent death rate in the world in the early 1960s (Oquist, 1980: 9, 10). The government, dominated by the conservative party, unleashed a wave of repression against the peasant movement as it feared its increasing strength. As a consequence of this State terror some peasant or-

ganizations evolved into a guerrilla movement and their target was not so much the landlord class but the conservative government. However, the guerrilla movement was coopted by the liberal party, the principal opposition party to the government, which in turn led to the conservative party organizing its own armed bands. The conflict became a struggle between the two political parties for control of the government and the country. Thus the *Violencia* was a political competition among elites through violent means, often on a regional level. Peasant demands were cast aside and banditry became common. This political banditry was part of an individual strategy tradition characteristic of small and medium coffee farmers. Meertens depicts this type of banditry as being similar to the 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' as analyzed by Scott (1985). The peasant movement had been fractured and disarticulated thereby dissolving into factionalism where peasants either supported conservative or liberal armed groups.

The third period in the 1970s was less violent. The agrarian system became more complex with the development of 'capitalism from above', as some landlords modernized their estates. This was complemented by a 'capitalism from below', i.e. the emergence of a new class of capitalist farmers (mainly former *arrendatarios* or tenants who were able to purchase the land they were cultivating and later even managed to accumulate land). Towards the end of this period the main national peasant organization (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* - ANUC) declined (Zamosc 1986) leaving a political vacuum which was occupied by the guerrillas and increasingly also by other armed groups such as those linked to the drug traffickers or dealers, the paramilitary, and the self-defence militia.

In the fourth period of the 1980s and 1990s, violence again dominated the political scene. The roots of this violence, as Winn (1992: 265) writes, 'can be found in the aborted "revolution" of 1944-54, which challenged ladino control of Indian lands and labor, and in the brutal repression that followed. ... This experience politicized many Indians, some of which joined the ladino-led Guerrilla Army of the Poor ... The fear of a leftists revolution based on Guatemala's Indian majority detonated the ensuing conflict. For the guerrillas, it was a war of liberation ... For the army, it was a war against "terrorists" to be won at any social cost. But all were aware that there was also an ethnic dimension to the conflict, in a society where the lines of class and ethnicity often overlap.' The revolutionary guerrilla groups extended and consolidated their geographical

reach and political influence due to successive governments' inability to tackle the problems in the countryside. The drug dealers also entered the scene and extended their reach, particularly in the areas of colonization, as the cultivation of coca shifted from Peru and Bolivia to Colombia. Landlords as well as peasants are involved in coca growing and this blunts the class conflict as they both oppose the State's attempts to eradicate coca cultivation and fight the drug dealers. The USA government has exercised an increasing influence in shaping Colombia's policy towards the coca problem. Legitimate social demands by the rural population have been portrayed by the government propaganda as a drug issue and thereby justified repressive measures or, at best, allowed it to ignore the real crisis faced by the peasantry and indigenous groups.

The conflict has killed 35,000 people over the past decade (*The Economist*, Vol. 353, No. 8143, 1999: 68). 'While it is mutually convenient for the government of Colombia and the United States to attribute these principally to drug traffic, it is increasingly evident that much of it is, in fact, politically motivated; that, while some killings are obviously the result of guerrilla activities, far more are a consequence of state terrorism, perpetrated by the army or by para-military forces whom they sanction. ... It is no coincidence that while counter-insurgency has generated almost three times as many casualties among non-combatants as among the guerrillas, and has created a refugee population of 600,000 internally displaced peasant families, drug traffickers have acquired 21 percent of the country's arable land' (Ross, 1997: 28, 30; his data refer to the early 1990s).

More recent research estimates that the drug mafia owns 42 percent of the best land in Colombia and that together with the paramilitary squads they have driven some 800,000 peasants from their villages and small farms over the last decade (Carrigan, 1996: 7). In one newspaper survey '30% of displaced people said they fled from the guerrillas, 35% blamed paramilitary units and 15% claimed the army had forced them to move' (*The Economist*, 5 April, 1997). These figures are not entirely reliable as they fail to mention those people displaced by the drug mafia but they reveal that the rural population suffers at the hands of all four key political actors in this conflict: the State, the paramilitary, the guerrillas and the drug mafia.

It is notable that one of the key demands of the guerrilla rebels is agrarian reform. This is in addition to action against poverty, the disarming of paramilitary groups,

respect for human rights and democratic change which would guarantee that if they laid down their arms they could engage in peaceful politics.

In short, as Meertens (1997: 247) writes (my translation): 'During the 20th Century the peasant struggles for land and the reactions by landlords, as expressions of the class struggle in the countryside, have been blurred not only by the variety of regional structures but also by their constant insertion in political conflicts of another kind, whose divisions go across class lines. Perhaps this has been the most important characteristic of Colombia's rural history.' This statement is particularly valid if we remember that the drug mafia has penetrated the Colombian political system up to the highest level and thus has become a major actor in the country's political conflicts to which Meertens refers.

### **3.4 Brazil's Landless Peasant Movement**

In Brazil the principal protagonist in the countryside over the last decade has been the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* - MST) which has some 500,000 adherents, making it by far the largest peasant movement in South America. It has spearheaded over one thousand land invasions or farm seizures demanding the expropriation of the land occupied which is generally unused land belonging to the landlords' estates. The MST is a combative and well-organized group whose strategy is illegally to occupy uncultivated farmland. These actions come as no surprise as land inequality is particularly acute in Brazil where only 4 per cent of farm owners control 79 per cent of the country's arable land (Veltmeyer *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore it is estimated that Brazil has 2.5 million landless peasants. In these land occupations a variety of peasants are involved, mainly rural semi-proletarians or proletarians, such as wage workers, squatters, sharecroppers and tenants (Petras, 1998a).

Through direct action, which includes blocking highways and sit-ins at local offices of the state's agrarian reform institute (INCRA), by 1994 the landless peasants had pressurized the government to settle over 120,000 families on land since the beginning of their actions in the mid-1980s (Veltmeyer *et al.*, 1997: 181, 192). Furthermore, during his first term of office from 1994 to 1998 President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has settled 285,000 landless peasant families on expropriated plots and his aim is to grant

formal titles to a further 400,000 families who have been occupying land abandoned by previous owners by the end of his second term of office in 2003 (*The Economist*, Vol. 352, No. 8128, 1999: 60).

In this struggle for land there have been many casualties as *fazendeiros* (landlords) and their hired gunhands (*pistoleros*) acted with impunity. Many protestors also died and were wounded in clashes with the militarized police. According to estimates from the Catholic church almost 1,000 land-related killings have taken place since 1985 (Padgett, 1998: 32). Serrill (1996: 35) describes very vividly one of the major violent confrontations between the police and the landless peasants in their battle for land. 'Some 1,500 peasants from northern Pará state in the Brazilian Amazonia wanted land, and they were hungry enough, desperate enough, to take bold action to get it. On April 17 [1996] they blocked a highway in Eldorado de Carajás to draw attention to their demand for the right to settle on idle farmland nearby. To their consternation the state government responded with busloads of heavily armed military police. After the cops fired a volley of tear gas, the peasants charged, waving machetes, hoes, scythes and a few pistols. The police opened fire with automatic weapons. The result was the bloodiest confrontation in the 30-year history of Brazil's land reform movement. Nineteen demonstrators died and 40 more were wounded by the police fusillade. The scene, filmed by a local television newsman and broadcast repeatedly in the following day, stunned all of Brazil. ... The death toll from these rich vs. poor confrontations is high, and mounting. Since 1979 more than 200 peasants have been killed by police or by hired guns in land conflicts around the country; rarely has anyone been prosecuted for these crimes.' But this time in view of the public outcry following the killings trials were initiated against 150 policemen accused of murdering the 19 protestors. However, although the evidence is strong against the accused, in the trial's first verdict, three military police officers were acquitted on 19 August 1999 (*Time Magazine*, Vol. 154, No. 9, 1999).

The MST leadership is aware of the need to forge linkages and make alliances with urban organizations in order to extend public support for their goals. It has thus developed connections with the urban left and the Workers Party (PT) thereby being part of a wider project of social and political transformation. In the last presidential elections in 1998 the MST mobilized support behind Luiz Ignácio da Silva (nicknamed

Lula) who came second in the presidential race. In short, the MST is the most dynamic, creative, inspiring and influential political movement in today's Brazil (Hammond, 1999).

The actions of the MST illustrate how old style class struggles, though with some new features, have resurfaced in the contemporary world. Except for Argentina, Brazil was the only country in Latin America which by the 1990s had not yet undertaken any significant agrarian reform. This lateness can be explained by the political power of landlords, who were able to block any earlier attempts at agrarian reform, and by the decision of the State to open the Amazon region for colonization, thus relieving some of the pressure for land by the impoverished mass of landless peasants. This colonization of the pioneer frontier provided a temporary 'safety-valve' by releasing the social tensions in the countryside as it provided possibilities for movement and improvement for some rural workers.

However, the colonization itself was a violent process. Much of the violence in the frontier region resulted from actions of landlords and other capitalists who claimed the land colonized by the pioneer peasants (the *posseiro*) as their own and often expelled them by force, especially after they had cleared the land. Certain major development projects also resulted in violence due to the forced displacement of population and negative impact on the livelihoods of the local population and on the environment (Hall, 1989). The lack of an institutional infrastructure in the frontier region also meant that violence was often used to resolve conflicts rather than using the legal or administrative mechanisms of the State. Violence was also used as a means of social control and in particular for dominating labour. Thus by relieving potential intensification of conflicts in the region of origin of the migrants this colonization also created new conflicts and violence in the frontier region (Foweraker, 1981).

In short, the widespread violence in rural Brazil is an expression of the struggle for land and survival by the rural poor. Thus agrarian reform is still a major issue in Brazil and crucial for tackling rural violence as well as for reducing the enormous inequalities in the countryside and allowing the survival of the peasantry.

#### *The Brazilian rubber tappers' environmental movement*

Environmental and ethnic questions have become increasingly important politi-

cal issues as the fate of the tropical forest and the fate of the indigenous peoples become more intertwined. Furthermore, the environmental movements became struggles for social justice as native groups were being displaced and their livelihoods were threatened by the depredatory actions of the commercial interests of companies exploiting the natural resources through logging, mining, oil extraction, the building of dams for hydroelectric power stations, deforestation for pastureland and cattle raising, and so on. Conflicts between these companies, cattle ranchers, and other large landowners and the local population often resulted in casualties and activated human rights groups in defense of the victims. This coalition of indigenous, peasant, environmental, human rights and other organizations has become one of the major forces in the fight for social justice (Kaimovitz, 1996; Sachs, 1998).

In Brazil the building of the Transamazon Highway in the 1970s led to large scale deforestation and expansion of pastureland as big capital was lured by tax rebates, subsidies and cheap credit to Amazonia. This led to a large scale migration of settlers, largely from impoverished northeastern Brazil, to the tropical forest areas, a movement which contributed to the environmental deterioration. The expansion of grazing and mining encroached on lands used by indigenous groups and rubber tappers in what Dore (1995: 262) has called the most extensive enclosure movement in history. This sparked off the rubber tappers' movement as well as the actions of native indigenous groups in defense of their livelihoods, bringing the Amazon environmental issue to world attention. The assassination of 'Chico' Mendes in 1988, who was the leader of the Amazon rubber tappers' movement, provoked an international outcry.

'As leader of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, located in the western Amazonian state of Acre, "Chico" Mendes had helped spearhead one of the most significant social-environmental movements in Latin America, that of the rubber tappers or seringueiros. His murderers, recently arrived cattle ranchers or fazendeiros from the south of Brazil who resented the tappers' growing power to resist land-grabbing and the destruction of their rubber stands, were eventually caught, tried and convicted. That the assassins were brought to justice at all was due largely, however, to the international campaign which immediately followed his murder. The perpetrators' subsequent escape from gaol came as no real surprise in a country where 99 per cent of homicides arising from rural land conflicts go unpunished' (Hall, 1996: 93). 'Chico' Mendes's murder led

to strong national and international pressure which prompted the government to accede to some of the rubber tappers' demands by establishing extractive reserves which attempt to reconcile the conservation of the forest with its sustainable use in supporting local livelihoods. The first extractive reserve was created in 1990 and many others followed thereafter. Although 'Chico' Mendes' assassination might have been foretold he did not die in vain.

### **3.5 The Chiapas Rebellion in Mexico**

At first sight the Chiapas peasant rebellion led by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, which burst onto the political scene on the 1st of January 1994 does not appear to support my proposition that rural conflict and violence are more likely to occur in a highly inegalitarian and exclusionary agrarian system. After all Mexico had the first and most significant peasant and agrarian revolution in post-colonial Latin America. The consequence of this was that the oldest and one of the most extensive agrarian reforms ever to be implemented in the region took place in Mexico. Indeed since the revolution the country has enjoyed relative political stability although violence remained ever present it is at a lower level than in many other Latin American countries. But with the modernization of agriculture and the vast irrigation projects of the northern provinces of the country new inequalities appeared as government policy clearly favoured capitalist enterprises which led to the rise of modern forms of neolatifundism. The *ejido* agrarian reform sector received comparatively little support from the government, just enough for the ruling party (PRI) to retain its control in the countryside through a web of clientelism and sporadic repression. But the *ejidos* were increasingly unable to fulfil their assigned role of provider of cheap food for the domestic market and government policy did not encourage them to shift their production pattern towards the more lucrative export market.



However, on further reflection the Chiapas rebellion can be interpreted as providing additional support for the proposition put forward in this paper.<sup>8</sup> Chiapas is Mexico's most southern and indigenous region, bordering with Guatemala, where the agrarian reform had the least impact and landlords remained the dominant force. The Chiapas rebellion is not only a struggle for land but also for an inclusionary development process and democracy. As Burbach (1994: 113) argues '[t]his is not a single-minded revolt of indigenous peoples focused only on retaking their lands and expelling the rich who have exploited them. Nor, as demonstrated by the two thousand Indians who rose up in arms on January 1st, is this a 'foco' movement in which a few guerrilleros try to goad the rest of the populace into supporting them. And ... this is not a Sendero Luminoso-like struggle in which an Indian or peasant army is intent on destroying all who stand in its way in order to seize absolute control of the state. ... What distinguishes the EZLN from its predecessors is that it is not bent on taking power in Mexico City, nor is it calling for state socialism. Its objective is to spark a broad-based movement of civil society in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico that will transform the country from the bottom up.'<sup>9</sup>

Thus Chiapas is a rebellion against neoliberalism and globalization, against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of Mexico with the United States of America and Canada, and especially against the amendment of article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, one of the main gains of the agrarian movement of 1910-17, which put an end to the agrarian reform. The closure of further land distribution and the threat to peasant subsistence through cheap food imports from the USA and Canada following the NAFTA agreement are some of the main reasons for this rebellion (de Janvry, Gor-

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<sup>8</sup> I am, of course aware, that this momentous movement has a multiplicity of causes and its significance for Mexican history cannot yet be adequately determined as it is still an evolving movement and its ramifications go well beyond the land issue. The interpretations of the causes of the Chiapas rebellion are truly varied as can be seen in the Appendix. Some interpretations are likely to be more valid than others. Much depends on the eye of the beholder and I am, of course, not exempt from bias. Ouweneel (1999: 88-89) distinguishes between analysts who follow a 'from-the-inside perspective' and a 'from-the-outside perspective'. While the first group centre their analysis on the impact of poverty and overpopulation in the Selva Lacandona and provide a detailed narrative of the EZLN, the second group focuses on problems of development in general such as population growth, the unequal distribution of natural resources, the collapse of coffee prices and the abrogation of agrarian reform in the state of Chiapas in general. Thus the former group tends to speak of the 'Lacandona Revolt' while the latter group speaks of the 'Chiapas Revolt'.

<sup>9</sup> For a comparison between the EZLN movement in Mexico and Shining Path in Peru, see Lora (1999). For a historical comparison between peasant revolts in Chiapas and some Andean countries, see Gosner and Ouweneel (1996).

dillo and Sadoulet, 1997; Harvey 1998). The peasants' maize and cereal cultivation is endangered by the government's neoliberal policies under which the State has withdrawn subsidies, credit, technical assistance and other services to the peasant sector (Barros Nock, 2000). Maize is a crop which is not only important for the economic survival of the peasantry but also has cultural and symbolic significance.

In short, the rebellion in Chiapas is fuelled by the exclusionary impact of Mexico's agricultural modernization on the peasantry and by fears that Mexico's integration into NAFTA will marginalize them further. Mexico's peasant farmers cannot compete with the large-scale mechanized maize and cereal farmers from North America unless special protective and developmental measures are adopted in their favour.

Indeed the Chiapas rebellion has come to symbolize the new character of social movements in the countryside in Latin America which are at the forefront of the struggle against neoliberalism (Veltmeyer *et al.*, 1997, ch.10). The peasantry is striking back and it would be a serious mistake to dismiss these new peasant and indigenous movements in Latin America as the last gasp of rebellion (Petras, 1998b). Whether they will lead to the resurgence of the left as claimed by Petras (1997) remains to be seen. But they undoubtedly reveal that these new movements are shaping new class and ethnic identities in which the protagonists are affirming their own history and capacity to make history.

### **3.6 War and Peace in Central America**

The land issue was not only an important factor in the history of violence in Central America (or relative lack of violence in Costa Rica due to its far more egalitarian land distribution) but also played a key role in the Central American peace accords by which Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador are attempting to find a resolution to the civil war which was ravaging their countries. In this section I will only sketch the possible relationships between the land, conflicts and violence in these countries. Hopefully this might suffice in a general paper of this kind but a proper analysis of these relationships would certainly need a separate paper or book.

A few figures are useful to gauge the magnitude of these civil wars. According to some estimates 300,000 people were killed in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua during these conflicts and 2 million people were displaced, being forced either to flee

abroad or to safer parts of the country. (The total population in these three countries in 1980 was 14.2 million.) The majority of these violent acts were committed by government forces and a much smaller proportion by paramilitary forces or death squads and guerrilla groups (Pearce, 1998: 590-591).

In 1986 President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica took the initiative in searching for a political solution to the civil war in these countries. His efforts were rewarded with the Esquipulas II 1987 agreement signed by various countries and which paved the way for the ending of the civil wars. But peace agreements were not finally signed until 1990 in Nicaragua, 1992 in El Salvador and 1996 in Guatemala (*ibid.*: 588). Although the civil war has ceased in these countries violence continues.

### *Nicaragua*

In Nicaragua land was highly concentrated and the dictator Anastasio Somoza was the largest landowner of the country. The Sandinista revolution which overthrew Somoza in 1979 implemented a radical agrarian reform expropriating almost half the country's agricultural land and benefiting over one-third of the peasantry. The expropriated estates were organized into state farms, in some cases into production cooperatives, and only a small proportion of the expropriated land was distributed directly to the beneficiaries as private family farms. The Sandinista government feared that subdividing the large estates would result in the loss of economies of scale and above all endanger the country's export earnings as peasant beneficiaries might switch from export to subsistence crops. A collectivist emphasis was also underpinned by socialist political and ideological factors.

The social forces opposed to the revolution started to organize an armed opposition to the government which received much support from the US government during the Reagan administration as part of its Cold War fight against any socialist movement - real or imagined. The counter-revolutionary groups (named 'the *contras*') exploited the dissatisfaction of many peasants with the agrarian policy of the Sandinista government and the collectivist character of the reformed sector. The armed conflict between the '*contras*' and the government severely disrupted the economy and agricultural production.

But the peasants succeeded in pressurizing the Sandinista government to adopt a

less state-centred agrarian reform. After 1984 some reformed enterprises were transferred directly to peasant beneficiaries in either cooperative or individual ownership. This shift in policy was also provoked by the desire to reduce the influence of the '*contras*' among the peasantry and to stimulate food production (Utting, 1992). Following this policy change, the amount of expropriated land redistributed to peasant beneficiaries in individual ownership trebled from 8 per cent in 1981-84 to 24 per cent in 1985-88 of total expropriated land (Enríquez, 1991: 91-92). Peasant beneficiaries also gained more favourable access to scarce inputs, modifying the earlier advantageous treatment given to state farms. However, civil war and the resulting economic deterioration of the country meant that peasants still faced a difficult situation.

The Sandinista agrarian reform also provoked a major organizational effort of the peasantry (Enríquez, 1997). The government helped to set up the *Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos* (UNAG) in 1981 and by 1987 one-fifth of all agricultural workers had joined (Blokland, 1992: 154). UNAG also managed to wrench a greater degree of autonomy from the State over time and has remained the most important peasant and farmer organization in the countryside to this day.

Despite the change in policy the Sandinistas failed to win the support of the majority of the peasantry as evidenced from the 1990 election results in which only 36.3 per cent of the national rural vote went to the FSLN, the government party, as compared to 44.2 percent of the urban vote (Horton, 1998: 261). This relatively poor rural electoral performance led Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to conclude in 1991, 'We didn't lose the peasantry because we never had it' (*ibid.*: xiii). According to Horton such an assessment is overly pessimistic as her research shows that the Sandinistas had a solid support among the peasantry, despite the economic difficulties and the sacrifices of the civil war. In my view this statement by Ortega attempts to preempt any criticism of the Sandinistas' agrarian policy and an unwillingness to admit that through their mistaken agrarian policy they lost support among the peasantry. It is most likely that the FSLN would have achieved a better electoral result in the rural areas if they had distributed individual property rights to peasant beneficiaries from the beginning of the agrarian reform. This would have driven fewer peasants to support the '*contras*'. As Horton (1998: xii) writes: 'The great majority of contra field commanders and combatants were peasants from Nicaragua's mountainous interior. ... It is possible that 30,000 Nicara-

guans fought at some point with antigovernment forces, making the *contras* one of the largest armed mobilizations of peasants in contemporary Latin American history.'

Nicaragua's civil war of the 1980s had devastating human and economic costs. 'Out of a population of approximately 3.5 million, 30,865 Nicaraguans were killed during the war. Over 350,000 Nicaraguans, mainly from rural areas, were displaced by the war.' (Horton, 1998: xi). This pushed the Sandinista government to sign the peace accords, brokered by Costa Rica's president Oscar Arias, together with other Central American countries. These accords called for an end to outside aid to the '*contras*' in return for democratic elections in Nicaragua. This led at first to a temporary cease-fire and after the defeat of the FSLN in the 1990 elections to a permanent cease-fire and demobilization of the '*contras*'.

The victory of Violeta Chamorro in the 1990 elections led the new government to reform the agrarian reform. Land redistribution to both sides in the civil war was seen as a key element of pacification. Although the civil war ended this partial counter-reform also opened up new conflicts and bred new violence. This arose from the chaotic situation in the countryside with multiple claims over land. Landlords were reclaiming expropriated land, beneficiaries wished to subdivide the state farms and collectives and gain private property titles as well as prevent landlords and '*contras*' from acquiring land from the reformed sector, the '*contras*' were demanding a plot of land in return for giving up their weapons and those landless who had been bypassed by the Sandinista agrarian reform were also demanding land. It thus comes as no surprise to find that sporadic violence erupted in the countryside, especially when considering that 'as of 1995, 47 percent of the nation's total farmland was without legal title and former owners had filed 7,185 claims to ... 25 per cent of total farmland' (Horton, 1998: 279). The paradox is that although the '*contras*' had contributed to the victory of the anti-Sandinistas forces some of them took up arms again to fight for a piece of land as the Chamorro government either failed to respond to their demands or was too slow in doing so. These ex-*contras* who took up arms again are referred to as the '*recontras*'. They believe that it is only through violence that they can get governments to meet their demands.

## Guatemala

Like the other countries surveyed in this paper much of the violence in Guatemala has its origins in conflicts over land. These conflicts have not only a class dimension but perhaps even more importantly an ethnic dimension. Rural society in particular is split between the *ladinos* or so-called whites and the *indígenas* or Indians. Most of the *ladinos* are *mestizos*, i.e. of mixed white and Indian blood, are Spanish speaking and adopt Western dress and an urban life style. The *indígenas* speak one of the many indigenous languages of the country, are the majority of the population in the rural areas, and largely wear their own traditional dress, especially the women. There are, of course, differences within each category. *Ladinos*, comprise landlords, merchants, money lenders, civil servants and so on, occupying the upper echelons of rural society which is dominated by the *hacendados* or landlords. Meanwhile the *indígenas* are the subaltern group which is composed of a great variety of ethnic groups, which have their own language and identity but dominant among them are the Mayan population. Thus class relations have a clear ethnic dimension.

In the early 1950s a frustrated peasantry increasingly resorted to violence demanding an agrarian reform. One of main measures taken by the Arbenz government in 1952 was the implementation of an agrarian reform in the expectation that this would enhance social justice and reduce violence. Many US-owned plantations (mainly owned by the United Fruit Company) were expropriated as well as many *haciendas* owned by the *ladino* oligarchy. Together they conspired to overthrow the Arbenz government. They succeeded in 1954 and the CIA was heavily involved in his overthrow. In the eighteen months of his administration Arbenz distributed land to some 100,000 peasant families (Brockett, 1988). After his overthrow a violent agrarian counter-reform ensued in which much of the expropriated land was returned to landlords. Over 200 peasants were assassinated in the first few weeks after the fall of Arbenz.

This counter-revolution sowed the seeds for a harvest of violence. It aggravated the land problem and was a major factor in the renewed violence and ensuing civil war which was to last for 36 years. In the 1960s various guerrilla groups emerged in the wake of the Cuban revolution and the government started a counterinsurgency war. Between 1978 and 1985 alone half a million people out of a national population of 8 million became internal refugees; 150,000 fled to Mexico as political and economic

refugees; and 200,000 found their way to other countries such as the United States (Warren, 1993: 25). Political violence also shaped the flows of internal migration as people sought to escape from areas of high violence to more secure zones (Morrison and May, 1994). Furthermore, 'it is estimated that perhaps 200,000 civilians, primarily highlands Indians, had been killed or "disappeared" during the 36-year civil war which ended with the signing of the historic Peace Accords in December 1996.' (*The Economist*, October 16, 1999: 67).

For the guerrillas it was a war of liberation against the exploitation of the peasants by the landlords and export-oriented elite as well as against an oppressive State. Meanwhile for the government and the military it was a war against communist subversion and the menace from within. In the military's view guerrilla terror had to be met with counter-terror. This civil war acquired genocidal overtones as governments practised a 'scorched-earth' counterinsurgency campaign in the indigenous highlands against the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerrilla movement and its supporters (Jonas, 1997: 6). The military saw the Mayan population as being the main supporters of the guerrillas and thus the indigenous peasantry became victims of the military's indiscriminate violence.<sup>10</sup> While in Guatemala the counter-insurgency strategy has been genocidal, in Peru it was non-genocidal but authoritarian. The genocidal aspect is partly due to the more prevalent racism in Guatemala compared to Peru. Also in Guatemala the State's form of domination is still largely oligarchical while in Peru this had been swept away with Velasco Alvarado's revolution of 1968 (Kruijt, 1999).

With the signing of the Peace Accords on the 29th of December 1996 between the government and the URNG a period of four years was established for its implementation. While the demobilization of the URNG forces has been achieved, the downsizing of troops and dismantling of paramilitary groups has only been partially realized. Despite the Peace Accords, life for ordinary citizens is hardly peaceful. 'There is a growing spiral of violence, due mainly to criminality and common delinquency, but also to "social cleansing" death squads and the lynching of presumed delinquents. Meanwhile, former members of the army and security forces direct or participate in or-

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<sup>10</sup> For a study which explores the gender dimension of Guatemala's violence during the civil war and traces the intricate links between political violence and the systemic violence connected with class inequalities and gender and ethnic oppression, see Green (1999).

ganized crime and extrajudicial executions. The impunity they enjoyed in the past continues to exist (Molina, 1999: 4).

Thus Guatemala has still a long road to travel before it achieves a reasonable degree of democracy, equity and peace. But undoubtedly the Peace Accords have been a major turning point despite some recent setbacks like the 16 May 1999 defeat of the constitutional reforms in a referendum and the still-unsolved assassination of Bishop Gerardi in 1998 which is widely believed to be the work of right-wing forces as he had exposed the human rights violations of military and paramilitary forces, as well as by others. The indigenous population is still awaiting greater constitutional guarantees concerning their identity and human rights while the peasants' demand for land still remains unfulfilled. Thus major challenges still lie ahead for the Guatemalan State and its citizens.

### *El Salvador*

The extreme rural inequalities and exploitative conditions in rural El Salvador led to a peasant uprising in 1932 which was brutally suppressed by the armed forces and landlords. According to some estimates 30,000 to 40,000 people were killed, although others put the figure at 20,000, out of a population of only one million at the time. No wonder that this massacre is referred to as '*La Matanza*' (The Killing). Indians in particular formed the target of this slaughter (Pearce, 1986). This massacre ensured the continued domination of the landed oligarchy for many decades to come. It was only when the peasantry and rural wage workers felt their livelihoods increasingly under threat in the late 1970s that conflicts escalated again and threatened to engulf the country in civil war. Research has shown that there is a significant relationship between patterns of land tenure and use and sociopolitical conflict (Brockett, 1994: 187). Thus in March 1980 an agrarian reform was decreed but it soon met the powerful opposition of landlords which prevented its effective implementation and unleashed a period of civil war lasting until 1992 (Seligson, 1995; Paige, 1996). The government's expectation that the reform would lay the basis for lasting social stability and peace were frustrated as the landed oligarchy was able to mobilize its allies in the armed forces and security forces against it.

Nevertheless, the 1980 agrarian reform in El Salvador managed to distribute



between one-fifth and one-quarter of the land to one-fifth of rural labour. However, the agrarian reform failed to offer anything to the large mass of the landless as the beneficiaries were largely limited to the estate's small tenants and to some of its workers. Production cooperatives were organized on most of the expropriated farms but about a fifth of their land area was cultivated individually. Only a small proportion of expropriated farms were subdivided and distributed individually to beneficiaries as private peasant family farms. The commonly held view that individual farming is superior to collective farming is not born out in El Salvador. Yields achieved on the collective land of the producer cooperatives of the reformed sector were often higher than those obtained on family plots either within or outside the reformed sector (Pelupessy, 1995: 148).

The twelve years of civil war claimed at least between 200,000 and 300,000 lives (Booth and Walker 1993: 156) the overwhelming majority of which were the victims of the armed forces and death squads who were also responsible for the assassination of Archbishop Romero. The death toll equalled about 1.5 per cent of the population and the war displaced another 30 per cent from their homes (Brockett, 1994: 175).

With the signing of the peace agreement on 16 January 1992 the civil war formally ended, the guerrillas were brought into the peace process and became a political party. This institutionalization process was seen as a way to reduce conflicts or, at least, find peaceful mechanisms to resolve them, and thus reduce violence. But sporadic violence continues in El Salvador, not least from the police and paramilitaries. Furthermore, the agrarian reform of 1980 remains unfinished as the second phase was never implemented. There is even the possibility that some beneficiaries might lose their land as they are unable to pay the debt arising from the agrarian reform (Kowalchuk, 1998). The country's high demographic density and rural unemployment, its land shortage, and intensity of cultivation, which has negative ecological consequences, makes it difficult to find a solution to the rural poor's demand for land. Furthermore, the expansion of agro-exports are leading to peasant displacement, conflicts and violence. Without overlooking the difficulties, I support Pearce's (1986: 303) conclusion that 'only an agrarian reform carried out within a broad process of radical social transformation can possibly pave the way for lasting peace and development in El Salvador.'

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

I have argued in this paper that the highly unequal agrarian system, the associated exploitative social relations and the exclusionary modernization processes are important factors, in some cases even the most prominent ones, in explaining conflicts and violence in rural Latin America. The analysis has also revealed that there are other significant factors which influence the character and evolution of conflicts and violence in the countryside. However, in a preliminary essay of this kind those determinants which are not rooted in the agrarian system, and especially in the land tenure structure, have been given less emphasis.

This, as yet limited, comparative analysis of various Latin American countries has shown that no single and simple answer can be given regarding the causes of rural violence, its persistence or reemergence, and possible ways of dealing with its causes and consequences.<sup>11</sup> While some commonalities can be found there are also variations arising from the structural peculiarities of each country as well as from the different actions of landlords, peasants, the State and other significant actors.

The Cuban revolution of 1959 can be considered as a catalyst for agrarian reforms. Governments in Latin America as well as in the USA, realized that without them they may face the prospect of widespread peasant rebellions and possible socialist revolutions in their own countries. But agrarian reform did not always prove to be the expected panacea (Thiesenhusen, 1995). Nevertheless the land issue has been shown to be central to many of the conflicts and violence in the countryside and therefore needs to be tackled if governments wish to attain some degree of social and political stability. For example, those countries which only implemented a very limited agrarian reform experienced further peasant frustration and mobilization as in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Brazil. The clearest example is Brazil with the rise of MST and the demands of the poor peasantry for land which have been met with violence from landlords and the State. In the other countries it has led to the rise of guerrilla movements who have been able to mobilize the disenchanting rural poor. This has provoked counterin-

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<sup>11</sup> There is often little consensus among authors on the causes and consequences of violent conflicts. Even interpretations on a particular event, like the Chiapas rebellion, vary greatly (see Appendix). Although comparative research is a daunting task it is a worthwhile enterprise as besides being able to generate some meaningful generalizations it can also assist those engaged in the study of a particular case by providing a broader analytical framework.

surgency actions by the State, with the support from the US government during the Cold War period, so as to fight a real or imagined communist subversive threat. These counterinsurgency actions have been responsible for most of the violent deaths and massive displacements of rural population and even acquired genocidal characteristics in Guatemala.

The relevance of the land issue has also been manifested in the Central American Peace Accords in which land redistribution was a significant ingredient to attain the demobilization of the warring factions and achieve a certain degree of political stability. It is significant to observe also that the two countries with relatively little rural violence during this century, Argentina and Costa Rica, have a more egalitarian agrarian structure and a larger middle class farm sector as compared to other Latin American countries.

In other cases the opposite has also been the case. Countries which implemented radical agrarian reforms, or threatened to do so as in El Salvador, provoked the wrath of landlords and other affected groups. In Guatemala it led to the overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954 and to a violent counter-reform in which much of the expropriated land was returned to former landowners. As mentioned above, this just aggravated and postponed the problem by a decade or two in Guatemala, leading to far more violence subsequently. In Chile, the massive agrarian reform, but above all Allende's promised transition to socialism, albeit a '*via chilena*', was one of the key elements in the military *coup d'etat* and the ensuing counter-revolutionary violence. However, a significant proportion of the expropriated land was transferred as individual family farms to some of the agrarian reform beneficiaries. Since the transition to democracy in Chile in 1990 few violent conflicts have emerged due to the severity of the earlier repression by the authoritarian government but also due to the parcelization process which satisfied some of the peasants' demands, albeit for a minority. In El Salvador it led to twelve years of civil war between 1980-1992 and enabled landlords to block subsequent phases of the 1980 agrarian reform.

The implementation of agrarian reforms in most Latin American countries did not fulfil the general expectation of political incorporation and control of the peasantry, thereby reducing violence. However, let me first refer to a relatively successful case, at least for a certain period. Mexico is perhaps the only case in Latin America where the

agrarian reform achieved important political goals from the point of view of the new dominant class interests. For seven decades or more the agrarian reform and the Mexican State's ability simultaneously to incorporate, coopt and repress the peasantry, ensured one-party rule and relative political stability. This was only shattered in 1990 with the neo-Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas and, as we have analyzed earlier, this region was the weakest link in Mexico's agrarian reform.

Various reasons account for the general failure of peasant incorporation. For example, in Peru the exclusion of many indigenous peasant communities from the land distribution process led to new conflicts and violence. This flaw in Peru's agrarian reform was ruthlessly exploited by Shining Path opening one of the most violent chapters in Peruvian history. In Nicaragua, despite the initial popularity of the revolution and the extensive agrarian reform, its statist character alienated many peasants and limited the number of peasant beneficiaries. Much of the rural violence though was due to the war waged by the *contras* against the Sandinista government, generously supported by the US government, but successfully recruiting many alienated peasants.

The Colombian case is a more problematic situation for analysis. It supports to some extent the propositions put forward in this paper. For example successive governments try to appease those areas experiencing the most intense land conflicts with minor or localized agrarian reforms. But the peculiarity of the Colombian case is shown by the ability of landlords, belonging to competing political factions of the dominant class, to mobilize their respective peasant constituencies through a variety of patron-client relationships. Thus rural violence during the period of '*la violencia*' acquired feudal-like characteristics. This impeded the unity of the peasant movement. Although, with the rise of powerful guerrilla movements, rural conflicts have acquired a clearer class character in the past two decades, this in turn has been distorted by the widespread influence of the drug mafia into almost all aspects of Colombian life.

The shift from a State-centred inward-directed development process to a neoliberal market- and export-oriented model has weakened the power of traditional peasant organizations with the drastic fall in permanent rural employment and the rapid rise of casual and temporary forms of labour employment. Labour markets have become more flexible, competitive and dispersed making it difficult to develop organizations and solidarity networks among rural workers. Nevertheless, new peasant and indigenous

movements have emerged like the MST in Brazil and the EZLN in Mexico, which will make it politically difficult to continue to impose the neoliberal model upon the peasantry regardless of its consequences. It is possible that rural conflicts will become more violent than in the past as the State has been weakened in its mediating and incorporating capacity as well as in its ability (and willingness) to deal with the negative effects of the current unequal and excluding pattern of rural modernization and globalization. Whether this new peasant and indigenous movement can ensure that market forces are harnessed for a participatory, inclusionary and egalitarian development process remains an open question (Kay, 1999).

Concluding, I have endeavoured to show that an important first step for dealing with rural violence entails resolving the land question so that the landless and poor peasants can gain access to sufficient land and economic resources to ensure an acceptable standard of living and participation in society. Furthermore, development strategies and modernization processes have to become inclusionary which is difficult to achieve within the current context of globalization as it tends to exclude the rural poor. Political changes are also required for tackling conflicts and violence. This, in turn, would necessitate the further democratization of Latin America's social and political systems. It is my belief that through comparative analysis it is possible to improve our understanding of rural violence in Latin America. To what extent the limited comparative analysis in this paper has shed any new light on this important issue is for readers to judge.

## **APPENDIX: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CHIAPAS REBELLION IN MEXICO**

Below I offer a selection of interpretations by various authors on the causes of the Chiapas rebellion in Mexico. Economic, demographic, social, political, cultural, ethnic, historical and international factors are put forward as key factors for explaining the uprising. The interpretations are remarkably varied, often complementary but sometimes also contradictory. Nevertheless, the land question is mentioned by several analysts as an important ingredient of this rebellion. These texts I have obtained from abstracting journals and, if requested, I can provide the exact source of the citations.

"The indigenous Zapatista outburst in Chiapas, Mexico, in early 1994, was a product of agrarian modernization, which the state initiated in the 1980s."

"The Zapatista uprising is provoked by the colonization of Mexico's civil society through the corporatist encroachments of a clientelist authoritarian political system that aligned itself to the national and international economy's systemic demands."

"The abuse of agrarian laws and human rights by the state's large landowners and the forced recruitment of agricultural workers are explored in relation to the 1 January 1994 uprising."

"[The author] examines the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico on 1 January 1994, as a result of economic imbalances, peasant dependence on the state, discriminatory practices between the state and Indian communities, and the global effects of capitalism on agrarian societies. Distinctions are made between larger structural causes, short-term causes, and detonators that contributed to the start of the revolution."

"[The author] examines the roles of local land tenure, community solidarity, and recent commercialization in the 1994 rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico. Neither the communal allocation of land tenure system, community solidarity, nor community disruption and proletarianization due to recent economic change may be considered as primary causal factors behind the revolt. The best explanation for the revolt lies in the desire of certain groups to obtain land, notably immigrants to the Lacandona rain forest area, and in recent changes in land tenure law that have ended their hopes of acquiring land."

"The Chiapas uprising in Mexico was rooted in the deterioration of economic and political conditions after the late 1970s, subsequent to their improvement since the 1950s. The native populations were forced to move outside the traditional communities for work and outside of state control."

"The armed rebellion is traced directly to the economic adjustment policies prescribed for Mexico by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which forcibly proletarianized the lower and middle classes through a dramatic reduction in real income levels."

"The Chiapas rebellion in Mexico is the culmination of 500 years of the indigenous people's struggles against outside domination. Though the Chiapas region is characterized by extreme poverty and inequality, which constitute ample reason for civil

disorder, the precipitating factor was repression in the political system. Democracy and reform have been absent from the region for many years, and Chiapas has been governed like an unwanted stepchild. Unlike other regions of Mexico, where farmers gained land through land redistribution after the Mexican revolution, Chiapas farmers have steadily lost land to outside ranching and logging interests. In this context, the Zapatistas emerged as a self-defense group aimed at the indigenous people's survival."

"On the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed (1 January 1994), the Zapatist Army of National Liberation initiated a rebellion against the government in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. The events were a response to the exclusionary and homogenizing effects of globalization."

I finish this selection by reproducing an abstract of Pablo González Casanova's article 'Causes of the Chiapas Rebellion', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 3 (1-2), 1996, pp. 269-290, in which he offers the largest number of causes for the Zapatista uprising I have ever seen. "[He] examines the true causes of the 1 January 1994 rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, in response to current biased explanations of the uprising. A 9-point interpretation is offered consisting of (1) a heritage of the rebellion; (2) the crisis of the traditional hacienda; (3) the pastoral contribution [i.e. liberation theology]; (4) the resurgence of the student leaders of 1968; (5) less land for more poor; (6) the politicization of the indigenous peoples; (7) the institutional violence of the Chiapas regime; (8) the cooptation vs selective repression of indigenous leaders, direct action of the masses, and negotiation practice between authorities and subordinates; and (9) the poverty trap.

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