

# DE GUATEMALA A GUATEPEOR

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- GARRISON GUATEMALA. By GEORGE BLACK, with MILTON JAMAIL and NORMA STOLTZ CHINCHILLA. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984. Pp. 208. \$25.00 cloth, \$9.00 paper.)
- THE DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE AND EVOLUTION OF A PEASANT SYSTEM: THE GUATEMALAN POPULATION. By JOHN D. EARLY. (Boca Raton: University Presses of Florida, 1982. Pp. 207. \$20.00.)
- EL PROLETARIADO RURAL EN EL AGRO GUATEMALTECO. By CARLOS FIGUEROA IBARRA. (Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria de Guatemala, 1980. Pp. 475.)
- GUATEMALA IN REBELLION: UNFINISHED HISTORY. Edited by JONATHAN L. FRIED, MARVIN E. GETTLEMAN, DEBORAH T. LEVENSON, and NANCY PECKENHAM. (New York: Grove Press, 1983. Pp. 342. \$17.50 cloth, \$7.95 paper.)
- INVERSE IMAGES: THE MEANING OF CULTURE, ETHNICITY, AND FAMILY IN POSTCOLONIAL GUATEMALA. By JOHN HAWKINS. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984. Pp. 470. \$35.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.)
- GUATEMALA: TYRANNY ON TRIAL. Edited and translated by SUSANNE JONAS, ED MCCAUGHAN, and ELIZABETH SUTHERLAND MARTINEZ. (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1984. Pp. 301. \$19.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.)
- DE INDIOS Y CRISTIANOS EN GUATEMALA. By RAFAEL MONDRAGON. (Mexico: Claves Latinoamericanas, 1983. Pp. 239.)
- LOS DIAS DE LA SELVA. By MARIO PAYERAS. (Havana: Ediciones Casa de las Américas, 1980. Pp. 115.)
- GUATEMALA: DESEMPLEO Y SUBEMPLEO. By MAX SOTO, CARLOS SEVILLA, and CHARLES FRANK. (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centroamerica, 1982. Pp. 188.)
- GUATEMALA: SUS RECURSOS NATURALES, EL MILITARISMO Y EL IMPERIALISMO. By JACOBO VARGAS FORONDA. (Mexico: Claves Latinoamericanas, 1984. Pp. 173.)

Guatemala is the nation that spawned *El Señor Presidente*, a ghoulish portrayal of bad government by Miguel Angel Asturias, win-

ner of the Nobel Prize in 1976. Since the publication of this novel in 1948, the country's politics have gone from bad to worse, or as Central Americans say, "de Guatemala a Guatepeor."

Guatemala suffers from a set of intractable problems: a society highly stratified along both class and ethnic lines (with the most inequitable distribution of income in Central America), appalling poverty for the lower stratum, a pronounced urban-rural dichotomy, repressive and unstable government, and extremist political groups on either end of the political spectrum who are committed to using violence. Less pressing but ever-present are the difficulties commensurate with being a small developing country dependent on exporting agricultural products for necessary foreign exchange. Economic problems and explosive political issues are inextricably linked. Although Guatemala's difficulties are not new, being indeed a natural outgrowth of the country's sordid history, they have been given urgency by the emergence of leftist organizations bent on overthrowing the regime. Conflict has exposed the political and economic meanness of the existing regime, forcing difficult choices on the Guatemalan elite, the urban middle class, the poor, and interested international actors.

Guatemala's large indigenous population has long attracted the attention of anthropologists. Aside from their ongoing work, recent writing on Guatemala has been dominated by chronicles of the struggle between revolutionary organizations and the regime, with an emphasis on documenting the repressiveness of successive governments. Not surprisingly, authors demonstrate their political persuasions, with the right being conspicuously absent.<sup>1</sup> This literature largely lacks theoretical pretensions, but it succeeds in describing contemporary Guatemala and in raising questions about the possibilities and problems of revolution in an ethnically plural society.

The battle for Guatemala's future is being waged in rural Guatemala, principally in the western highlands, where the country's large indigenous population is concentrated. The contest is not for territory but for the support of the rural poor. Two North American anthropologists, John Early and John Hawkins, reviewed the literature on rural Guatemala, and through the prism of their fieldwork, they seek to illuminate life in the Guatemalan countryside. Guatemala has traditionally been viewed as sharply divided between "*ladino*" and "*Indian*," the latter consisting of twenty-two ethnic groups comprising roughly half the population. In *Inverse Images: The Meaning of Culture, Ethnicity, and Family in Postcolonial Guatemala*, Hawkins challenges this view by asserting that Indians and ladinos now form a single continuum. He argues that they are interlocked not only socially in political, economic, and ecclesiastic institutions but culturally as well.

Indians and ladinos remain distinct groups, but everything from

social perceptions, dress, ubiety, and economic activity is defined by the relationship between the two social groups. The clearest inverse relationship is ubiety. Ladinos move toward the city, the center, and power, despising manual labor. Absentee landlords abound because ladinos can hardly bear to remain on their rural estates. The Indians, in contrast, flee power and move to the field and the periphery, preferring manual labor. Hence Guatemala's pronounced division between urban and rural spheres. Early's *The Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: The Guatemalan Population* is filled with demographic minutiae, but his evidence dramatizes the division between Guatemala City and the rest of the nation. The capital contains almost 20 percent of the national population yet is 90 percent ladino.

One of the paradoxes in Guatemala (and in other Central American countries as well) is that wealth is produced in the countryside and consumed in the cities. No one has yet explained how agrarian economies can become so dominated by cities. Guatemala's rural-urban dichotomy is both a mirror and an extension of the structure of the economy.

Despite incipient industrialization and exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves, Guatemala's economy remains fundamentally agrarian. Large estates produce agro-exports—coffee, cotton, bananas, meat, sugar, cardamom, chocolate, and sesame seeds.<sup>2</sup> Estates of more than nine hundred hectares (2,223 acres), or .14 percent of all farms, occupy 22 percent of all available farmland.<sup>3</sup> Farms of less than seven hectares (17.3 acres) account for 90 percent of all farms, but only 16 percent of the cultivable farmland. The smallest farms, with less than 1.4 hectares (3.5 acres), represent 54 percent of all farm units but occupy a mere 4 percent of farmland. These small farms produce basic grains and vegetables for domestic consumption. Between 1950 and 1978, the area of land devoted to export crops increased 200 percent while the area in maize—the preferred crop of small farmers—decreased by 10 percent.

*El proletariado rural en el agro guatemalteco*, Carlos Figueroa Ibarra's massive study, illuminates the dependence of the agro-export sector on seasonal, poorly paid labor. The shortage of land in the highlands forces peasants and the landless either to pick coffee or to descend in cattle trucks to harvest other export crops in the torrid coastal flatlands. Wages are miserable because they allow for the financing of the agro-export sector's expansion, the consumption of the elite, and the maintenance of competitive prices for the international market. The lack of stable and remunerative employment reduces whole communities to subsistence levels. Many rural households survive only by patching together a number of income sources each year.<sup>4</sup> Max Soto, Carlos Sevilla, and Charles Frank report the results of their quantitative study

in *Guatemala: desempleo y subempleo*. It documents the limited capacity of nonagricultural sectors to provide productive employment.

Poverty is most evident in the departments of the western highlands, where the population is most dense (aside from Guatemala City) and largely indigenous. Arable land is scarce, not because of plantations (which are concentrated in the lowlands) but because of the terrain and population growth. As Early notes, Guatemala's population is increasing rapidly. Within the past half century, the number of years required to double Guatemala's population has dropped from 145 to about 20 years (Early, p. 48). Population pressure not only has led to competition for land but has weakened the productivity of land through deforestation, erosion, water contamination, and soil depletion.<sup>5</sup>

Given the poverty of indigenous groups in the highlands as well as the rugged terrain, it is not surprising that guerrillas have chosen the highlands as the site for contesting the government's authority. The first guerrilla organization emerged in 1962, when it arose from an aborted military coup.<sup>6</sup> Although this group was decimated by 1968, sporadic guerrilla activity continued. In the 1970s, the survivors of earlier efforts founded organizations that were politically more sophisticated. They have also proved to be more agile. The two strongest groups are the Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA) and the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP). Weaker groups include the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR) and the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT), the Guatemalan Communist party.

Mario Payeras's *Los días de la selva* is a unique first-hand account of the EGP, now the largest of the guerrilla organizations. The book recounts how sixteen men entered Guatemala from Mexico in 1972. For three years, this nucleus of the EGP fired only a single shot at the army, concentrating instead on painstakingly building support among poor subsistence farmers. Every day was a struggle against rain, mud, disease, hunger, loneliness, and doubt. Building support among indigenous groups proved to be exceedingly difficult because of their fear and distrust. Payeras describes one of the first attempts at obtaining provisions in a small, isolated community: "Allí escuchamos por primera vez la palabra *macá*, vocablo terrible que para nosotros significaba entonces algo más que el simple *no hay*, adoptando toda una connotación de rechazo con raíces de siglos" (p. 32).

In June 1975, the EGP made its presence known by assassinating a hated landlord. The army responded by sending in hundreds of troops, thus initiating the war for the highlands. ORPA joined the battle, and so did FAR and the PGT. The guerrillas were put on the defensive and proved to be unable to protect their supporters from army

repression. But they carried out sporadic attacks on army posts and columns. By 1982 they had achieved a strong presence in the departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos and had made inroads into the western lowlands. The guerrilla organizations, long riven by sectarian divisions, eventually signed a pledge of unity in order to form the Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG).

The government of General Romeo Lucas proved incapable of halting guerrilla activity. When his hand-picked successor staged an improbable electoral "victory" in the election of March 1982, opposition among the Guatemalan elite coalesced. The fray was settled by a coup d'état that placed General José Efraín Ríos Montt in the presidency. He unleashed an unprecedented reign of terror aimed at eliminating the guerrillas and their supporters. During his brief tenure in office, an estimated five to ten thousand peasants and rural laborers were killed, and thirty thousand were driven into exile in southern Mexico. Many more were uprooted.

A number of recent books recount the cost of the attempted suppression of the guerrilla movement, some in grisly detail.<sup>7</sup> *Guatemala: Tyranny on Trial* presents testimony from persecuted Guatemalans at a three-day forum held in Madrid. It was edited by Susanne Jonas, Ed McCaughan, and Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez. Rafael Mondragón's iconoclastic book, *De indios y cristianos en Guatemala*, is woven around lengthy excerpts from guerrilla communiqués (which unfortunately are not adequately cited). Jacobo Vargas Foronda's *Guatemala: sus recursos naturales, el militarismo y el imperialismo* draws on a rich store of information from the Mexican media. *Guatemala in Rebellion: Unfinished History* is a collage edited by Jonathan Fried, Marvin Gettleman, Deborah Levenson, and Nancy Peckenhams. The book offers fifty-four short and readable chapters edited from diatribes, eyewitness reports, policy statements, interviews, and scholarly essays. The best book on the country's "dirty war," however, is George Black's *Garrison Guatemala*. Black and his assistants make no effort at withholding their personal convictions, but their informative account is well documented and well written.

Despite the sustained, sanguinary counterinsurgency campaigns, the core structures of the four guerrilla organizations survived. They retrenched into impregnable strongholds afforded by the geography. After a period of regrouping, they began a new campaign of harrasing the army. The ones who did not survive the army's onslaught in 1982 were the rural poor who got caught between the guerrillas and the army.

While the guerrillas and the army struggle, the country's rural poor—especially the indigenous population—suffer. The dispossessed are courted by the guerrillas, but the guerrillas cannot protect them

from the army's counterattacks. The army cannot catch the guerrillas and resorts to savagely taking "the sea away from the fish." Each side can wreak havoc, but neither side can decisively defeat the other.

The existing regime has already shown what it has to offer Guatemalans. Just what the guerrillas would do if they triumph someday is unclear. The phraseology and iconography of the guerrillas is Marxist-Leninist. For example, the flag of the EGP is described as follows: "The red color of our flag represents proletarian revolution. . . . The image of Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara symbolizes the political-military character and the revolutionary internationalism of our organization. . . . The two large stars symbolize the alliance between workers and peasants, the class basis of the Guatemalan revolution."<sup>8</sup> Guerrilla columns bear such names as Ho Chi Minh, Augusto César Sandino, and Ernesto Guevara. But nothing in the guerrillas' propaganda suggests specifically how they would resolve Guatemala's pressing problems.<sup>9</sup>

The experience of neighboring Nicaragua suggests that no facile solutions exist. The Nicaraguan regime's conflicts with the country's Miskito, Sumo, and Rama Indians suggest the inherent tension between the ambitious plans of a postrevolutionary regime and the conservative nature of indigenous groups. How would this tension be resolved in Guatemala? A second point of tension that can be anticipated is between the complete reliance of small countries on foreign exchange generation and the existing structure and control of the economy. An added complication is the geographic division between productive land (in the lowlands) and the location of the poor indigenous population (in the highlands). A third and obvious area of tension would be relations with the United States.

Guatemala's recent elections, with the victory of Vinicio Cerezo and his Christian Democrat party, may bring a lull in fighting between the army and the guerrillas. But can it be more than a lull?

#### NOTES

1. For a rather feeble exception, see Jorge E. Torres Ocampo, *Reflexión, análisis, crítica y autocrítica de la situación política de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Unión Tipográfica, 1980).
2. For a succinct overview of the Guatemalan economy and the agro-export sector in particular, see Inforpress, *Centro América 1983* (Guatemala: Inforpress, 1983), 1-20; Inforpress, *Centro América, 1984-1986* (Guatemala: Inforpress, 1984), 17-26.
3. Figures are from Black's *Garrison Guatemala*, 3-4.
4. See Douglas J. Uzzell, "Mixed Strategies and the Informal Sector: Three Faces of Reserve Labor," *Human Organization* 39 (Spring 1980):40-49.
5. Don R. Hoy and Francis J. Belisle, "Environmental Protection and Economic Development in Guatemala's Western Highlands," *The Journal of Developing Areas* 18 (Jan. 1984):161-76.
6. This organization was based in the eastern lowlands in the department of Izabal.
7. In addition to the books listed here, see Gabriel Aguilera Peralta and Jorge Romero

- Imery, *Dialéctica del terror en Guatemala* (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1981); and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso Editions, 1984). The latter was first published as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Barcelona: Editorial Argos Vergara, 1983).
8. Solidarity Publications, *Articles from Compañero* (San Francisco: Popular Press, 1982), 33.
  9. See the newsletter published by the EGP, *Compañero*, and that of a solidarity group in Mexico, *Noticias de Guatemala*.