

LAND STRUCTURE, RURAL POVERTY AND RURAL OUT-MIGRATION: AN INQUIRY

GUATEMALA. Edited by SUSANNE JONAS and DAVID TOBIS. (Berkeley, Calif.: North American Congress on Latin America, 1974. Pp. 264. \$5.00)

LAND CONCENTRATION AND RURAL POVERTY. By KEITH GRIFFIN. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1976. Pp. 296. \$24.00.)

LAND TENURE AND THE RURAL EXODUS IN CHILE, COLOMBIA, COSTA RICA, AND PERU. By R. PAUL SHAW. (Gainesville, Fla.: University Presses of Florida, 1976. Pp. 180. \$11.50.)

In recent decades masses of the rural population in many countries of Latin America have been permanently abandoning the countryside and settling in urban centers at an alarming rate. This rural exodus toward the large cities is not unique to Latin America. It appears to occur with equal intensity and with similar consequences in most underdeveloped countries where it has become a cause of growing concern for government.

The reasons for such large-scale transfer of population from rural to urban areas in Latin America are not especially difficult to identify. The concentration of land ownership and the population growth rates for the region are among the highest in the world. The mechanization of commercial agriculture and the shortage of new arable land have put severe pressure on rural employment opportunities. As a result, the number of landless agricultural workers is increasing in most countries, while the wage levels for those who do succeed in finding work have been correspondingly depressed. The powerful attraction exerted by the large cities on the rural population has been well documented in a number of studies, among which is a recent work by Wayne Cornelius.¹ Although Cornelius's study is primarily concerned with the political socialization of migrants in the squatter settlements that have arisen in Mexico's largest cities, he is also interested in examining why they migrate. His field research in Mexico City clearly indicates that "in the vast majority of cases, economic factors were the most important determinants of the decision to migrate" (p. 21). Greater employment opportunities and higher wages are overwhelmingly perceived by the rural poor as the most attractive aspects of residence in the city. Moreover, continued improvements in communication and secondary transportation systems have made it possible for the subsistence farmer or landless agricultural worker to become increasingly aware of the great disparities between urban and rural wage levels and living conditions in general.

A major stimulus to the formal study of agrarian and land tenure problems in Latin America was the Alliance for Progress. Since the demise of the Alliance in the late 1960s, most countries have continued to draw up plans that focus on the complex needs of the rural population and its environment with a

view to formulating a strategy for halting massive emigration. The alarming rate of rural out-migration has forced some governments to seek the means of ensuring that the rural population remains in farming areas and produces the supplies needed by the mushrooming urban centers. Unfortunately, most of these programs have not yet gone beyond the preliminary stage or have remained mere statements of purpose. Moreover, there is no intrinsic guarantee that land reform or agrarian reform will necessarily improve the living conditions of rural labor or assure better long-term prospects for the agricultural economy.

A number of scholars have attempted to assess the economic costs and benefits of internal migration, while others have focused on the possible political repercussions of rapid urbanization in the less developed world. As a contributing factor (or response?) to unbalanced economic development, some have concluded that there are no sound reasons why rural out-migration cannot be contained and why more of the rural population cannot be employed in activities connected with agriculture itself. Accordingly, how the variables of land concentration, rural poverty, and out-migration interact has been the inquiry of a growing number of studies in recent years, including two of the three books to be reviewed.

NACLA's study of Guatemala was prepared with a dual purpose in mind: to examine United States imperialism since 1954 within the conceptual framework of dependency theory and to describe the Guatemalan class struggle. As a whole, the book constitutes a substantial analysis of the political economy of Guatemala for those who subscribe to a neo-Marxist viewpoint. However, the multiple authorship of what is basically a collection of research papers resulted in needless repetition that more careful editing could have eliminated. Since the major emphasis is on the external relations of dependence orchestrated by the United States and the internal class struggle, only two of the nineteen articles are pertinent to the present inquiry. The first, authored by Andrea Brown, contains a revealing description of the pattern of rural land ownership in Guatemala based on the 1964 census. At that time, 2.1 percent of landowners owned 62 percent of the arable land, while 87 percent of landowners owned 19 percent of the arable land.² Considering the fact that agriculture is the basis of Guatemala's economy, more attention should have been given to an analysis of the latifundio-minifundio system of agricultural production.

It is assumed by Brown that those who have the land also possess the power to resist any type of change in its distribution. The various colonization programs pursued since 1956 are dismissed as merely a new mechanism for establishing the latifundio-minifundio system in previously uncultivated areas. The implication is clear that land distribution will remain the principal problem in Guatemala. With a rapidly expanding population, the pressure from peasants for land is expected to increase in the face of continued intransigence on the part of Guatemala's ruling class. According to the author, the only solution to the problem will emerge "when a significant mass of the population is sufficiently mobilized and organized to overthrow the system" (p. 22).

The second NACLA article of interest deals essentially with a description of Guatemala's Indian culture, a brief history of the exploitation of Indian labor,

and the aborted, idealistic programs that evolved during the decade following the 1944 revolution. This reviewer saw little evidence of an Indian nationalist movement or an impending class struggle during five years of residence in Guatemala that ended in the early 1960s. Changes have undoubtedly occurred in the ensuing fifteen years. However, even accepting the fact that differences of ideological perception and interpretation do exist, I found little evidence in *Guatemala* to support the general conclusion that the emergence of Indian awareness will make a socialist revolution inevitable.

Keith Griffin's book focuses more clearly on the crucial role of agrarian reform in alleviating poverty among the rural population in countries characterized by a high degree of land concentration. Griffin's work is testimony to the growing realization by developmentalists that growth per se provides no guarantee that the standard of living of the poorer sectors of society will automatically improve. The continued misery of much of mankind has led the author to reassess the alleged "urban bias" of economic policies that have emphasized import-substituting industrialization for policy instruments that can be used to reduce inequality by achieving a redistribution of income. Given that the economies of most underdeveloped countries are largely agrarian, Griffin argues that "a redistribution of landed property is almost certain to be of prime importance in mounting a successful attack on poverty" (p. 10). While a land reform program by itself is not sufficient to eliminate rural poverty, he considers it a *conditio sine qua non* in many countries.

Griffin does not suggest that there exist any "easy" or "painless" solutions to the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. Indeed, the weight of evidence presented recently indicates that in most Latin American countries it will be extremely difficult, at least in the short run, to effect major changes in the national distribution of population and wealth through governmental action.³ This brings me to perhaps the most disappointing aspect of Griffin's book. Although he recognizes in principle the existence of political obstacles to the attempt to implement land reform, he does little to advance our knowledge of how these problems might be overcome. The seven case studies that comprise the book invariably conclude that development strategies should concentrate on increasing output and employment in rural areas through "a vigorously executed land reform." While the economic analyses and prescriptions may be sound, I was disappointed in the author's failure to consider more thoroughly the political impracticality of their implementation.

Latin Americanists will find the chapters on Colombia and Guatemala excessively narrow in their concentration on the coffee sector. In the case of Colombia, Griffin argues for the expropriation and redistribution of large land holdings in the densely populated regions of the country, accompanied by the organization of a large rural public works program. His data suggest that small holdings are cultivated "much more intensively" than the latifundia. Therefore, land reform has the potential to increase employment and agricultural output "very quickly" (p. 150). Griffin prepared his study on Colombia in 1968. By that time I am certain that there already existed ample evidence that the National Front's approach toward agrarian and land reform was more vacillating than "vigorous."

The third Latin American case study is a previously unpublished chapter on the systems of labor control and rural poverty in Ecuador, written in 1974. In addition to a broader historical framework, Griffin's study of Ecuador presents the reader with a more balanced analysis of economic and political considerations that affect the success of governmental agrarian reforms. The remaining case studies, drawn from North Africa and Asia, treat economic factors with varying degrees of thoroughness. It is apparent that each of the essays was prepared for a particular sponsoring agency, among them the FAO, the ILO, and AID. This accounts for the difference in emphasis with which such economic factors as growth, foreign trade, and development are treated, as well as the ten-year time span during which the individual studies were conducted. One suspects that in the case of some of the earlier studies, the author's consideration of land reform as an alleviator of rural poverty might have been less sanguine had he examined his conclusions in the light of more recent data. To cite one example, Colombians of virtually every political persuasion have produced numerous studies attesting to the failure of that country's experimentation with agrarian and tax reform policies over the past fifteen years.

Although examined from a somewhat different perspective, Griffin's case studies provide supportive data for R. Paul Shaw's inquiry into the relationship between land tenure and rural out-migration. Briefly stated, Shaw argues that the latifundio-minifundio complex, combined with high rates of population growth, operates as the primary stimulus to rural out-migration. He is concerned with exploring the question of whether actual income-producing possibilities in rural areas are representative of potential income-producing possibilities, excluding extensive frontier development. In other words, is the widening of income and amenity differentials due to a more rapid rise in urban incomes, or, as Shaw hypothesizes, is it due also to rural income and welfare levels being "held back" to produce situations of inadequate agricultural opportunity?

Shaw develops a "model" that considers agricultural income-producing possibilities, possible situations of economic stress created by rapid population growth, and rural out-migration as a logical reaction to such stress. The system of land tenure is the institutional factor of central importance that contributes to the rapid evolution of situations of economic stress by impeding effective utilization of labor and nonlabor agricultural resources. Those most susceptible to such stress are the minifundio and landless employee class whom Shaw predicts will demonstrate the greatest propensity to migrate to urban areas.

Based on a survey of agricultural studies of land and labor use in Latin America drawn largely from the 1960s, Shaw concludes that income-generating possibilities for a large proportion of the rural agricultural labor force are rather dismal. He then hypothesizes that motivation to migrate will be initiated by the appearance or aggravation of noxious conditions in the rural sector. Once migration is considered, information on income and amenity differentials is expected to be actively sought as part of the decision whether or not to actually migrate. In his view, rural "pushes" may operate both directly and indirectly in creating motivation to migrate, whereas urban "pulls" may operate largely as "conditioners" of decisions on where to migrate (p. 52).

Not surprisingly, the implications of Shaw's analyses indicate that an uneven distribution of labor to land resources in combination with relatively high rates of population growth is an important influence in rural migration. The strongest support for this is found in the data for Chile and Peru where, of all factors considered, only those relating to the interaction of the two principal variables accounted for a sizable proportion of the variation in the migration measures. Of greater interest to this reader, Shaw found that high proportions of land held by latifundistas are more significantly related to rates of out-migration than proportions of the rural population centralized on minifundios. The implications of his cross-sectional analysis are that reducing the proportion of farms that are minifundios will be moderately associated with lower rates of rural out-migration, whereas a reduction in the proportion of land held by latifundistas will be highly associated with lower rates of rural out-migration. He also found that the more uneven the distribution of land to labor resources, the more this characteristic alone accounts for variations in the incidence of rural out-migration.

By focusing on "underruralization" with respect to the inefficient use of potentially productive agricultural resources, Shaw intentionally omits the important issue of whether rural-urban migration has actually been detrimental to the development of urban economies in Latin America over the last several decades. His analysis proceeds on the assumption that the rapid flow of rural out-migration represents an increasing burden in such areas as the demand for urban employment, housing, education, and other social services.

Shaw's final chapter is concerned with policy considerations for influencing the pace of rural-urban population redistribution in Latin America. He agrees that no government dominated by large landowners is likely to introduce a reform that will effectively deprive that class of the economic and social basis of its power. Nevertheless, he does not believe that the preceding viewpoint can be generalized to Latin America as a whole. He cites the fact that almost all governments have agrarian reform laws on the books and conveys his impression—unsupported by data—that redistribution of land in recent years has been rapid. Perhaps the most ingenuous statement presented in support of his position is that "the majority of Latin American countries endorse the United Nations General Assembly resolutions on agrarian reform" (p. 128)! Have we forgotten so quickly the lessons of the Alliance for Progress and the "articles of faith" contained in its Charter?

To his credit, Shaw is most candid in recognizing that his study is basically exploratory. More historically oriented students like myself will find that the author's attempt to elaborate a "theoretical model" occupies a disproportionate amount of his attention, especially in view of the inconclusive nature of the results. However, sufficient narrative and thought-provoking hypotheses are provided to justify his claim that the book addresses policy and planning issues of critical importance in present-day Latin America.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, the excellent studies by Jorge Balan, Harley L. Browning, and Elizabeth Jelin, *Men in a Developing Society: Geographic and Social Mobility in Monterrey, Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), and Wayne A. Cornelius, *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975).
2. The percentages are quoted from Lehman B. Fletcher, et al., *Guatemala's Economic Development: The Role of Agriculture* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1970), p. 59.
3. This view is expressed in Wayne Cornelius's Introduction to *Urbanization and Inequality: The Political Economy of Urban and Rural Development in Latin America*, Wayne A. Cornelius and Felicity M. Trueblood, editors (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1976). Cornelius concludes that in view of the powerful forces promoting concentration and centralization in the development process, "governments must intervene massively in this process in such a way as to alter the deeply-rooted propensity of individuals and business enterprises to locate within the largest urban centers" (p. 21). The capacity to achieve such relocation of investment presumes a sophisticated level of economic analysis and planning, administrative coordination, and a measure of political support that most Latin American governments have found difficult to develop and sustain.