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Notes on Guatemala

Hotel Bolivar  
Lima  
Peru  
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Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

When I left the United States last year, someone remarked that whatever else might be lacking in the countries I was to visit nature would never fail to provide some spectacle. Guatemala, when I arrived there last month on a short survey trip, more than lived up to this belief. One of the first things I was shown was an aerial photograph of that country's volcanoes, which revealed a series of wonderfully symmetrical cones stretching from Guatemala City to the Mexican border. Within the volcano masses were darker blotches of color: the many lakes caught within the mountains' embrace. This photo, however, done in black and white, hardly prepared me for the often breathtaking beauty of the highlands and their colorful indian populations.

If there is one characteristic of these highlands which distinguishes them from the Andes of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, it is the forests - thick masses of evergreen trees carelessly displayed over the hillsides and plains. They are a much more comfortable sight to the eye than the naked slopes of the greater part of the Andean highlands, and, as a person with whom I was traveling said, "Life seems more possible here than in Bolivia."

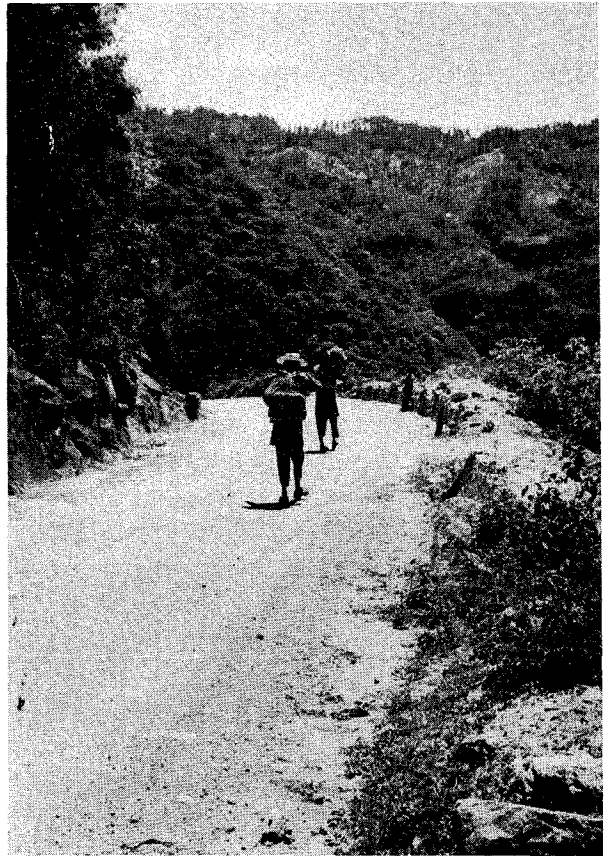


View of Lake  
Atitlán.

Surprising too were the large lakes of Amatitlán and Atitlán, particularly the latter, a mingling of

deep green and blue waters resting against the bases of several placid looking volcanoes. They complement the landscape well, and cause many visitors to compare Guatemala to Switzerland. (A comparison which has larger implications for many Guatemalans, who foresee an era in which their country will occupy a position in industry and agriculture in Central America which is similar to that of Switzerland in Europe.) It is no wonder that the lakes have become resorts nor that they are standard items on the tourist itinerary.

But if the natural background is eye-catching, the indian of the countryside is apt to surpass his setting in almost every instance. The features of these indians and their complexions do not differ radically from what is seen in the Andes, but their costumes, which vary from region to region, are stylistically and in color vastly more intriguing. In the three Andean countries, the costume of the indian tends to be standardized from one to the other, and even where distinct styles are maintained (as in Vicos Hacienda in Peru, or among the Otavales and Salasacas in Ecuador) they run to monochromatic whites or blacks, picked out with bits of color.



Countryside, north of Lake Atitlán.

Guatemala by contrast is a kaleidoscope of color. Red, blue and blue-green are used as the main grounds for designs compounded of red, black, blue, purple, yellow, white and green. These designs may be plaids, bold applications of stripes, zigzags, or animal and bird decorations. Their cut varies considerably also, and men's trousers may come in shorts, kneelength tights or long flaring pants. These costumes, bewildering in their variety, take a long time to know, but I am told that eventually a person can identify with certainty the region, and sometimes the town, from which an indian comes by his dress.

These indians differ in other respects from their counterparts in the Andes. Through the years of the Colony and the Republic, they

have retained to a far greater degree customs originating in pre-Spanish times, although these have been altered and added to from the European contact as one might expect. In the area of religious practice especially there are many instances cited of costumbres (religious acts or prayers) which have no demonstrable source in the Old World.

There are local indian religious and political structures which function as indigenously inspired and maintained organizations. Although their sources may be in Spain, their current use is primarily indian. There is, for example, the cofradía, a mandatory fraternal organization for indian males which has as its patron and charge some saint in the Catholic hierarchy. The members of a cofradía undertake a yearly cycle of religious activities connected with this saint which stand apart from normal Catholic ritual. Although patterned after the Spanish cofradía, in Guatemala the organization has been given a unique flavor by the indian, and, some suspect, invested with pre-Conquest meanings and rituals.

But if the Guatemalan indian displays more elaborate indigenous trappings than his Andean counterpart, in the main he is part of a life and economy separated from those of the urban centers which closely resembles the Andean situation. The basis of his life is agriculture, although, much after the fashion of the Otavalo in Ecuador, this may be overlaid with artisanship in which he produces a product saleable in local markets. Village and regional specialization has been remarked upon in Guatemala many times, and this seems to provide for a greater mobility among the indian who then travels from market to market disposing of his goods and buying others than in the Andes. This movement of sellers and buyers, however, makes up a network which is wound about and superimposed upon the cities. It is the result of indigenous efforts and only mildly influenced by the non-indian way of life which surrounds it.

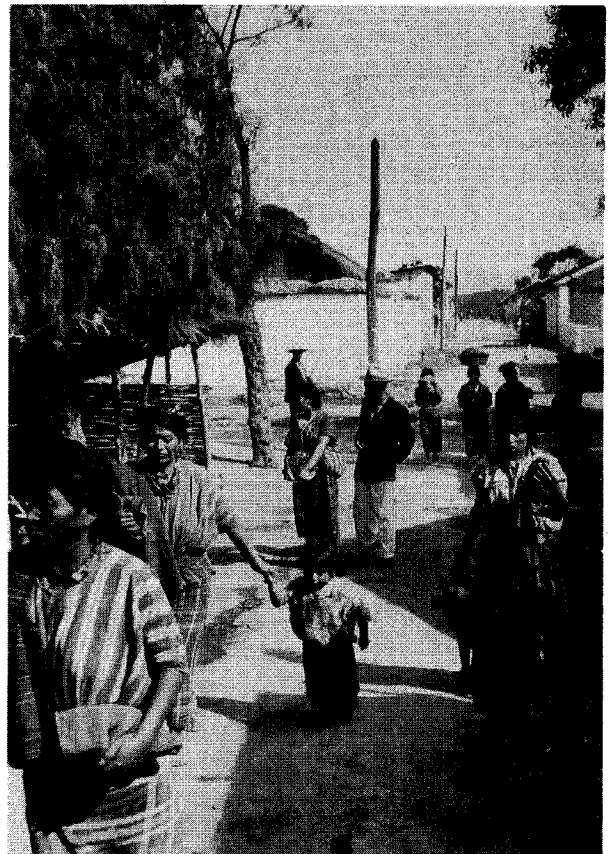
The nation's capital, Guatemala City, reflects this split between two behavioral patterns and two economies. It is the commercial center of the country (but mainly of activities directed toward the economics of a world rather than a local market), which dresses itself in imitation of urban capitals elsewhere. Emphasis is on western style clothing, a western pattern of consumption and a western set of values and attitudes. Here, as in Lima, the indian is essentially a transient, moving like a tourist through the paved streets and among the shining cars, motorcycles and bicycles. It can be said that the capital, and all citizens who live according to its terms, looks beyond the country for its satisfactions whereas the indian populations look inward.

The two sets of value systems and economic patterns still exist side by side (or, better said, intermingled) as they have for

many years. Under the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz (who was overthrown in 1954) there were enacted various measures which were pointed in the direction of integrating the two - as well as correcting what some people felt was an unfair distribution of land and wealth in the country.

The Agrarian Census of 1950 showed that 70% of the cultivable land in the nation was owned by 2% of the population, 20% was in the hands of 22%, and only 10% was the property of the rest of the people. The "rest" were mainly indians. The Arbenz government passed an agrarian reform law in 1952 which permitted the expropriation and redistribution of nationally and privately owned lands. By October, 1953, 7,00,000 acres of State land had been redistributed, and 500,000 acres of private lands expropriated. (In this process, the United Fruit Company was one of the heaviest losers to the total of some 234,000 acres.)

Under Arbenz' successor, Colonel Castillo Armas, this law was suspended, and a study undertaken by a U.S. firm of consultants as to what measures to take. Their recommendations resulted in a modified agrarian law, containing one particularly important provision: a progressive tax, amounting to 25% of assessed value at the end of five years, is applicable to unused agricultural lands. It is hoped that this tax

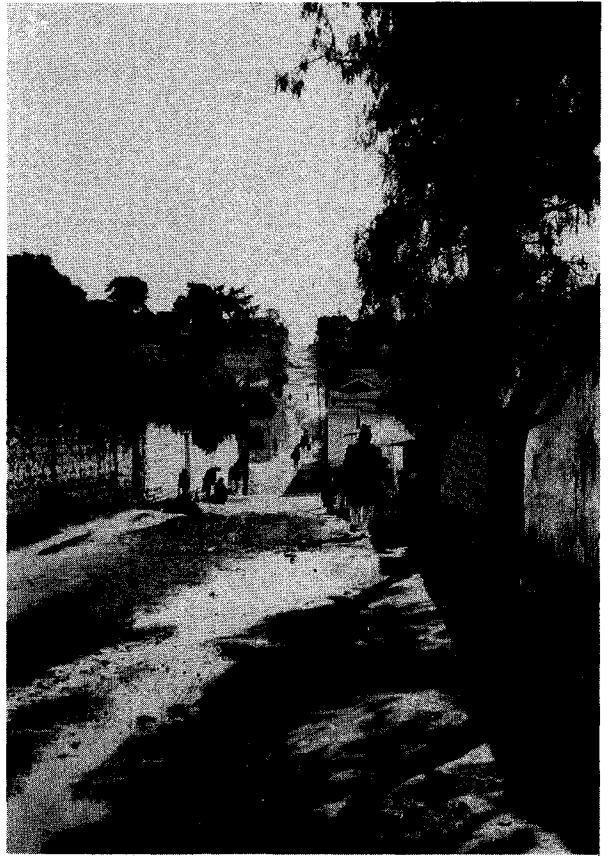


Saturday morning in Patzún.

will force owners to put all their land into production.

The Castillo Armas regime seems aware of a need to move slowly in the direction of land reform, and, as one official told me, there is nothing else to do - traditional patterns simply cannot be disrupted overnight. Nearly every day the government has to face the kind of problem implied by this statement, such as one incident which took place while I was in Guatemala.

A group of indians who had received lands under Arbenz were in turn dispossessed by the former owners. The indians would not leave the area, however, not believing that the law would desert them. This year they found themselves still denied access to the land and they met to decide upon action. On the instigation of the landowners according to one of the local newspapers, although this remains to be proven, they were arrested and sent to Guatemala City on charges of "Communist activity." They were later released, but the event points up the complexity of the problem of change especially in the area of making innovations stick.



Village street.

It also illustrates a theme which, under Castillo Armas, is basic in the political situation: the campaign against Communism. The country is covered with posters and billboards saying that Communism is bad, destructive and to be avoided, and that the present government fulfills its promises. There is no concealment of this activity, no pedaling down of the government's major worry - a resurgence of Communist power in another Arbenz regime. When Castillo Armas visited Cobán, the capital of the rich coffee producing Department of Alta Vera Paz, the Governor and other officials who feted him took as the theme of their speeches the Communist "threat" and exhorted the people to fight it vigorously.

The day following this event, I met the president, a soft spoken man with an air of quiet competence. He appeared to be well informed on the country's problems and on local needs and desires, and was curious to an embarrassing degree in his continual asking for infor-

mation and ideas. I felt sorry for his associates who must have a hard time keeping him satisfied in this respect. He did not impress me as a person who would rush into anything without a great deal of prior deliberation.

If this last is true, it is probably all for the good of Guatemala, where the government has no easy road to travel. The population of roughly 3,000,000 is over half indian, with that segment speaking only one of several indian languages and almost entirely illiterate. Illiteracy is found in considerable quantity among the non-indians as well. The nation's economy suffers from that type of schizophrenia which is current in the Andean countries. The indian agriculturalist and artisan produces for local markets; the large landowners and industrialists are interested in products for world markets (coffee, bananas, sugar, chicle, essential oils and some mining of sulphur, gold, lead, zinc, silver, chromite, manganese and mica). The agricultural system is antiquated in much of the country, and urgently needs modernization and some program aimed at a more efficient exploitation of land resources (which might have to entail changes in present ownership of property). Underlying these problems is that of an aggressive Communist party, bent on what often smacks of naive overnight reform, and which continues its agitation although outlawed.

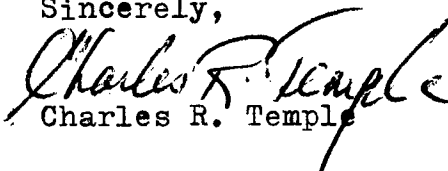
Still many of the Guatemalans I met were not afraid to speak on these problems, and often treated them with a refreshing optimism. There was a general satisfaction that a moderate minded president was in power after what seemed to many people the excesses of the Arbenz tenure. The feeling was that the country's difficulties could be solved one by one. There was little talk of the indian as the mandatory repository of the nation's future (as is so often the case in the Andes): the indian has a place, but no greater nor lesser than any other citizen in the nation.

This attitude may be colored by a belief held by many that Guatemala is part of a larger whole - a federation of Central American republics. During the nineteenth century this federation was an official reality, although it was soon broken up by civil wars and shifting and confused regional desires. Nonetheless, the present Constitution of Guatemala specifically states that one of the concerns of the government is to aid and abet the formation of a new federation. Feeling this, the Guatemalan may be able to look at the unassimilated indian populations as a major problem for the nation but a minor problem within the larger frame of a confederation of states.

All in all, I carried away from Guatemala a bundle of impressions which spell out a different climate of opinion than I found in Bolivia,

Peru and Ecuador, with regard to the indian and his assimilation into the national life. Opinion in general seemed less subject to the rampant enthusiasm of Bolivia, the nagging fear of Peru or the disinterest of Ecuador. At the moment it is neither "conservative" nor "radical." Nor did it take its main inspiration from a belief that the indian has to be compensated for four hundred years of exploitation at everyone else's expense - an idea all too popular in reform talk in Andean countries. The comments of the people I met suggest that a more balanced approach to the indian has taken the public's fancy.

Sincerely,

  
Charles R. Temple

Received New York 6/21/56.