

MDD-2

The Complicated Question of the Land.

March 12, 1964.

Bogotá.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
 Institute of Current World Affairs,
 366, Madison Avenue,
 New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr Nolte,

First, some quotations:

'...In order to carry into action a radical land reform it would require the work of a standing army of three hundred thousand surveyors no less than fifteen years; but during that time the number of homesteads would increase..., and consequently all these preliminary calculations by the time they were made would prove invalid. To introduce a land reform thus seemed in the eyes of these landlords, officials, and bankers something like squaring the circle. It is hardly necessary to say that a like mathematical scrupulousness was completely alien to the peasant. He thought that first of all the thing to do was to smoke out the landlord, and then see'

Leon Trotsky: History of the Russian Revolution.

'...The question in all agrarian transformations is "who will force who". Here with this present law, it is not the campesinos who will be able to force the landlords, but rather it is the landlords who will force the campesinos to buy their uncultivated lands, valued far above their worth, at prices far beyond the reach of most of the people in the countryside, who are hardly within the monetary economy at all. Those that can buy will be our 'kulaks'.

Diego Montaña Cuellar, Colombian Communist.

'...But it is not only a matter of productivity. There is also the social aspect. I do not think that from this point of view an economic system characterized by the predominance of wage-labour in the countryside can be considered satisfactory. Rather than a land of peons, Colombia must be a land of proprietors...The possibility of possessing a homestead of one's own, and security... The stability and the liberty that belongs to those who own the land they work... these are things that we should not forget. In a land of large agricultural enterprises worked by wage-labour the conflict of interests between the proprietor and the workers gets worse and worse.'

Carlos Lleras Restrepo, Reporter of Colombia's
 Agrarian Reform Law.

'...una reforma para los buenos - a reform for the good ones'

Frequent comment of supporters and opponents.

'...It is not my intention here to go into details. I limit myself to insisting on the fundamental importance of a structural reform.

...From the economic point of view, the essential problem of Colombian

agriculture is the narrowness and fragmentation of the market.'

G.Perez R. : El Campesinado Colombiano.
(Quotations both taken from the same page)

'...The peasant has very good reasons for being conservative. '
Orlando Fals Borda.

'...A reform such as Gladstone proposed for Ireland.'
General Rafael Uribe Uribe, 1904.

I hope these quotations will have induced in you some of the light-headed confusion and heavy-hearted concern that comes from the study of any Land Reform. It is a complicated question.

It is complicated first because it is a question of present politics and of distant social justice, of immediate economic possibilities and of ultimate economic necessities. Every expert has his say.

And then again it is complicated because they all speak at once, and because every 'learned agronomer', economist, sociologist, soil scientist and forester is convinced that he alone holds the key, and that his problem is the most urgent of them all.

The result is Babel. Voices proclaim what is diplomatically necessary, what is politically necessary, what is politically possible, what is, for politicians, desirable if possible - and all these have their nuances. There is a plethora of regional descriptions and predictions; there are estimates of present production, estimates of what is possible with improved transportation and no other change, and of what is possible with all combinations of possibilities. There are fundamentals and fundamentals; G. Perez R., whom I have quoted above, manages to get two into the same page. It is possible to discern any number, but it is also better to keep them further apart. Most fundamental-seeming of all, the foresters brood above this chaos with their sad assertion that every year so many good hectares are washed away for ever.

Some schema must be found to bring order into this. At present, if anything is done, few people know quite why, and success and failure are confused. For the economically unsound may be politically necessary, the economically desirable politically impossible. The measures to be used are not only the number of hectares expropriated, distributed, and colonized, but what happens to votes, influences, and reputations, and in this country to lives. It will be best to take one point-of-view at a time. This is repetitious, but the repetitions do form a pattern. In a nation consumed by politics, it is logical to begin with politics.

The *raison d'être* of the Frente Nacional is far from being revolutionary. It was formed to end a period of comparatively mild Peronista experiment conducted by General Rojas Pinilla, an experiment that had found its opportunity in the temporarily irreconcilable antagonisms of the traditional parties. At its inception, it promised nothing more than pacification and sobriety - I do not mean to imply that this was a small promise - sobriety among the parties and peace in the country, sobriety in government and a sort of peace between the parties. The Frente Nacional was not, and is not, faced with anything that can be described with simple lyricism as 'a freshening wind blowing from the countryside'.

The countryside was in places violent, and in places had been 'revolutionary'; there had been land-grabs: 'peasants had seized the land by force'. But by the end of the fifties the violent areas were more demoralized than revolutionary, and even those that had once been so had the stale characteristics of any ill-led peasant movement that has gone on too long. There had been more Liberal revolutionaries than social revolutionaries - 'against the millionaire Ospina', rather than against all millionaires. Peasants had seized land from peasants; there was no wide spontaneous move against large estates. Bandits took harvests and left the land, looted fincas and left them empty. Authentic 'Tierra y Libertad' leaders were few, and fewer and degenerate after ten years fighting. The pathetic 'Give me land that I may be at peace' utterances of some of them represent the aspirations of tired men: they must not be taken to be the national motive for revolt. There was a relation between the varieties of land tenure and the varieties of violence, but it remains true that peace was not abandoned for lack of land.

Thus when the Frente Nacional was formed the peasants of Colombia were confused, leaderless, in some departments totally demoralized. A land reform might be therapeutic, but it was not, politically, the most urgent necessity: the pressure from below was weak - bad weather is not always a freshening wind.

Such a reform was indeed politically dangerous. The Frente Nacional is an agreement among Colombian gentlemen to keep politics within peaceful and civilian bounds. For some of these gentlemen to use this forum to preach redistribution of the land, nowhere mentioned in the agreement, might they not seem to be taking a demagogic liberty with the very symbol of stability? Might it not seem merely the first attempt of the Liberals, whose initiative it was, to make the Frente Nacional their own, following the pattern in which so many previous Frentes and Unions had become party governments, to exclude Conservatives at the cost only of Conservative lands?

There were good counters to these alarms: the constitution of the Frente Nacional itself would prevent the victimization of any one political group - at least, of any political group of importance; moreover, a modicum of land reform would cover the nakedness of the oligarchic pact; it had become a diplomatic necessity. It was therefore meet that some should be expropriated for the good of class, peace, and country. And besides, there was, in the longer term, the 'wager on the strong': Carlos Lleras made this clear enough, and there existed the precedent for such

dubious political sociology in a delightful emergency reform passed in the month after the Bogotá riot of 1948: 'The lowest agricultural class will have new parcels in lands of public domain; the agricultural middle class lands already cleared, taking into consideration the environment in which its members have operated...and the urban middle-class will have lands near the large urban districts, where family gardens will be organized'. The political desirability of a multiplication of what are called in the Law 'Unidades Familiares', a dream from the unmechanized days of Aristotle and Rousseau, neither of them a farmer, is the most unrealistic part of the thinking behind the Law: it would be better replaced with some study of what such farms are like, perhaps of some of the troubles of General de Gaulle. But 'Je ne m'intéresse pas aux légumes' is true not only of him; here the pastoral vision prevails, and it is an immediate help to those who support the Law.

The reform proposed and enacted was therefore not so bad. The 'doctrinaire' Conservative criticism that it opened the way to 'a traffic of influences such as the country has never seen' - the expropriation clauses are very vague - hardly served to make it more unpopular, and Carlos Lleras did his utmost to show that the compensation prices proposed were much better than those in Mexico, Bolivia, Venezuela, and anywhere else where prices had a remote chance of being paid. Hence a small reform, emphasizing colonization of new lands; when it came to expropriation, the touchstone of any reform, cheap for the reformers and expensive for the beneficiaries.

But there are grounds for supporting such a reform beyond the present internal need for peace à outrance in the Frente Nacional. Every agrarian reform in South America has had as its first apparent result a drop in production and an increase in food prices in the cities. A revolutionary has resources in morale and in force to cope with this. A conservative government, bent on general pacification, succeeding a Peronista general who was generous to the city poor, has not. Here any sensible politician prefers to keep his troubles at a distance. The present agricultural structure favours the city consumer; competition between producers, between peasant and peasant and between peasant and more or less mechanized farmer, is often intense; high prices are a result not so much of low productivity but of bad marketing and expensive transportation, - profits on food are not high for the producer. Food is expensive enough without a reform to increase its price, as any rapid reform would. In a country that in the last fifteen years has suffered from more continuous disorder than any other in Latin America, and disorder not directly related to the land, such would not be justifiable. It is all the less justifiable in that rapid land settlements in restricted areas, and Colombia has no real 'frontier', are always bad and an affliction for future generations.

There is no universal 'optimum rate'; those liberal Americans who complain of sloth should remember speed: the Mexico of 1910-20, or more pertinently, the Mexico of Cardenas. Whatever justification those periods have in terms of national morale - great indeed, but there is no Colombian Zapata and no Colombian Cardenas - they have much less in terms

of agricultural economics. This may seem callous: 'The Colombian campesino has lived his own way for centuries and can carry on for a few years more'. There is more truth, and in some ways more generosity, in such an attitude than all those conscientious statistics about the lack of lavatories in rural areas admit, but my point here is that it is more callous to give the peasant a little more land quickly now, which is nothing more than a false hope and cold comfort, to satisfy an ill-informed social conscience. The political achievements, to date, of the Frente Nacional are to be valued in themselves. An attempt to be more vigorous in the country, with all the inevitable mistakes of rapidity, might have vitiated them too.

As it is, Colombia now has a law with which all things are possible. This has been the most frequent criticism of the law, but its real weaknesses lie elsewhere, in the weakness of any law at the mercy of the courts of this nation of lawyers, and, more particularly, in the lack of any provisions for improving marketing - the second fundamental of G. Perez R. - beyond the revamping of an existing toothless organization, that has been in the past one of the most ineffective of Colombia's many ineffective institutes. Nevertheless, it remains a law that can be used more and more widely, when politics allow.

How does this small hope compare with what, in the opinions of the myriad of experts, must be done?

Works on Colombian agriculture usually contain a 'normative section'. This describes the distribution of the rural population and the structure of land-holding; briefly thus: in the hills, too many peasants, isolated from each other and from all other sophisticating influences, working fragmented holdings too small for anything much more than subsistence, sometimes too small for that, using antiquated methods - though these have time and time again proved to best in the circumstances - far from the advice of the national and Rockefeller researchers, of all experts. (Note that it is possible for these to do the country a service and the peasant a dis-service at the same time.) In the valleys, larger holdings often half-worked, often using the best locally-available arable land for lazy extensive grazing, paying to few workers wages lower than the minimum allowed by the law. The owners -- indeed, they only seem interested in making enough to live comfortably from their land with the least possible effort. 'Normatively', this sensible ambition, for centuries that of landowners everywhere, will not do.

Hence the simplest, simpliste solution: 'smoke out the landlord', bring the campesino down from the hills.

But this would, in its simple form, be a great disaster. Social justice for the peasant, as opposed to a vague 'historical revenge', is not to be found in the countryside. There are too many of them. There would not be enough land for anything more than to make the 'minifundio' the universal holding of Colombia. 'Colombia must be a land of proprietors' - Carlos Lleras does not mean what he says; he means that Colombia must be a land

of some proprietors, more workers and no peons. If the 'unidades familiares' that the law proposes to create are to be of an economical size, and the law insists that they are to be, though the sizes it hints at are rather too small, then they represent a hope for a small number only of the Colombian peasantry - justice for a few, for a few richer ones, for 'unos pocos buenos'.

The second objection to the simple 'normative' solution is that the picture it gives of the situation in the valleys is too simple. Of course there are idle absentees and agricultural pluralists, 'living with as little effort as possible', but both in terms of land and numbers they are fewer in Colombia than they were, and fewer than in most parts of South America. Colombians claim, I do not know how justly, that the distribution of the land, looked at by itself, is more just than it is in many parts of Europe. And what exactly constitutes an absentee? The Colombian rich do not very often live on their farms, but their surveillance is stricter than the old Mexican once-a-year visit for a fiesta and a photograph among the peons. According to Orlando Fals Borda, the most detailed and exact commentator, more of the rich are taking to farming in earnest. There is probably a scarcity of good tenants, and this does not mean, in the disdainful words of Arthur Young about Frenchmen similarly criticized, 'that they read agricultural journals and have metayers around their country seats'. It may be because the time of very high coffee prices is past, and one working finca is no longer enough; it is certainly not because they feel threatened - that always has the opposite effect; these facts remain: it is possible to run several estates efficiently without living on them all, all the time; large landowners do buy tractors and heed advice - they are the main beneficiaries of the research stations. Theirs is the capital, and theirs the ability to learn. The peasant of the hills is not going to jump suddenly into such a state of technical advance, to fulfill the expectations of distant philanthropists. To give him these lands would mean, as I have explained above and again here, first higher prices in the cities and then a system of compulsory, coerced agriculture for the 'beneficiaries' in the country, most un-campesino, costly and inefficient.

The third fault in the simple answer is that in many districts there is no land to be taken at all. The answer then is held to be colonization, and it is in this politically less controversial direction that the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform has done most; in hectares, colonies have been more important than expropriations. This letter is mostly objections, and there are more to be made here. Colonies are expensive; they must be put on their feet; above all they need roads and markets. They can all too easily become awkward matters of pride and prestige. These tensions can be a good thing, but in a country where the rest of the transport and communications are so bad, and where resources for construction are limited, it is hardly fair to concentrate too much on new areas at the expense of the old. And not everybody will want to go, and those who do will find themselves, in one very important respect, in the same boat as those who do not.

To invert Carlos Lleras, there is not only the social aspect, there is the matter of productivity to be considered. The simple statements that 'Colombia does not produce enough to feed herself properly' and 'too much good arable is used for cattle' taken together do lead to the same all-too-obvious conclusion as is found in the 'normative sections'. But the truth is that it is not primarily irrational land-use that is at the root of this: with no change in structure, and with no change in methods, Colombia could do very much better. Colombia cannot distribute: transport is inadequate and expensive, designed for exporters. The result is a whole lot of virtually separate regional markets, regional gluts, regional scarcities, temporary scarcities, temporary gluts, high prices in the towns, much speculation, low profits for most growers. Merely to increase the competition among them by creating more arable 'unidades familiares' will not overcome this. Even if, by disciplining these in ways the present Law does not provide for - co-operatives are not compulsory - a drop in production could be avoided, the only sure beneficiary would be the townsman. The official analysis of the problem of productivity, as it appears in the Law, is wrong.

The assertion of the sad few foresters remains: every year so many thousand hectares washed away for ever, because the slopes are farmed when they should not be. 'The fools, they are burning the hills' - the country has been smoking for weeks. Peasant methods are often as careful as can be, but it is still true that much land is worked that will erode if it is worked at all. For the forester it is logical to expropriate the campesino of the hills. There is much to be said for a land reform in reverse: buy the peasant out and make large arable farming financially attractive - at present the peasants can produce from habit at something very like a loss; in some crops, their massive, self-denying competition is unbeatable. The difficulty of such an hypothetical reform is that the campesino's attitude to his land is often as un-functional as that of the absentee hacendado: if to him land means ease, prestige, 'the undisturbed control of the neighbourhood', to the peasant it means money in a way more direct than the gain of what it produces. To the peasant land is a bank: as to the hacendado, the best security. Not all is kept in production in the hills. And it goes un-noticed too that the extreme division of a single person's lands is not only the result of the prevailing system of inheritance, but also makes possible a very sophisticated variegated agriculture: the farmer can grow a wider variety of crops, ready to sell at different times. Thus the removal of the peasants from the hills, where expert opinion says he should not be, presents the same obstacles in the peculiar importance of landownership and the underestimated sophistication of the landowners as the expropriation of the hacendados of the valleys. 'Who will pay them a fair price to get out?' is here too a pertinent question. The value a peasant and his neighbours put on his land stands less chance of being accepted officially than the inflated price the large landowner faced with expropriation is going to ask.

This rehearsal of complications is meant to be discouraging. It is meant to be more discouraging for 'agrarristas' than the simple cry that in two years the reform has not benefited more than fifteen thousand families and that expropriations only amount to a score or so. I hope the considerations above will quiet some cries of 'shame' and 'fraud'. Land Reform is a dangerously emotive issue, and in this country at this time it is not the most important one. The role of such a reform here must be to supplement the unavoidable move to the cities: the cities will require not only to be fed, but also to be able to sell in the country. The over-generous rooting of too many poor peasants in the countryside will not help this, nor will it help them to obtain education and everything else. Would the reformers themselves rather be peasants or workers? Neither. But those who rapidly answer 'peasant' are the romantics among them.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Deas

Malcolm Deas.

Received in New York March 18, 1964.