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978-0-521-03138-7 - The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in
Colombia: Struggles of the National Peasant Association 1967-1981

Leon Zamosc

Excerpt

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Introduction

By inducing structural changes, redefining old social cleavages, and giving rise to new class contradictions in the countryside, the transformations related to the development of capitalism also create favorable conditions for the emergence of agrarian movements. As social and political agents that strive to shape reality according to the aspirations of a class or a class alliance, these organized forms of collective action may themselves become factors of socioeconomic change in the countryside. Rural social movements are particularly relevant when their outcome focuses on the crucial alternative between an evolution based upon a peasant pattern of farming, with widespread ownership of land, or one dominated by landlords and entrepreneurs who monopolize the means of production and exclude the peasants. Since most countries come to the threshold of capitalism with traditional rural structures in which peasants are the main sector of the population, it is the peasants who seem to have most to win or lose. This fact, however, has not always created social movements representing the interests of the peasantry. On the one hand, in only a few cases has the agrarian question been settled by dramatic struggles leading to sudden shifts in one direction or the other. Instead, there has usually been a protracted process of socioeconomic change that permitted gradual transformations without major social and political upheavals. On the other hand, there have been few cases in which the alternative between peasant and landlord paths appeared to be a clear-cut issue. Most frequently, both patterns of agrarian evolution have coexisted within the same country as part of special circumstances that limited their opposition to particular regions or branches of agricultural production. Moreover, it is well known that the peasants have special difficulties regarding the organization and representation of their interests. Heterogeneous class composition and other factors have typically combined to confine their collective mobilization to particular local or regional issues. On the rare occasions when the peasants have been able to flex their political muscles at the societal level, their influence has usually been transient and heavily conditioned by their dependence upon more powerful or influential allies.

Still, and despite all these restrictions, during the last hundred years peasants and farmers have not only taken part in the main national and

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social revolutions, but have also produced social movements and political parties that were both massive and independent, such as Mexican and Bolivian agrarianism, American populism, agrarian socialism in Canada, and the parties of the Green International in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. In all these large-scale mobilizations, the pressure for a non-monopolistic development of agriculture played a major or at least a predominant role. Thus, there have been many cases in which the resolution of the agrarian question has shifted from the natural spontaneity of purely socioeconomic change to more deliberate political conflict. Furthermore, the historical evidence of these cases definitely questions the heuristic value of some taken-for-granted arguments concerning the presumed impossibility of an independent peasant movement. Peasant movements and national peasant parties have not only existed, but have also left deep marks on the history of their countries. Even though they were usually defeated, in many cases they disappeared only after attaining partial goals of resistance and consolidation or after achieving radical agrarian reforms that implied significant socioeconomic and political transformations of the entire society.

In the history of social movements and agrarian struggles in Colombia, the Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (ANUC, the National Association of Peasant Users) is the only organization that was able, at least during part of its existence, to articulate autonomously the demands of the peasants on a national scale. By resisting the landlord path of agrarian evolution and by trying to force a resolution of the agrarian question that would favor the peasants throughout the country, ANUC's struggles in the first half of the 1970s were one of the great peasant challenges described in the preceding paragraph. In terms of the Colombian experience, the basic character of ANUC clearly distinguishes it from earlier peasant mobilizations of the twentieth century. The rural struggles of the late 1920s and early 1930s were the first major battles on the agrarian question in Colombia, but although those struggles caused a national political debate and led to some reforms, they failed to develop into a unified peasant movement and were confined mainly to some coffee-growing areas in which the peasant and landlord economies had become acutely antagonistic. The much more widespread clashes of the *Violencia* during the 1950s aligned the peasants with the conflicting factions of the dominant classes, and even though that civil war had regional effects upon the evolution of the agrarian question, it led only to marginal struggles in defense of the interests of the peasantry as a class.

Given this general introductory appraisal of ANUC's historical importance, let us consider three central issues that will further clarify the nature of the peasant movement and give some additional clues to its importance. The first issue is the already mentioned definition of ANUC

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as agent and interpreter of the aspirations of the peasantry as a class. In the 1960s, the agrarian question was not posed as a uniform issue in Colombia. Instead, it was defined by a set of contradictions that involved the varying attitudes of different class sectors toward the possibility of a free peasant economy. For some groups, the main problem was to gain access to land of their own. Others needed to improve their conditions of reproduction in order to preserve and strengthen the existing peasant economy. Still others had more specific socioeconomic and ethnic-cultural demands. Despite this great diversity, ANUC emerged as an unifying force during the early 1970s, coordinating the demands of these sectors and expressing their grievances on three main battlefronts: the struggle for land, the defense of the colonists, and the protection of the smallholders. In general, then, the main issues raised by ANUC have to do with its effectiveness as a unified peasant movement and its social and economic impact. In terms of the agrarian conflicts related to the capitalist process in Colombia, the central concerns involve not only questions of class but also the way in which the struggles developed on the different fronts, the results of these struggles, and their combined effect upon the resolution of the agrarian question. In terms of the current upsurge of research and debate on peasantry and capitalism, ANUC's case offers a contemporary opportunity to study both the specifics of peasant political action and the potential of the peasants to influence, by their class struggle, the patterns of agrarian development under capitalism.

A further relevant aspect of ANUC's experience is the changing nature of the relationship between the peasant movement and the Colombian state. On the one hand, it was the reformist policies of the state that led to the creation of ANUC as a semi-official peasant association in 1967. Taking into account both the special organizational difficulties of the peasants and the conditions that prevailed in Colombia in the wake of the *Violencia*, it can be speculated that perhaps a national peasant movement would have never emerged without this initiative from above. On the other hand, the counter-reformist government policy after 1970 became one of the main factors behind ANUC's radicalization and led to open confrontation between the peasant movement and the state – a confrontation that became one of the main axes of conflict in the subsequent struggles. What therefore comes to the fore is the state's involvement in the resolution of the agrarian question. Given the nature of the Colombian state under the National Front, this issue suggests a second line of inquiry that encompasses three different levels: the ways in which the agrarian question appeared, as a problem, at each juncture in the process of capitalist development, the projects that the dominant classes attempted to impose at each juncture, and the effects of such projects in terms of class realignments and shifts in state policy. In the last instance, the changing

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relationships between ANUC and the state dramatized the crucial importance of the class alliances and oppositions in which the peasants were involved.

Finally, this question of the peasants' allies leads to a third significant issue: the political and ideological orientations of ANUC during its confrontation cycle. After the collapse of the reformist alliance that had created the conditions for its development, ANUC adopted the typical attitudes of a revolutionary movement. At the beginning, its revolutionary orientations were directly related to the links that the peasant leaders had established with the political left, especially the new Maoist organizations. Later, with the successive breaks between the peasant movement and these groups, ANUC redefined its revolutionary attitudes as part of an attempt to create an independent political force of its own within the leftist camp. Given the weaknesses of the socialist opposition and the working-class movement in Colombia, these political definitions of the peasant movement are crucial for any analytical approach to the question of peasant political participation. It is necessary to examine the factors that account for the peasants' receptivity to leftist influences. It is also important to study the effects of radical politicization upon the peasant struggles and the general evolution of the peasant movement. For once in Colombia's history, ANUC's rise provided a real chance for the left to exert considerable ideological and political influence upon large sections of the population nationwide. The outcome of this unique historical opportunity deserves special attention and careful assessment.

These considerations define the three central problems focused on in this book: the agrarian contradictions that provided the framework for the peasant struggles, the changing relationships between the peasant movement and the state, and the politics and ideology of the peasant challenge. The exploration of the issues encompassed by these problems provides the basis for a tentative answer, advanced in Chapter 10, to the paramount question of the historical significance of ANUC in the capitalist development of Colombia. In dealing with these issues, this study approaches the peasant movement as a protagonist in the drama of the class struggles that marked Colombia's recent socioeconomic and political history. This emphasis on class analysis is, of course, only one possible approach to the understanding of political conflicts and social movements. Meaningful insights can undoubtedly be derived from models of conflict resolution; from theories that stress the institutions of the political system; and from more conventional approaches that focus upon features of a social movement such as leadership, following, organization, goals, and means of action. It was mainly because of the structural nature of the central questions and concerns that class analysis was considered to be most suitable for this research. However, considerable efforts were made to

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overcome the reductionist limitations usually inherent in any analytical approach. Thus, although the political and ideological developments are explained by reference to the underlying class contradictions, special attention has been given to the ways in which ideology and politics, in turn, influenced the structural processes with their own capacity for objective determination. Similarly, the characteristics of ANUC as an organization are referred to at appropriate points, even though they have not been employed as basic categories of analysis.

A further note concerns the scope of this book. As originally conceived, it was to deal in depth with the different battlefronts of the peasant movement in Colombia and was to include a comparative analysis leading to broader conclusions on theoretical issues posed by peasant mobilization and political participation. Unfortunately, these goals proved too ambitious. Only the most central theoretical issues have been raised and briefly discussed in the last chapter, in the hope that it will be possible to carry out the much needed comparative elaboration in a future study. With regard to the treatment of the subject itself, it would have been ideal to provide an equally exhaustive analysis of each battlefront of the peasant movement. But priorities had to be defined and, as a result, most of the analytical effort was devoted to the regions of land struggle. Although it is true that this introduces an element of unbalance, this limitation is largely compensated for by the nature of the subject itself. In fact, it was in the regions of land struggle that the peasant movement reached its height and achieved its most tangible results. The main factors involved in the other battlefronts were also present in these areas: The issues posed by the demands of peasants with land and agricultural workers, for example, were as relevant in these regions as in the others. Furthermore, other elements, such as the politicization of the peasant movement, were particularly influential in the areas of land struggle. Still, throughout the work a consistent effort was made to maintain an overall perspective, both by recurrent reflections on the differences between the areas of land struggle and the other battlefronts of the peasant movement and by a selective analysis of the main processes that affected ANUC's performance on these other battlefronts.

This research started with two years of background bibliographical work, which was carried out in Manchester and focused upon general aspects of Colombian society and relevant issues in the field of peasant studies. The actual fieldwork began in 1977 and lasted until early 1982. The first year in Colombia was spent largely in libraries and archives, using secondary sources in order to sketch the historical evolution of the agrarian question and the peasant struggles. The collection of more specific data on ANUC, including documents of the organization and interviews with government officials, political activists, peasant leaders, and rank-

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and-file members of the movement, was started in 1979. By mid-1981 this research had become an integral part of a broader project on popular participation in Colombia, a project sponsored by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and conducted in the country by the Research and Popular Education Center (CINEP). With better resources, access was gained to the more remote Colombian regions that had not been visited in the previous stage of fieldwork. The collection of data led to the formation of a special archive that includes 148 interviews, 435 documents of the national and regional associations of ANUC, collections of ANUC's journals and bulletins, 84 documents of other organizations related to the *usuarios*, and 742 entries regarding articles on the peasant movement in Colombian newspapers and magazines. This archive on ANUC, which has been organized by subject and includes a thematic index, is open to the public and can be consulted at CINEP's library in Bogotá.

To summarize, this work outlines the overall direction of ANUC and emphasizes the movement's action in the areas of land struggle. The analytical perspective is largely concerned with the class contradictions involved in the historical developments spurred by the peasant *usuarios*. This book uses a chronological format in analyzing the main structural factors that shaped the rise and fall of the peasant movement and the land struggles during the 1970s. In Chapter 1, the historical evolution of the agrarian question in Colombia is traced in order to explore the structural agrarian contradictions after the Violencia. Chapter 2 examines the political prospects for the emergence of a peasant movement in the 1960s, considering the immediate precedents of the struggle for land and inquiring into the motives that eventually led to the creation of ANUC. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the 1971 waves of land invasions, considering the role played by direct action in ANUC's radicalization and studying the development of the peasant movement on its different battlefronts. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 follow the subsequent evolution of the battle for land, taking into account the effects of repression and other changing elements of state policy and paying special attention to the leftist politicization of the peasant struggles. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with the consequences of broader socioeconomic changes in the areas of land struggle, studying ANUC's attempts to develop new forms of agitation among the agricultural laborers and in the peasant settlements that emerged after the land struggles. Chapter 9 examines the factors of decline leading to the final crisis of the peasant radicalism of the 1970s, considering the dimensions of that crisis and observing its final outcome at the beginning of the 1980s. Chapter 10 summarizes the main aspects of this study, advancing conclusions and raising problems and questions for further research.

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The agrarian question in Colombia

The agrarian question can be posed as follows: what is the pattern of agrarian evolution that prevails in capitalist society?¹ The development of capitalism in different countries has shown that there are two basic alternatives. One of them, the “landlord path” of evolution, features the concentration of land ownership, which creates favorable conditions for a capitalist agriculture based upon wage labor and large-scale production. The second alternative, the “peasant path,” is characterized by the distribution of land among large numbers of smallholders, which leads to peasant farming based upon family labor. These alternatives are opposite poles that define a whole range of possible mixed outcomes in which both patterns of production appear side by side.² The importance of the agrarian question can be measured by the consequences of its resolution: The socioeconomic structure of the countryside shapes the conditions for economic performance, defines the relative strength of the rural social classes, and sets the stage for their participation in the political processes linked to the development of capitalism.³ The way in which the agrarian question is resolved depends, in turn, upon a complex mix of historical, socioeconomic, and political factors unique to each country.⁴ As a first step in the study of these unique dimensions in Colombia, the first section of this chapter will briefly trace the history of the agrarian question in light of the changes that marked the emergence and development of capitalism. The second section will deal with the socioeconomic factors of the agrarian question during the 1960s, emphasizing the way in which these factors defined the antagonistic landlord and peasant paths and shaped the structural conditions for a peasant movement in Colombia.

The historical background

Part of the specificity of Colombia’s historical development is due to the ways in which geography has conditioned the socioeconomic processes. Located between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans at the northernmost tip of the South American subcontinent, the country is dominated by three Andean mountain ranges separated by two broad valleys running south to north. Beyond the mountains, extensive plains with savannas and forests

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mark the landscape of the Atlantic Coast, the Eastern Llanos, and the southeastern Amazon Basin. Although the country's latitude is tropical, the climate is determined mainly by topography. The Andean ranges produce changes of temperature according to altitude, thus defining three main thermal levels of cold highlands, temperate slopes, and hot valleys and plains. Climate clearly influenced the original spatial distribution of population. The indigenous peoples developed sedentary cultures mainly in the healthier cooler areas, so that their gold and agricultural surpluses attracted the *conquistadores* and the early Spanish settlers to the highlands.⁵ Only later, under the double pressure of land concentration and population growth, did the downward movement to settle the slopes and plains begin in earnest. Furthermore, the size and abrupt relief of the country posed great obstacles to transportation and communications. Coupled with the diversity of ecological conditions, these difficulties led to the early differentiation of distinct regions and hindered the development of the national market. In addition, since high shipping costs raised the prices of exported commodities to noncompetitive levels, the transportation problem was also the main cause of the country's comparatively late integration into the international market.⁶

A second factor was the demographic situation found by the Spanish at the time of their conquest. From the point of view of its Indian population, Colombia was midway between densely populated regions like México or Perú and sparsely populated areas like the River Plate.⁷ There were, therefore, sufficient grounds for the consolidation of a local aristocracy of landlords who received rights to the surpluses and labor of the Indian communities. But since these opportunities were limited, their early monopolization led to the formation of significant groups of poor Spanish *vecinos* (neighbors) who had no option but to settle as peasants and artisans in different parts of the country and in the emerging towns.⁸ At the same time, imported diseases and harsh exploitation caused a drastic reduction of the Indian population during the early colonial period.⁹ As a result, African slaves were introduced into mines and *haciendas* of Antioquia, the Cauca Valley, and some points on the Atlantic Coast. However, given the diminishing importance of gold mining, it proved very difficult for the Spanish to stem the flow of runaway slaves.¹⁰ Combined with the decimation of the Indian communities in the highlands and the downward colonization movements, the decline of slavery contributed to a very rapid mixture of racial stocks. Consequently, a highly miscegenated population, with a predominance of Spanish and Indian elements in the highlands and Negroid shades in the lowlands, has been the hallmark of Colombia since colonial times.¹¹

For the Spanish, the establishment of an export economy appeared to be the shortest route to personal fortune and the general prosperity of the

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colony. Since gold is an exceptionally valuable commodity in relation to its volume and weight, bullion exports had been less affected by transportation costs and provided the basis for the country's vital commercial link with Europe until the eighteenth century.¹² However, when gold mining declined, neither the Bourbon reforms of the late colonial period nor the free-trade republican policies after 1820 were successful in promoting other exports. Topography, the development of chemical substitutes, and the presence of cheaper competitors in the international market easily defeated the short-lived export "booms" of Colombian quinine, indigo, rubber, and tobacco during the nineteenth century.¹³ In the absence of the economic stimulation usually associated with the development of the export sector, and given the ecological fragmentation, the socio-economic processes of the nineteenth century led to the formation of regions that were relatively isolated economically.¹⁴ As centers of administration, political life, commercial activities, and artisan production, the cities and provincial towns played a pivotal role in these regions. But the real bases of economic and social life were located in the countryside, where *haciendas* and peasants produced surpluses for the limited regional markets as part of their traditional pattern of cattle raising and agricultural production.

In Colombia, as in most Latin American countries, the formation of the *haciendas* and the peasantry was a long process that can be traced back to the evolution of the colonial agrarian regime. In the New Kingdom of Granada (1564–1718), the original systems of Indian exploitation were *encomienda* and *concierto*. The *encomenderos* extracted tribute in kind from the Indian communities in exchange for protection and religious instruction. *Concierto* was a form of draft labor by which crown officials allocated workers from the Indian communities to neighboring settlers who had received land leases, or *mercedes de tierras*. Later, under the policy of *composiciones*, the Indian communities were granted collective land ownership as *resguardos*, while the land leases became the private property of the Spanish settlers. With the rapid decline of the Indian population, the periodic *reducciones* carried out by the crown led to a continuous transfer of *resguardo* lands to the landowners. By the eighteenth century, the *resguardos* could no longer provide significant agricultural surpluses and had ceased to be a dependable source of draft labor. Consequently, during the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada (1718–1810) the remaining *encomiendas* were abrogated and the *concierto* system was abolished. In the meantime, miscegenation had given rise to a growing population of *mestizos* who, given their mixed ethnic definition, did not qualify for land in the Indian *resguardos*. These *mestizos* were incorporated into the *haciendas* as *agregados*, a vague category that included different types of tenants, sharecroppers, and peons tied by bondage debts. All in all, then, the continuous mon-

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opolization of land and the gradual dissolution of the Indian communities enabled the *haciendas* to gain direct control over the available labor. This process involved, at the same time, the racial redefinition, dispossession, and subjection of the exploited population. The liquidation of the *resguardos* was accelerated by the 1780 Bourbon reforms, which authorized their privatization in certain circumstances, and was almost completed in 1820 with a republican decree that ordered repartition of communal property among individual members and paved the way for an intensive landlord assault based upon forcible sales. Nevertheless, there were some cases in which the Indians refused parcelization and kept their *resguardos* intact, notably in Cauca, Caldas, and Tolima. In many other places, and especially throughout the eastern Andean range, where there was much *mestizo* influence, many communities accepted privatization but managed to resist the landlord pressure and maintained their control over a substantial part of the land.¹⁵

Most authors agree that the development of the Colombian *hacienda* reflected the local aristocracy's use of its power to adapt to the prevailing conditions of restricted trade, abundance of land, and scarcity of labor.¹⁶ Basically self-sufficient economically, the *hacienda* provided cattle and foods to supply the provincial towns and responded easily to occasional opportunities for commercial expansion beyond the regional limits. On the other hand, land monopolization and the establishment of servile relations of production prevented free access to the land and ensured the subjection and control of the labor force on the estates. During the nineteenth century, racial miscegenation, dissolution of Indian *resguardos*, and consolidation of *haciendas* gradually led to the formation of extensive estates, a subordinated peasantry on these estates, and a free peasantry that managed to resist landlord encroachments. A parallel process was taking place in the colonization of new areas on the slopes and plains. In these areas, poor Spanish settlers, *mestizos*, and runaway slaves were trying to gain access to the land in order to establish the basis of their freedom as peasants. They invariably met with the opposition of landowners who held title to enormous tracts of virgin forest. Some of these titles had originally been granted by the crown; others were republican concessions to generals and patricians who had been involved in the Wars of Independence. But most of them had been obtained through the speculative practices of landowners who used their influence to get the lion's share from the legal processes of public land allocation. In this situation, the colonization movements involved continuous conflict between those who were taking actual possession by working the land and those who held ownership claims to it. Throughout the nineteenth century, the de facto and legal outcomes of these struggles between axes and titles led either to the establishment of sectors of free peasants, as in most areas of An-