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978-0-521-03138-7 - The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in  
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Leon Zamosc

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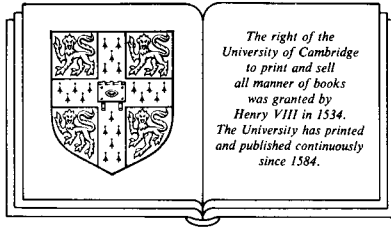
# THE AGRARIAN QUESTION AND THE PEASANT MOVEMENT IN COLOMBIA

Struggles of the National Peasant Association  
1967-1981

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*To Ximena, with love*

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## Foreword

There have been few good histories of peasant movements. The nature of the evidence is partly to blame for this. Peasants were mostly illiterate, and the few literates who stood by them or led them too often died a martyr's death. With the participants' own tale seldom recorded, what has been left is silence, or else the chronicles of the victors over the peasants, whose evidence is as twisted and indecent as a snapshot of victims by their executioners.

This silence and the biases of evidence are still with us as far as the history of the present – a sociology of the contemporary peasants – is concerned. In our own communication-saturated society, peasants still seldom tell their own tale, and their leaders still die violently the world over. And not for the plebeian rebels and activists are the cushioned émigré life or the foreign universities where most of the opposition's memoirs and tracts are nowadays written.

But it is not simply a matter of evidence. If beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, so do the mystification and the lie. Those who write about peasants are as a rule outsiders to them. It is not only that they usually meet peasants for a moment and a glimpse, or not at all; more important is that they fail to acknowledge the peasants' way of life as different, yet reasonable on its own terms, and as changing but with different alternatives. What usually occurs instead of observation, immersion, "understanding from the inside," is a version of Theory of Progress, into which facts are drawn to adorn a presupposed model, rather than to test it. The model is invariably a repetition of the observer's own history, followed by a paradise of riches and of liberty to all, in the light of a pet theory taken from elsewhere. Peasants are the bottleneck to its realization, a bother to be bulldozed out ("for their own sake" can be added). They are never treated as the subject of history, the makers of their own future. Also, to this mode of thought peasants are necessarily backward in the face of the writer's own "forwardness." They are just as necessarily those that will be defeated – and few like to identify with losers. That is how and why peasants come to be treated as fodder, by politicians for their schemes and by scholars for their intellectual construct. The bitterly

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divided reactionary juntas, the liberal politicians, and the revolutionary challengers often agree in this single sphere.

Against such blinds, the honorable exceptions of writings and deeds shine the brighter. Books like those by F. Znaniecki, R. Hilton, E. Le Roy Ladurie, J. Womack, or J. Scott show how an alternative approach, the one of “taking the peasant side,” is not only more ethical but also adds to perception. Such illuminations often come not from social scientists but from novelists such as Carlo Levi of Italy, Traven of Mexico, or Vasilii Shuknin of contemporary Russia. In consequence, there has been a slowly growing core of good books by those who have elevated peasants from a footnote to the text, not replacing progressivist mythology by a peasant one of pastoral bliss, but taking account of what Marx expressed so well, namely, that “It is not history as if she was a person apart who uses men as means to work out her purposes, but history itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes.” One should add “also women,” and say that the “pursuing of ends” can be done in different ways, sometimes as subjects and otherwise as objects of history. Which is, of course, the crux of the matter in analyzing the struggles for freedom.

This book belongs to the tradition I call more honorable and more perceptive – that is, one of treating peasants as a topic in itself, as a subject of and within the social reality. Good luck and perseverance gave its author invaluable access to vital information about one of the most significant peasant political efforts of the 1970s in Latin America – the rise and fall of the ANUC of Colombia. Zamosc watched it throughout the full cycle of rise, climax, defeat, retreat, and disintegration. For the most relevant five years, he was immersed in the peasant communities taking part in ANUC.

The book presents an analysis of a major peasant movement, its internal dynamics, and its interdependence with forces external to itself, written by a sympathetic observer/participant who was in it to tell its truthful tale, rather than to grind his own axe. The resulting realism is the book’s main strength. It does not glorify peasants or their leaders; they are corruptible and defeatable, but this does not make them putty in everybody’s hands. Their ability to act effectively was subject to various conditions, of which political democracy and external catalysts were the most important. But once established, the movement rapidly gained its own momentum. Contrary to what the landlords and government ministers said these were not barbarians on the rampage; their ability to think and act politically was impressive. Contrary to the super-left would-be manipulators, their fight was not just with the bourgeoisie, rural or urban, and with the landlords, but mostly with the repressive and ambivalent state. Equally ambivalent, and having an important impact on the move-

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ment, was the new factor of the intervention of international and national development agencies. This produced an equation very different from those so often assumed. More expectedly, the peasant movement was multidirectional in the aims of its subdivisions, social and regional. It was also exposed to a multiplicity of external forces and propaganda efforts. The politicized peasants were therefore subject to many ambivalences, not unlike other movements powered by plebeian spontaneity in the contemporary developing societies. Finally, they were essentially weaker than the state apparatus, for as long as it stood firm. It is the opening of the confrontation of forces external to itself and/or the moments when the state apparatus is shaken or rendered ambivalent through defeat, political crisis, or vacillating reforms that makes the peasant mass assert its significance the world over.

Of particular significance is Zamosc's analysis of ANUC as an authentic peasant organization, showing how its leadership grew from below and was transformed, and how problems of diversity within unity were handled in it, revealing the specific dynamics of mass organization. Land invasion as a political tool and tactic (rather than as a pauper's "grab") offers an important lesson of revolt and counterrevolution. The issue of regional peasantries, which we know mostly from theoretical debate, in this book is given an important direct expression via the study of political phenomena in its social and economic context. The triangle of fundamentally different yet intertwined forces – the state, the revolutionary opposition, and a peasant mass movement – is analyzed in the specific context of a Latin American society.

To recapitulate, contrary to much philosophizing about peasants, development, and revolution, Zamosc's book provides a massive testimony and analysis of a contemporary peasantry as a class in a major struggle. The result is complex and rich, with both unity and diversity, the internal and the external, being drawn and considered. Readers cannot help but learn from it, whether they agree or disagree with the author.

But does it all matter? After all, ANUC was defeated, was it not? Also, although one might pity the poor wretches, the future of mankind is peasant-free, is it not? So, why bother? Better to leave it to the archivists of curios. Not so, because there is no society, present or future, without its past, and the history of the victors, for the victors, and by the victors is not only indecent, but also bad history and bad sociology, for it makes us understand less the ways in which human societies operate and change. In particular, it hides systematically the effect of alternative futures that are selected or foreclosed by political struggle. Plebeian struggles or their absence influenced and continue to influence in a major way societies' future shapes (compare nineteenth-century France and Germany, early-twentieth-century Mexico and Egypt, Russia and India, or today's Czech-

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oslovakia and Hungary). Also, the nature of post-peasant society is defined by the way in which the peasants eventually transform and, of course, the peasants' frequent trick of nondisappearance and reappearance, contrary to planners' plans, is also something to be kept in mind.

This book reveals the Colombia that tourists, politicians, and bourgeois seldom see, and also helps comparatively to perceive the more general issue of plebeian as well as peasant movements and the actual fabric of their political action. Nonetheless, a good book should also be paid the higher tribute of pointing to the issues it raises that will need further study. What happened must be considered more fully in the broader context of Colombia outside the main axis of state versus peasant confrontation – the lack of political response by the major parties, workers' unions, and others to the peasants' challenge must be looked at in order to make the picture clearer. Furthermore, the structure of the participants' consciousness underlying the action must be considered more fully; it should not remain in footnotes alone. Still to be seen are the long-term effects, manifest and tacit, of ANUC's struggle on the country's long-term development. Zamosc has opened up, one may say stirred up, all these issues with an intensity that stands in direct relation to the book's virtues. Only trivia does not need a follow-up of argument, extension, and reconsideration. This book is anything but trivial. It will teach many things about real peasants, and more.

Teodor Shanin

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## Foreword by UNRISD

This volume presents the findings of one of the case studies carried out in Colombia under the Popular Participation Project of UNRISD, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. The Project focused on the organized activities of the “excluded” – peasants, workers, ethnic groups, poor urban dwellers – to increase their control over resources, decision-making processes, and regulative institutions of the larger society. It also analyzed in a historical perspective the encounter between such social movements and those social forces, structures, and ideologies that maintain an unequal distribution of power and wealth; and it looked more particularly at the role of the state in these encounter sequences. While the emphasis on the study of social movements reflected a rejection of a technocratic approach to the issues involved, the broader aim of the Project was to help clarify the idea of people’s participation in order to make it operationally more useful. The Project included a number of research, action-research, and sub-debate activities that were complementary and linked together through a general debate carried out by the Institute on the theory and practice of participation.

In 1980 a series of studies were initiated in Colombia with the aim of exploring the characteristics and results of the major peasant struggles and movements that took place between 1950 and 1980. The studies, carried out by researchers from the *Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular* (CINEP) in Bogotá focused principally on the rise and decline of the *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* (ANUC), the most important organized peasant movement in Colombia. The investigations were undertaken both because it was felt that the Colombian example could yield important insights into the dynamics of peasant movements and their dialectical relationship with the state, and also because of the interest of the present ANUC leadership in obtaining an objective history of the organization as a basis for future policy.

The present volume presents the results of one of these studies. It traces the history of ANUC on the basis of documentary evidence and extensive interviews and fieldwork; deals with a range of questions that are important to rural participatory movements elsewhere; and shows the vulnerability of officially sponsored peasant movements to sudden changes in govern-

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ment policy, particularly in cases where the state calls the movements into being in order to mobilize support for policies that are unwelcome to other elite sectors and dominant forces. Problems of leadership of participatory movements, and particularly of the difficulty and often inability of the members to control the leadership, are also discussed and confirm results from studies within the Project in Bolivia and Mexico. The study equally shows that as peasant movements grow, they have difficulties in dealing with the increasing socioeconomic differentiation and consequent fragmentation of their membership, a result also found in the study in Thailand within the Project.

Leon Zamosc has taught sociology at universities in Colombia and the United States and has directed two research projects on peasant movements in Colombia at CINEP. He is currently a member of the Sociology Department at the University of California, San Diego.

The study benefitted from a contribution of the Inter-American Foundation (IAF) and the final preparation of the text for publication was partly financed by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada.

Matthias Stiefel  
Project Leader  
Participation Project

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## Abbreviations

ACC	Peasant Colombian Action
ADAGRI	Association for Integral Agricultural Development
ANAPO	Popular National Alliance
ANIF	National Association of Financial Institutions
ANUC	National Association of Peasant Users
CERA	Executive Committees of Agrarian Reform
CINEP	Research and Popular Education Center
CIRA	Interamerican Center for Agrarian Reform
CRIC	Regional Indian Council of Cauca
CSTC	Confederation of Syndicates of Colombian Workers
CTC	Confederation of Colombian Workers
CUC	Council for Peasant Unity
DANE	Department of National Statistics
DOC	Division of Peasant Organization
DRI	Integrated Rural Development
ELN	National Liberation Army
EPL	Popular Liberation Army
FANAL	National Agrarian Federation
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FEDEGAN	Federation of Cattle Breeders
FENSA	National Federation of Agrarian Syndicates
FUP	Front for the Unity of the People
IICA	Interamerican Institute for Agricultural Sciences
INCORA	Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform
Liga ML	Marxist Leninist League
M-19	April 19 Movement
MNDP	National Democratic Popular Movement
MOIR	Independent Revolutionary Workers' Movement
MRL	Revolutionary Liberal Movement
OCIDEC	Independent Peasant Organization of Casanare
ORP	People's Revolutionary Organization
PAN	Plan for Food and Nutrition
PCML	Marxist Leninist New Communist Party
SAC	Society of Colombian Agriculturalists



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SENALDE	National Employment Service
UNO	Union of National Opposition
URS	Socialist Revolutionary Union
UTC	Union of Colombian Workers

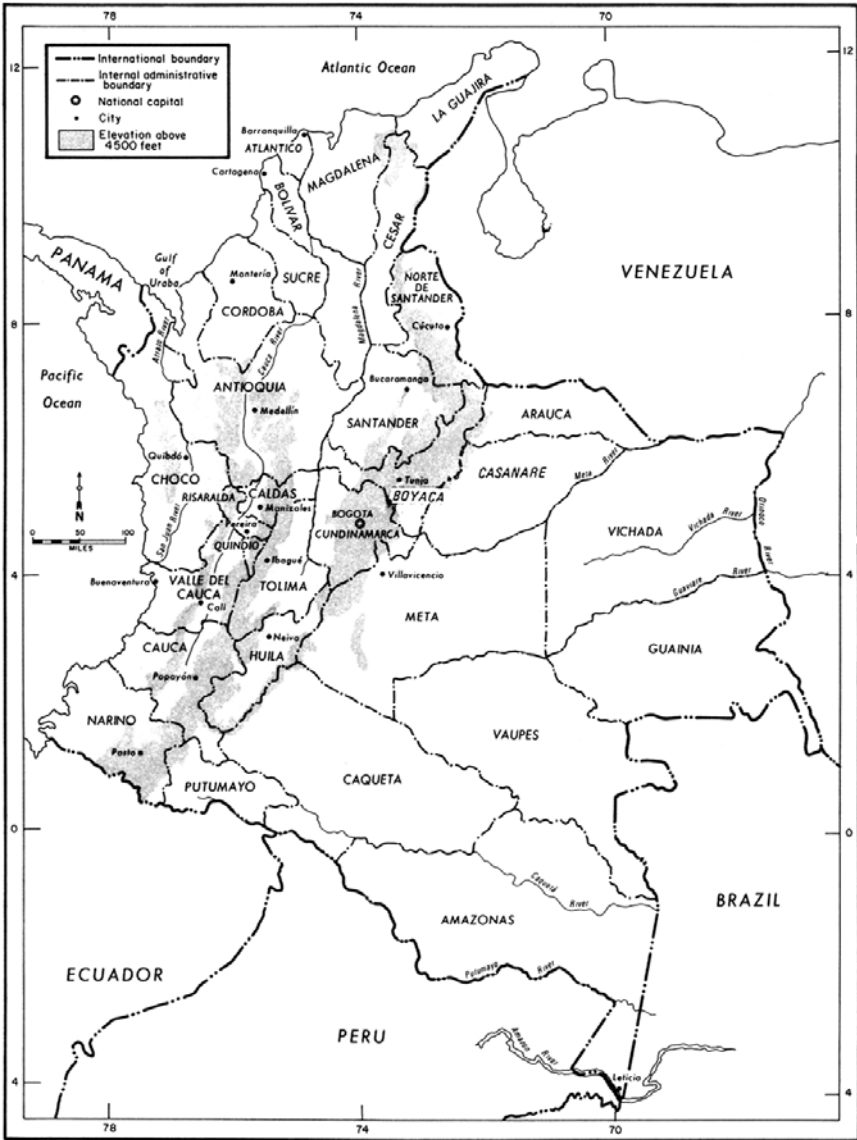
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Map 1. Republic of Colombia.