

LAND REFORM AND AGRARIAN REVOLUTION IN EL SALVADOR:

Comment on Seligson and Diskin

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The causes as well as the consequences of land reform are revolutionary. Land reform is not really reform at all. In an agrarian society, land reform is a revolutionary act because it redistributes the major source of wealth, social standing, and political power. Successful large-scale land reforms in Latin America and elsewhere occur only during social revolution or through the actions of invading armies imposing revolution from above. The land reforms in Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Cuba, and Nicaragua occurred during revolutions; the land reforms in Japan and Taiwan were imposed by invading armies. The reform in South Korea apparently represented a combination of the two.¹ Fundamental land reform without social transformation is a logical and practical impossibility. This is the reason why land reform as a counterrevolutionary strategy, such as the ill-fated "land-to-the-tiller" program attempted in Vietnam, is bound to fail.²

The inequality in landownership that land reforms are designed to correct is a major cause of revolution. Land reform itself is a central demand of most agrarian-based revolutions and almost invariably a policy of successful revolutionary regimes. As both Mitchell Seligson and Martin Diskin point out, agrarian inequality was a root cause of the Salvadoran civil war. The extent and consequences of the reforms that both initiated and concluded the war are therefore critical for understanding the origins of the war and for projecting the Salvadoran future. At the heart of the debate between Seligson and Diskin lies the question

1. On the social consequences of agrarian reform in Latin America, see Eckstein (1982). On Northeast Asia, see Cumings (1984). He noted on South Korea, "paradoxically, the three-month northern occupation of the south [during the Korean War], which included a revolutionary land reform in several provinces, cleared the way to end landlord dominance in the countryside . . ." (Cumings 1984, 23).

2. Serious land reform was not initiated in South Vietnam until 1970, when the country was under effective U.S. military occupation. The initial titling of land was not completed until 1974, a year before the U.S. defeat and precipitous withdrawal. On the largely ineffective efforts at land reform under earlier Vietnamese governments, see Prosterman and Riedinger (1987, 113–41).

of whether the agrarian reform being conducted in El Salvador represents a fundamental social transformation that has eliminated one cause of the Salvadoran revolution. Seligson claims it has. Diskin asserts that it has not.

Both Seligson and Diskin base their arguments on Roy Prosterman's index of rural instability (IRI), an admittedly crude but surprisingly effective predictor of agrarian discontent based on the extent of landlessness. Prosterman's index has attracted interest for practical as much as theoretical reasons. He served as a principal architect of the failed U.S.-sponsored land reform during the Vietnam War, and he drafted the "land-to-the-tiller" portion of the Salvadoran land reform of 1980. But even though Prosterman and his index are central to both arguments, neither Seligson nor Diskin calculates his index directly. Instead, they both employ an alternative measure of landlessness proposed by Seligson. Using the original Prosterman index yields some surprising results, but it also reveals the limitations of his ideas for understanding Salvadoran agrarian revolution and revolution in general.

Prosterman's Index of Rural Instability

As Prosterman cheerfully admitted, his index is simplicity itself (1976, 342). Rejecting computer models "concocted out of a hundred interlocking variables," he proposed using only one measure: "the percentage of landless peasants out of the total population of the country." When this percentage reaches 30, he predicted a "substantial danger of revolution." When it reaches 40, revolution becomes a "critical danger." El Salvador before the civil war, which Prosterman and Jeffrey Riedinger estimated at 30 to 37 percent landless, was clearly in the danger zone (Prosterman and Riedinger 1987, 144). Prosterman had originally proposed the index in the hope that "internal reformist forces . . . might take the necessary eleventh-hour steps to remove the causes of frustration and prevent the explosion, and . . . [that] donors of foreign aid might provide resources to make those steps more feasible" (Prosterman 1976, 342). What was to be done with landowners who refused to go peacefully he did not say.

In a footnote to his 1976 article, Prosterman clearly stated that his index refers to the percentage of all "families in the society . . . who work the land but do not own it" (1976, p. 350, n. 9). The index is calculated by dividing the number of rural families without access to land by the total number of families in the society as a whole. Seligson proposes another index based on the number of economically active employed individuals (not families) who are temporary day laborers or renters divided by the total economically active employed population of the country. Diskin follows Seligson's lead, although he would like to add permanent wage laborers, the rural unemployed, family labor, and the land-poor to the

numerator. Given the difference between urban and rural rates of participation in the labor force, Seligson's index will usually underestimate landlessness, as Diskin correctly notes. In fact, Seligson's version of the Prosterman index (1995, 66) is at 25.9 percent considerably lower than Prosterman and Reidinger's 1987 range of estimates.

According to Seligson's version of Prosterman's index, El Salvador fell below the minimum level of 30 percent landless and far short of the critical 40 percent level in 1971. Therefore, according to Seligson's figures, El Salvador should not have experienced a revolution. Nevertheless, Seligson's index could still be useful (although not for comparison with Prosterman's "danger levels") because it reveals a substantial decline in landlessness between 1971 and 1991–1992. Diskin's claim that his own version of Seligson's index shows higher levels of landlessness in 1991–1992 proves little because Diskin's index, like Seligson's, cannot be compared with Prosterman's index. Furthermore, Diskin provides no data for 1971 and therefore does not know if his own index was even higher before the war and land reform. Seligson could still argue that he has demonstrated that landlessness has declined substantially, and nothing Diskin says refutes this claim.

The obvious answer to the problem of changing indices is to simply calculate Prosterman's original index and see what happens. Table 1 presents a modest effort to do so based on estimates from data presented in Seligson's article. The starting point for these calculations is the 1971 census that found 29 percent of Salvadoran rural families to be landless, as Seligson notes (1995, 46). There is nothing "contradictory" about this number, although various extrapolations from it raise questions, as Seligson points out. In particular, the Oxfam estimate seems wildly inflated (see Simon and Stephens 1982). Seligson also notes that 38 percent of the remaining 71 percent of families with access to land (27 percent of all rural families) are renters. Adding the percentage of renters (27) to the percentage of landless (29) places the total number of landless rural families at 56 percent, the base figure for calculating Prosterman's index.

Because Seligson provides the rural percentage of the total Salvadoran population in 1971 and 1991–1992, it is a simple matter to estimate the landless percentage of all Salvadoran families by multiplying the rural percentage by the landless percentage. These calculations yield an IRI of 34 percent, exactly at the midpoint of Prosterman and Reidinger's own range of estimates for prerevolutionary El Salvador. Because no direct data on landless families in 1991–1992 were available in the Seligson article, I estimated this value on the assumption that the number of landless families would decline in the same ratio as the number of landless individuals (Seligson 1995, t. 5). Seligson also reports the proportion of renters in 1991–1992 (1995, 54–55). Prosterman's IRI for 1991–1992 can then be calculated using the (lower) rural percentage in that year.

TABLE 1 *Prosterman's Index of Rural Instability (IRI) for El Salvador in 1971 and 1991–1992 (Estimated from Seligson's Data)*

	1971 (%)	1991–1992 (%)
All rural families		
Landless ^a	29	25
Renters ^b	27	38
Subtotal	56	63
Rural percentage of the total Salvadoran population ^c	61	56
Prosterman's IRI ^d	34	35

^a The figure for landless families in 1971 taken from the 1971 census as reported by North (1985, 48). Estimated for 1991–1992 on the assumption that the percentage of landless families declines between the two dates in the same proportion as does the percentage of the total of temporary and permanent workers in Seligson's economically active agricultural population (Seligson 1995, t. 5).

^b Seligson reports, based on 1971 census data, that 38 percent of the 71 percent of families with land held it in various forms of direct or indirect tenancy (1995, 57). His data from the MIPLAN survey indicate that half (50 percent) of all families with more than 1 manzana of land in 1991–1992 (of the estimated 75 percent of all families with land in 1991–1992) were tenants (1995, 54–55).

^c As reported by Seligson (1995, 50).

^d Subtotal of landless and renters multiplied by the percentage of rural inhabitants.

Surprisingly, the result shows not a decline in the index between 1971 and 1991–1992 but a slight increase (from 34 to 35 percent). Thus on the Prosterman scale, El Salvador remains between the “substantial” and “critical” revolutionary “danger” levels. Despite a substantial land reform that redistributed 20 percent of Salvadoran farmland between 1980 and 1983, the IRI actually is worse now than it was before the war. What went wrong? The rural percentage of the total population has declined, just as Seligson says, although not by as much as the rural percentage of his “economically active employed population.” As a result of the reform and declining birthrates, the number of landless families has declined, as Seligson claims, but by a relatively modest amount (see my table 1). These modest declines in the incidence of the landless in the total population, however, have been more than offset by a substantial increase of 11 percentage points in the proportion of renters.

The extremely high level of renting revealed in the MIPLAN survey data is one of Seligson's most important findings, but its significance is lost in the change of indices. The real implications of Seligson's very important data are that the increase in renting has more than negated any decrease in landless laborers resulting from the agrarian reform. The fact that most of these renters are extremely small farmers (as Seligson and Diskin both note) compounds the problem. These individuals are not commercial renters but starvation renters. The increase in renting was

made possible by the undoing of Prosterman's Phase III land-to-the-tiller program by the landlord-dominated legislature under ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista), which relegalized renting in 1982. Although lands involved in Phase III reform were not given back to previous owners, economic pressures have apparently worked to reestablish renting at levels even higher than before the agrarian reform. This legislative action ultimately had greater impact than the assassinations of the chief of the land-reform program and two U.S. advisors (Prosterman's associates) in 1981, murders that were later linked to landed interests.

Increases in land values resulting from the war's end and the ascendance of market forces under neoliberal economic policies make it likely that renting will remain a problem or even increase. Land reform is therefore running a losing race with the market in rented land. Carrying out the land redistribution called for in the 1992 peace agreement can mitigate these trends temporarily, but it cannot reverse them. Seligson's critical finding on rental land suggests that agrarian tensions in El Salvador have not diminished at all, despite declining birthrates, rural migration to the cities, and land reform. The Prosterman index is one crude measure of this fact but certainly not the only one.

Actually, Prosterman's index captures just part of the reality of the Salvadoran agrarian structure and the agrarian origins of the civil war. Prosterman, a Southeast Asian specialist who did fieldwork in South Vietnam and the Philippines, developed his measure with that region in mind (1976, p. 346 and p. 351, n. 18). The IRI is actually a proxy for Southeast Asian sharecropping. Prosterman made it plain that the social organization of production in sharecropping is particularly conducive to "teeth-grinding frustration," as when a landlord carries away a third or more of the crop that could have fed starving children or arbitrarily reassigns the tenancy to a relative (1976, 346). It is this frustration, Prosterman suggests, that leads to revolution.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, it is the social organization of agrarian production, not landlessness or inequality per se, that leads to revolutionary movements in rural areas (Paige 1975). Sharecropping as a form of agricultural production leads to revolutionary discontent almost everywhere. Yet other forms of landlessness, such as plantation labor, do not. Prosterman actually rated Costa Rica as more revolutionary than El Salvador according to his index (1976, 354). But the Costa Rican figure reflects plantation laborers in the banana industry, not sharecroppers. Similarly, the *colonato*, a form of landlessness previously common in El Salvador, is not particularly conducive to revolutionary mobilization because of the extreme dependency it creates between landlord and tenant.

The predominant form of agrarian social relations in El Salvador is not Southeast Asian-style sharecropping (although farming in shares does exist), and thus Prosterman's index is in fact measuring characteris-

tics of other forms of agricultural organization. Although his IRI captures part of the reality of agrarian instability in El Salvador, it may actually understate the problem by not including owners of miniholdings too small to support a family. Estimating the actual extent of agrarian problems and revolutionary agrarian discontent in El Salvador requires a more detailed portrait of agrarian social relations. Recent research, particularly ethnographic studies in the Salvadoran countryside, provides such a portrait.

From Proletariado to Pobretariado: Revolution and the Social Relations of Agro-Export Production in El Salvador

As Seligson notes, areas under rebel control during the civil war (and hence excluded from the MIPLAN survey) were not areas with particularly high levels of landlessness in either 1971 or 1991–1992. As he also notes, Wickham-Crowley reported that these areas contain fewer landless laborers and more landholders than the rest of El Salvador (1992, 243–44). Seligson does not, however, note the obvious implication of these results: that support for the rebels of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and for agrarian revolution is therefore unrelated to landlessness per se. In fact, Wickham-Crowley demonstrated that the areas with the highest ratio of landless laborers to landholders were areas least controlled by the FMLN. The two provinces with the lowest ratio of landless laborers to smallholders, Chalatenango and Morazán, were actually the areas of greatest FMLN strength, redoubts of the FPL (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación) and the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo) respectively.

Furthermore, field research by Jenny Pearce in Chalatenango in 1984 indicated that guerrilla control in these areas was based on widespread and deep popular support among the peasantry (Pearce 1986). This support has its origins in widespread peasant mobilizations in the 1970s in both departments. The western coffee regions where the number of landless laborers is the greatest were actually the least revolutionary areas of the country. According to Wickham-Crowley, the two principal coffee-producing provinces, Sonsonante and Ahuachapán, are actually the provinces with the least FMLN support even though both were centers of the 1932 insurrection and *matanza* (Wickham-Crowley 1992, 243–44). It is possible that the *matanza*, still remembered vividly by area residents as late as the 1970s (Montes 1987, 195), insulated this region against further political mobilization. The distribution of FMLN support, however, negates the idea of any simple relationship between landlessness and revolution in El Salvador.

The broad patterns of agrarian transformation and peasant discontent are well known in general terms and have been confirmed by the

field research of Jenny Pearce in Chalatenango and Carlos Rafael Cabarrús (1983) in the adjacent (but agronomically distinct) area of Aguilares in the province of San Salvador. Export agriculture increased first in the coffee boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and then in the coffee and cotton boom of the 1950s and 1960s. This two-stage increase drove many subsistence peasants and colonos to seek refuge in areas with marginal soils and mountainous terrain, which were removed from productive (and valuable) lands involved in the expanding export economy (see Durham 1979; Dunkerly 1988; Paige 1985; Williams 1986). This pattern is equally common in Nicaragua and Guatemala. The result was a complex system in which displaced peasants rented or occupied legally or illegally subsistence holdings in marginal regions while serving as a migratory harvest labor force for the booming agro-export economy.

In Chalatenango and Morazán, for example, most poor rural Salvadorans either rent or own subsistence plots while working as migratory wage laborers, with more renters living in Chalatenango and more smallholders in Morazán. The result is what Cabarrús has called a “semi-proletariat” of poor landowners, renters, and sharecroppers who also work as seasonal or daily wage laborers. Strictly speaking, this group is neither entirely landless nor purely wage laborers nor all renters but some combination of the three. What they share is the common experience of extreme poverty closely tied to the behavior of landowners as employers, landlords, expropriators, or holders of idle lands. That is, the semi-proletariat’s experience of poverty is visibly tied to the action of human agents of the landowning class and hence easily understood politically in terms of exploitation.

This fact explains the remarkable success at mobilizing these peasants into vigorous and broad-based opposition movements—first by Catholic priests influenced by liberation theology, then by rural labor unions sponsored by Catholics or Communists, and ultimately by Marxist-Leninist guerrillas. This sequential mobilization process has been documented well by Pearce for Chalatenango and Cabarrús for Aguilares. These movements were eventually led by rural people themselves, who adapted the political categories of ideologues to fit their local circumstances. Thus the “*proletariado*” of Marxism and Marxist-influenced liberation theology became the “*pobretariado*” of the rural poor (Pearce 1986, 151). Poor landholders, renters, and wage laborers were linked by extreme poverty and also by their peripheral location in the agro-export economy and shared oppression by the landowning classes. From this experience arose the rural phase of the Salvadoran revolution.

Cabarrús’s data for Aguilares clearly indicate that the semi-proletariat or pobretariado was the sector most likely to support the peasant mobilization that led to revolution in El Salvador. The percentages in my table 2 were calculated from data presented by Cabarrús on peasant

mobilization in seven villages around Aguilares.³ The semi-proletarians (those who have some land but also work as wage laborers) were more politicized in general and more likely to join oppositional peasant organizations such as FECCAS (Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños) and ATACES (Asociación de Trabajadores Agrícolas y Campesinos de El Salvador) than either “middle peasants” (those with a small amount of land who do not have to seek wage labor) or those who depend entirely on permanent or daily wage labor. All three groups were about equally likely to join the army-sponsored ORDEN (Organización Democrática Nacionalista).

These patterns of agrarian social organization are not easily captured in summary statistics. Because most Salvadoran renters are impoverished small farmers who probably have to seek wage labor to supplement their small plots, renting indicates semi-proletarian status in most cases. Many wage laborers and other landless rural people also belong to the *pobretariado*, although workers on large plantations should probably be excluded. Smallholders and squatters are also likely to be part of this sector. Thus Prosterman’s index works because it captures the small renter and wage laborer part of the complex. But smallholders and squatters would have to be added to provide a complete picture of revolutionary potential in El Salvador.

How much land is necessary to move out of the semi-proletariat? In the village of Mirandella, peasants told Cabarrús that families with 5 manzanas (3.5 hectares) or more “*pasan bien*”; in El Tronador, families “*pasan bien*” with 3 to 5 manzanas; in El Paraíso, those “*que nunca jornaleyen [sic]*” have 5 manzanas (Cabarrús 1983, 176–77). According to Pearce, on the marginal soils of Chalatenango peasants need at least 10 hectares of land to support themselves and their families without outside work (Pearce 1986, 53). During the peace negotiations, the FMLN proposed giving 4 to 6 hectares to each recipient in regions with the best soil, while the government proposed 3. For the regions with poorest soil, the FMLN proposed 11 to 12 hectares and the government countered with 7.9 (Wood 1993, 37). These figures give some idea of the minimal levels necessary to provide basic subsistence as viewed by the interested parties.

All of these estimates are substantially above Seligson’s cutoff of 1 manzana (0.7 hectare) for the land-poor in 1991–1992 and even above Diskin’s suggested level of 2 manzanas. Unfortunately, Seligson provides

3. The raw data are presented in Cabarrús (1983, p. 173, t. 42). Unfortunately, in the summary tables (pp. 183, 185), Cabarrús calculated the percentages from the data the wrong way by showing not the percentage of participants in each organization by peasant type but the proportion of each peasant type in each organization. This approach led him to conclude incorrectly that wage laborers were less politicized than “medium peasants” (the rate of apoliticals is approximately the same in the two groups) and that wage laborers were more likely to join ORDEN than FECCAS or other oppositional groups. The opposite is actually the case (see my table 2).

TABLE 2 *Support for Opposition and Army Peasant Organizations, 1974–1977, by Type of Peasant, according to Cabarrús*

Type of Peasant	Support for Peasant Organization			
	Opposition ^a (%)	Army ^b (%)	Apolitical (%)	Middle (%)
Middle peasant	28.4	24.4	47.2	100.0
Semi-proletarian	39.9	26.5	33.6	100.0
Wage laborer	27.0	22.0	51.0	100.0

Source: Calculated from data presented in Cabarrús (1983, p. 173, t. 42).

^a Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños (FECCAS), Asociación de Trabajadores Agrícolas y Campesinos de El Salvador (ATACES), or Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO).

^b Organización Democrática Nacionalista (ORDEN).

no data on land-poor who had more than 1 hectare in 1971 or more than 1 manzana in 1991–1992. He cannot accurately assess change in the number of land-poor according to his own definition because of the change in the smallest recorded category from 1 hectare in the 1971 census to 1 manzana in the 1991–1992 MIPLAN survey. In 1971, those with less than 2 hectares (3 manzanas) constituted 50.2 percent of rural families. The landless constituted 29 percent, indicating that almost 80 percent of the rural population and almost half the total population were possible recruits for agrarian revolution.

The Limits of Reform: Coffee and Power in El Salvador

The Salvadoran reform of 1980 redistributed approximately 20 percent of Salvadoran farmland. Although this outcome represents a substantial reform, it has left a considerable mass of rural families without land. On this point, Seligson and Diskin agree. The analysis presented in my comment suggests that the situation may be even worse than Diskin thinks and potentially much more revolutionary than Seligson would concede. The Salvadoran reform of 1980 was not, as Seligson claims, “the most extensive nonsocialist land reform ever undertaken in Latin America except in Mexico” (1995, 64), nor did it reach the levels associated with major revolutionary land reforms that achieved some level of political stability.

Table 3, based on data from the *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, shows the percentage of farmland distributed and rural households benefiting in major Latin American agrarian reforms (Wilkie 1993). The 1980 Salvadoran reform fell far short of the Bolivian reform (in which 83.4 percent of the land was distributed, according to the *Abstract*), the Peruvian (at 39.3 percent), and the Mexican (43.4 percent), to say nothing of socialist reforms in Cuba and Nicaragua. The percentage of rural house-

TABLE 3 *Farmland Distributed and Rural Households Benefiting from Nonsocialist Agrarian Reforms in Latin America*

Country	Reform Period	Land Distributed (%)	Rural Households Benefiting (%)
Bolivia	1955–1975	83.4	78.9
Mexico	1917–1980	43.4	52.4
Peru	1967–1969	39.3	21.3
El Salvador	1980–1983	20.0	12.0
Venezuela	1959–1975	19.3	25.4
Chile	1962–1973	10.2	20.0
Costa Rica	1961–1979	7.1	13.5

Source: Statistical Abstract of Latin America (1993), pp. 44, 45.

holds benefiting from the Salvadoran reforms is actually the lowest in the table—lower even than the Venezuelan, Chilean, and Costa Rican reforms—because of the extreme density of the rural population in El Salvador. These comparative data provide little ground for optimism about the consequences of the 1980–1983 Salvadoran reform for political stability. Even the third-largest nonsocialist land reform in Latin America did not dissuade the adherents of Sendero Luminoso from launching an agrarian insurrection that nearly toppled the Peruvian government.

Even if the peace accords are carried out fully, the Salvadoran reform will not reach the levels of the Peruvian, Mexican, and Bolivian reforms. And it will still leave a huge number of Salvadorans without access to adequate land—regardless of whether one accepts Seligson’s or Diskin’s or my arguments concerning the political consequences of this fact. Seligson is right that there is little land left to distribute, at least if one accepts the limits proposed in the ARENA constitution of 1982. The land reform has touched neither the bases of agrarian wealth and power in El Salvador nor the root cause of the civil war—coffee. Phase II of the land-reform decrees of 1980 set a limit on farm size of 100 hectares, but the 1982 constitution raised it to 243 hectares. The lower figure would have affected many coffee estates, but the higher figure protects almost all coffee estates from reform. Only 9.5 percent of coffee land was included in Phase I of the 1980 reform (see Saade de Saade and Rivas 1983, 110).

How much difference could reform of coffee landownership make? In 1980, 295,867 manzanas (207,000 hectares) of land were producing coffee in El Salvador. About three-quarters of this land (151,000 hectares) was held by growers producing more than 1,000 *quintales* (1 *quintal* equals 100 pounds) per year (Saade de Saade and Rivas, 1983, 110, 117). Because production for estates of this size averages approximately 15 *quintales* per hectare, these estates averaged 70 hectares of coffee land or more

in production (the actual estate size is likely to be approximately twice as large because not all estate land is typically involved in coffee production). At current coffee prices approaching 200 dollars per quintal, an estate of this size would gross 200,000 dollars a year or more.

Redistributing all the land in these estates would provide 75,000 families (some 450,000 persons) with 2 hectares each of coffee land (and perhaps an additional 2 hectares of non-coffee land). This figure equals the number of families that received land in the 1980 reform, if we accept Elizabeth Wood's figure of 73,672 beneficiaries (Wood 1993, 54)—fewer if we accept Seligson's estimate of 85,000 families but still many more than the 47,500 families slated to receive land under the peace accords. Redistributing coffee lands would provide a substantial consumer market because the small farmers would be producing a marketable surplus, and it would also put a substantial dent in the landless and land-poor populations remaining after the agrarian reform.

Needless to add, these calculations are purely academic. Seligson is right. As a practical matter, there is no more land to redistribute in El Salvador because it is politically impossible to redistribute coffee lands that constitute the core source of wealth and the backbone of the ARENA party. Even though the ARENA elite increasingly represents coffee processors rather than coffee landowners (Paige 1993), complex ties of kinship link the processors and the growers, and the party still depends on the political patronage ties of the growers in its strongholds in western El Salvador. Nevertheless, the displacement of peasant cultivators from coffee lands caused both the 1932 and 1980 uprisings. Only a revolution could redistribute this land, and the FMLN has abandoned this road in order to accept parliamentary democracy.

Conclusion

Reports of the demise of the agrarian problem in El Salvador are greatly exaggerated. Despite the substantial agrarian reform of 1980, migration to cities, and declining birthrates, levels of landlessness remain as high as they were in 1980 largely because increases in renting have offset a small reduction in landlessness. Furthermore, many land-poor semi-proletarians probably exist, although their exact number cannot be assessed through the data presented by Seligson. The pobretariado of land-poor semi-proletarians remains a substantial force in El Salvador. Implementing the agrarian reform component of the peace accords is critical for reducing the agrarian crisis in El Salvador and lessening agrarian tensions. Exclusion of coffee lands from the reform, however, will still leave a large landless and land-poor population. No practical prospect exists for including coffee lands in such a reform. To do so would be a revolutionary act.

Many things have changed in El Salvador since 1979. A weakly rooted but functioning democracy has replaced the closed military dictatorship that was a major cause of the revolution. The former revolutionary leadership now sits in the national legislature, and one of its leaders now declares himself a social democrat. A member of the conservative Catholic lay organization Opus Dei now occupies the seat of the slain Archbishop Oscar Romero. But agrarian problems persist and are likely to be exacerbated in the short run by neoliberal economic policies and rising land prices. And as a practical political matter, there is no more land that can be distributed. Those who think that agrarian reform solves all political problems in the countryside need only consider Peru—or Chiapas.

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