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Retrieved 5/18/2023 from https://c4ss.org/content/58581.
Citations updated 7/20/23

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Malcolm X once said that all "[r]evolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality." From the Marxist-influenced Landless Workers Movement seizing unused land in Brazil to Indigenous #LandBack efforts in North America, the struggle over land—both as a means of production and as a sacred source of life—rages on. And no wonder, when large-scale absentee ownership of land is unilaterally enforced by state interventions all over the world, enabling, just in the United States, 100 wealthy families to own 640 million acres (about the size of New England), 25 individual land barons to own 20 million acres (nearly 1% of the country), and Bill Gates himself to be the largest agricultural land owner in the country. As such, there is never a bad time to look back at historical land reform movements in order to learn from their strategies. This short piece in particular is focused on comparing the land reform movement in Guatemala in the 1950s with that in Mexico during the revolution from 1910-1920—with particular emphasis on the reforms moved along by Emiliano Zapata's Liberation Army of the South (often referred to as the Zapatistas). Both were focused on breaking up large pseudo-feudal landholdings and redistributing their ownership more widely, though beyond that they have some marked differences.

One major difference between the Guatemalan and Mexican land reform movements is that the former—although certainly involving smaller units and movements, particularly amongst workers—was a more united and monolithic effort by the state. The central mechanism for land reform in Guatemala was President Jacobo Árbenz's Decree 900. Approved by the Guatemalan congress on June 17th, 1952, this sweeping reform allotted 603,704 hectares of land to around 100,000 Guatemalan families over the course of two years. This was accomplished through the creation of numerous committees and departments ranging from local to national. In "The Law That Would Change the World" from *Silence on the Mountain*, Daniel Wilkinson describes how one

organized group of workers attempted to expose misconduct around Decree 900 by the large farm Plantation La Patria. They signed a petition and submitted it to the Local Agrarian Committee of La Igualdad—one of the many agrarian committees formed by workers and communities to enact Decree 900—in hopes it would reach President Árbenz. However, before this, "the workers' petition would have to pass through a series of committees that Decree 900 had set up to administer the reform." It first went through the aforementioned Local Agrarian Committee, then the Departmental Agrarian Committee in San Marcos, then the National Agrarian Department in Guatemala City before finally reaching President Árbenz more than a year after it was submitted. What is clear from this bureaucratic chain is that the land reform of Decree 900 was part of a united structure stemming from the centralized state. Local non-state actors were absolutely part of the reform movement as is demonstrated by the petitioning by the workers of Plantation La Patria or the manner—also described by Wilkinson—in which local labor unions nominated the head of the Local Agrarian Committee in La Igualdad, but both the petitioning and nomination were both part of the more monolithic structure of Decree 900.

In contrast to Guatemala, land reform in Mexico during the 1910-1920 revolutionary period was not by any means part of one unified structure, primarily relying on local and non-state actors. Helga Baitenmann points out (pg. 3) that when the "different revolutionary factions presented their land reform proposals, villagers adopted them interchangeably in their continuing struggles over land." These different factions all created local or regional organizations to implement their specific land reform plans; for example the Zapatistas in southern Mexico appointed "keepers of the land" ('guarda-tierras') who were tasked with provisional land distribution (pg. 14-5). These local guardians encouraged the aforementioned variance in land reform proposals. In chapter eight of

"Popular Participation in State Formation: Land Reform in Revolutionary Mexico" by Helga Baitenmann from *Journal of Latin American Studies* , February 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1.
Decreto 900 Ley de Reforma Agraria by el Congreso de la República de Guatemala,
Constitución de la República de Guatemala, 1945.
"Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Reform Law: A Critical Reassessment" by Douglas W. Trefzger from *International Social Science Review* , 2002, Vol. 77, No. 1/2 (2002).
Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror Betrayal and Forgetting in Guatemala by Daniel Wilkinson
Zapata and the Mexican Revolution by John Womack
"A Spark of Hope: The Ongoing Lessons of the Zapatista Revolution 25 Years On" by Hilary Klein
"A Life of Struggle for Land and Community in Guatemala: Interview with Isabel Solís" by Dawn Marie Paley

Zapata and the Mexican Revolution, John Womack outlines how in Zapatista-occupied Morelos, a village…

> could keep its land under a common title and distribute cultivation rights, or it could distribute the titles themselves to individual small-holders—however it elected. Neither the state nor the federal government could interfere in each village's choice, and the most the federal government was allowed to do at all was to prohibit the selling or renting of land.

As shown by the allowance of this federal interference—as well as the greater federal control one could find in northern Mexico at the time—the state was certainly a part of revolutionary Mexican land reform. Similar to Guatemala, there were numerous departments and councils where groups and individuals could petition for land grants or land restitution, but this system was not a unified bureaucratic hierarchy like that created by Decree 900. Instead these various institutions were parts of the quasi-governmental structures created by the various revolutionary factions.

Another central difference between Guatemalan and Mexican land reform are their motivations. In the case of Guatemala, land reform may on the surface seem like a distinctly far-left reform. This is, as described by Wilkinson, how many Guatemalans reacted to it, with the only landowner in La Igualdad willing to even discuss land reform with the Local Agrarian Committee rejecting it entirely because of his vehement anticommunist views. U.S. foreign policy arguably held this perception as well, as Douglas W. Trefzger argues (pg. 32-3) that the intervention by the U.S. into Guatemala was not solely to protect their businesses interests with United Fruit Company but also as part of the larger-scale effort to contain communism and Soviet influence in the western hemisphere. And to this point it is certainly true that explicitly left-wing revolutionaries like those of Communist Party of Guatemala (PGT) were involved

in this effort and in some cases the redistributed land became successful worker cooperatives. However, Decree 900 was still a distinctly industrial-capitalistic effort. The legal justification used by Árbenz for the decree was Article 88 of the Guatemalan Constitution which allowed the government to make direct interventions in the national economy to help improve industry and agriculture. So, the improvement of the economy was the fundamental basis of the law. And the decree itself was not simply the redistribution of land, but rather the reallocation of unused land. At the time, according to Trefzger (pg. 32), only 12% of privately held land in Guatemala was even under cultivation, and the reorganizing of land ownership was intended to improve this percentage. Even further, the decree explicitly states that its goal is to develop "capitalist methods of production in agriculture and to prepare the way for the industrialization of Guatemala," with the specific methodology being the freeing of rural workers from dependency on specific plantations and thereby allowing them participate more openly in the labor market which would in turn improve the domestic economy and allow for greater industrialization.

When it comes to the driving factors behind land reform in revolutionary Mexico, it is harder to pin down specifics because the push for land reform existed in villages even before the more explicitly ideological revolutionary factions took form—though Baitenmann's "Popular Participation in State Formation" goes a long way in helping to suggest some motivations. A great deal of the petitioning for land by villages was obviously motivated by their own small-group economic interests, as debates around whether to apply for a land grant or for land restitutions often revolved around simply which one would grant them ownership of the most land, ut the motivations behind one of the most famous revolutionary factions, the Zapatistas, can be defined fairly clearly. Zapata desired the restoration of the land to the original pueblos that owned it, but it is also important to note that many of the land reform programs he and his people proposed often focused more

on equitable redistribution of land than on restoration to primordial ownership. A balance was struck overall, with some of the land seized being returned to the peoples who originally inhabited it and the rest being divided equally amongst others (pg. 6-7). What becomes clear when seeing this is the Zapatistas' commitment to justice and equity—to right past wrongs and create a more egalitarian future. Much like the differences in de/centralization in these land reform movements, this is strikingly different from the Guatemalan goal of modernizing the economy, even if elements of justice and equity were contained in Decree 900. And though Mexico and Guatemala are now firmly capitalist nations participating in the world economy, there is much that can be learned from their history as well as the present struggles of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation—named for the early revolutionary army—who combine Marxist, anarchist, and Indigenous politics in a fight for land-based autonomy in contemporary Mexico and Indigenous activists like Isabel Solís who have been fighting for communal land rights in Guatemala for decades.

Sources (nonexhaustive)

Farming While Black by Leah Penniman

"If You Don't Use Your Land, These Marxists May Take It" by Jack Nicas

"Meet The 25 Land Barons Who Collectively Own 1% Of America" by Hannah Kim

"American land barons: 100 wealthy families now own nearly as much land as that of New England" by Christopher Ingraham

"America's Biggest Owner Of Farmland Is Now Bill Gates" by Ariel Shapiro