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Privatization is Theft...

Kevin Carson

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...Unless the loot is distributed to crony capitalists. When you give feudal land holdings to the people working them—the real owners, in other words—you might as well prepare the welcome wagon for a CIA-sponsored coup.

As Jesse Walker points out at Reason Hit & Run, much of what Evo Morales calls “land reform” is what libertarians would call “privatization”—if it wasn’t done by, you know, Evo Morales. And if the beneficiaries weren’t poor people.

Walker adds:

Like most land reform plans, this one will eventually affect private holdings as well, though the holdings in question owe more to the remnants of Latin feudalism than to the market.

Of course, this last went over the heads of some commenters. The guy with the state title to the land is the “good guy,” regardless of how that title came about. One commenter, Captain Holly, wrote:

The article you linked makes it sound as if Morales is starting with distributing public land (an overall

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good thing) but will finish with the “redistribution” of the privately-held farms (a potential Zimbabwe-style disaster).

Given his leftist pedigree and choice of friends (Chavez, Castro), I’m not terribly optimistic about the results.

“Privately-held farms”—that’s one way to describe the latifundia, I guess. Or if you believe in some objective standard of justice in holdings, you might prefer Joseph Stromberg’s description:

...feudal land monopoly dating from the Spanish (and Portuguese) conquest and settlement. In most of these countries, the landed elites dominate the political structure; with its help, they exploit the peasants and maintain an agrarian reserve army of cheap and docile labor by quasifeudal labor dues, fraud, inflation (which devours small savings), and ultimately armed violence by landlord-sponsored vigilantes or national armies...

...Far from reflecting economies of scale arrived at in free markets, the politically based latifundia are so over-expanded that often as much as one third of the work force is required to boss the other demoralized two thirds. Hence, the great estates resemble nothing so much as islands of socialist “calculational chaos” unable to operate at optimum economic rationality.

On the playing of the Zimbabwe card, Walker had this to say:

It’s rather misleading to hold up Mugabe as an example here. For one thing, the land being

redistributed in Bolivia is idle and (thus far) government-owned, not productive and privately owned. For another, Mugabe is infamous for having perhaps the worst land “reform” package ever, one where land was seized according to race and distributed according to political connections. There have been a host of land reform schemes in world history, with a host of approaches and a host of outcomes. I have no idea how well-designed this plan in Bolivia is, but even if it’s bad I would be amazed if it’s anywhere near as putrid as Zimbabwe’s program.

As for the reference to Morales’ choice of friends, I suspect that choosing Uncle Sam as a friend would be considerably less popular in Latin America. And given the history of the U.S. government in overthrowing left-wing regimes, especially those engaged in land reform, and given its history of close ties to right-wing military dictatorships and death squads, any reference to “choice of friends” brings to mind the saying about glass houses. The U.S. government has been buddies with some of the absolute worst people in the world, so long as they were willing to make things comfortable for United Fruit Company. If my country faced the enmity of pigs like those controlling the U.S. government, I suspect I’d take my friends wherever I could find them. As Jonas Savimbi (one of the charming characters the U.S. chose as a friend) said, if you’re in a river full of crocodiles and somebody throws you a rope, you don’t worry about who’s holding the other end. If the U.S. doesn’t want countries turning to people like Castro and Chavez for support, maybe it should stay home and mind its own fucking business for a change.

There was a similar run of comments on Hugo Chavez under an H&R post this week. One commenter expressed the wish that the U.S. (excuse me, “we”) had succeeded in overthrowing

Chavez in 2002, instead of just supporting a “half-assed coup.”
In response, spur wrote:

we didn't support a half-assed coup, it failed cause Chavez is pretty popular and the people rallied. Chavez is popular in part because the fools the US supported before him, who received very little flack from libertarians[,] were actualy worse than him.

But golly, how could they be worse than him when their thuggishness was on behalf of the rich—you know, the *good guys*?

Another commenter, MUTT, pointed out in the same vein that mainstream libertarians hardly ever make a peep about the thieving aristocrats of the world, like Somoza. But when some left-wing populist attempts land reform of the big feudal estates, they start squealing like a bunch of little girls about the big ol' nasty threat to “sacred rights of property.”

See, it's a simple inversion of the “four legs good, two legs baaad” chant of Animal Farm's sheep: “Rich guy good, poor guy bad.” “Batista good, Castro bad.” “Suharto good, Sukarno bad.” “Pinochet good, Allende bad.” “Somoza good, Sandinistas bad.” Get the picture? When labor organizers or peasant activists get tortured to death and left in ditches with their faces hacked off, it's no big deal. But when some rich latifundista bastard loses land title to the people whose ancestors have been working it time out of mind, it's a crime against humanity. *Ceteris paribus*, state intervention on behalf of the rich is always more “libertarian” than statist intervention on behalf of the poor. Baaa, baaa, fuckin' baaaaaaa!