LAND, BLOOD AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION: LATIN AMERICA'S ETERNAL WAR ON THE POOR

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Abstract

This article examines economic and political processes and their implications for development, peace and democracy throughout various Latin American countries between 1960 and the present. It illustrates the continuous coexistence of neoliberalism and various forms of repression, which provides foundation for the argument that authoritarianism is the political counterpart of neoliberalism. A critique of the assumption that poverty can be alleviated through neoliberalism's promise – the ‘trickle-down’ effect – is offered. Findings recognise the relevance of more inclusive and humane economic policies in creating conditions for peace and democracy in Latin America.

Introduction

Many regard Latin America as a region of extremes – not only in terms of the extremities in the natural landscape, but also in terms of the living conditions of its peoples. The region contains the world’s largest and most bio-diverse rainforest, drained by the largest river, the Amazon. Latin America is rich in petroleum, natural gas, uranium, fresh water, rivers with hydroelectric potential, forests and marine life. Yet here one can also find the greatest inequality in the world, where 43% of the region’s more than 500 million inhabitants live in poverty (Sanches 2002). Latin America’s many faces each have their own reality: the homeless and starving children, who lead short and brutal lives; the peasants massacred and uprooted from their land; union leaders and human rights activists who are constantly under threat of being abducted and killed; men, women and children held in debt-bondage as slaves; those who toil under the scorching sun on plantations from dawn to dusk and are still unable to meet their basic human needs; the women who breathe in the toxic fumes 15 hours a day inside the plants in free trade zones and still cannot feed their children; the underweight, newborn babies; the women who die during childbirth due to the lack of medical assistance. The list is long. Yet despite their unique experiences, there are shared challenges for these groups. They are the ones who bear the weight of a system which concentrates ‘power in power and misery in misery’ (Marcos 2001) – a system which denies them their basic human rights and dignity. They are also the ones who are forgotten in the statistics when showing economic growth, and whose experiences are rendered invisible in the fast-changing world of globalisation. Meanwhile the elites of Latin America, often with military support from the North, continue to enjoy ‘first world’ lifestyles, promote deals with foreign enterprises and further subordinate their countries to global capital interests.

Although import substitution (protectionist policies aimed at helping domestic industries compete against imports) was attempted by governments at various times, most Latin
American countries resorted to a neoliberal developmental model which they have undertaken for more than two decades. This model is based on the idea that the best anti-poverty measure is to open societies for market-based competition which promises to create prosperity not only for enterprises, but also for the more unfortunate members of society, since wealth would trickle down to the poorest (Christie and Warburton 2001). While poverty is supposed to be alleviated through neoliberalism’s promise – the ‘trickle-down’ effect – the reverse unfolded. There is substantial evidence suggesting that neoliberalism produces poverty, aggravates inequality, impedes social development by turning human rights into commodities and destroys sustainable livelihoods by granting corporations unprecedented rights and freedoms. In Latin America the number of people living in poverty rose from 130 million in 1980 to 180 million at the beginning of the 1990s. The top 20% of the region’s population earn 20 times more the poorest 20% (Bello and Cunningham 1994). Moreover, since the 1980s the number of children leaving school early to support their families has increased by 50% (Green 1995). Even in terms of overall GDP growth, the negative impacts of neoliberal restructuring are clear. Between 1960 and 1980 GDP grew by 75%, while between 1980 and 1998 it grew by only 6% (Weisbrot 2001). As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Structural Adjustment and Debt argued, in 1999 the proportion of the rural population whose income and consumption fell below nationally defined poverty lines was 61% and the income of most Latin Americans was 20% lower than in 1980. Between 1991 and 1996 unemployment increased, reaching 7.4% in 1997 (Cheru 1999). Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) are a major component of the neoliberal agenda. It is often argued that they represent a political project of social transformation at the global level which seeks to make the world safe for multinational corporations (MNCs) by liberalisation, deregulation and reducing the role of the state in national development. These policies erode the social welfare of the poor and deny them their economic, social and cultural rights (Singh 1999).

Within this development problem, however, Latin America’s poor are not mere passive victims. They have in many cases illustrated Freire’s (1970) desire to be ‘the architects of their own liberation – building progress from below’. The neoliberal system has recognised the power of the downtrodden and perceived it as a threat – witnessed by the continuous persecution of, and violence visited upon, those who attempt in any way to challenge structural inequalities and injustices. Galtung’s (1996) ‘structural violence’ comes into focus here – a term used to describe any constraint on human potential imposed by economic and political structures. While direct violence is about inflicting traumas on the body, structural violence operates through needs deprivation. It is manifested in poverty, exploitation and the violation of human rights. An unequal and unjust social structure constitutes violation of the most basic human rights.

This article illustrates these connections by examining the economic and political conditions in various Latin American countries from 1960 to 1990 and from 1990 to the present. This division is based on the widely held perception that the decade of the 1990s is a break with history in many Latin American countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala and Argentina. The 1990s are considered to be a new epoch, representing the end of military rule and marking the onset of democratically elected governments. In each period the discussion centres on two topics, namely economic developments and the political atmosphere in
relation to human rights and democracy. Although each country has its unique historical and political context, there is much evidence of significant patterns across nations, the implications of which are of great importance to the struggle against poverty and for social justice, true democracy and peace.

The arguments of the paper are multiple, building on theorists of Latin America and peace studies. It focuses on the coexistence of neoliberalism and military and ideological repression and argues alongside Halebsky and Harris (1995) that neoliberalism advances while being unresponsive to the needs of most of the population; neoliberalism relies on the repression of the working majority, resulting in undemocratic political regimes throughout much of Latin America. History illustrates that violence, repression and human rights violations are an inevitable expression of an underlying socio-economic structure established by global processes which have always entailed class struggle. The more unrestrained, unregulated and free capitalism is, the more repressive becomes the political system necessary to ensure its maintenance.

These ideas are supported by Galtung (1996) who argues that structural violence often leads to direct violence, the aim of which is to maintain oppressive structures. Building on Galtung, the paper assumes that social and economic changes constitute development only when they lead to an improvement in the living conditions of the majority of the population. For Galtung, development involves meeting basic needs and developing these needs further. He describes peace as the absence of violence of all kinds and non-violent and creative conflict transformation. In the absence of conditions under which everyone’s basic human needs are adequately met (development), structural and direct violence would always prevail, eliminating the possibility of peace. Thus development, economic policy and peace are inherently interconnected.

This paper attempts to bring forward important connections that have remained unrevealed, excluded or insufficiently dealt with in academic literature. The significant amount of works on the topic of authoritarian governments, political instability, violence and human rights violations throughout the region has given little attention to the economic developments that were taking place amidst the never-ending atrocities (Blanchard and Landstreet 1989; Horton 1998; May 2001). Today one can find a significant number of critics who point to the destructive effects of the neoliberal agenda on social and economic development (Weaver 2000; Tabb 2002; Stiglitz 2002; North and Cameron 2003). However, only few authors, such as Green (1995), Veltmeyer (1997) and Holloway and Pelaez (1998), make brief references to the undemocratic tendencies of neoliberalism. Existing literature tends to be compartmentalised into the economic and the social on one hand, and the political on the other. This paper seeks to advance existing research by transcending these arbitrary divisions and placing economic and political developments side by side – linking past with present and local with global.

Authoritarianism and Its Impact on Prospects for Peace and Democracy between 1960 and 1990

The period between 1960 and 1990 is full of tragic memories for most Latin Americans. The human rights violations that took place during these years have been widely documented in academic literature and films in many parts of the world (Smith 1989;
Seidman 1994; Tula 1994; Boron 1995; Fowler 1996; Richter 1997; Horton 1998; Payne 2000; May 2001). The following discussion reviews what is already well known and almost undisputed by sociologists, anthropologists, historians and political economists.

In Guatemala state-sponsored violence has been a persistent feature of the political landscape throughout the country’s history. Since the 1950s Guatemala has been in the hands of the military. State-sponsored terrorism began after 1960 when guerrilla groups were killed on a massive scale. In the 1970s indigenous peasants were organising peacefully to assert and defend their interests through cooperative movements. However, the repressive apparatus was attempting to eliminate not just suspected guerrillas, but also potential sympathisers or supporters (Brockett 1990). In March 1966 the government murdered 28 intellectuals (May 2001). Twenty thousand Guatemalans disappeared between 1966 and 1976. In one year (1977-1978) 100 Kechi Indians were killed. Between 1978 and 1985 the government destroyed approximately 440 villages, killed between 100,000 and 150,000 people and left over 100,000 children orphaned. One million people were internally displaced and 150,000 refugees fled to Mexico (Berger 1992).

The targets of state terrorism were popular leaders, citizens with leftist, reformist ideas and their families, workers and campesinos (May 2001). According to Brockett (1990), the military exceeded all past levels of barbarity between 1980 and 1989. The indigenous population of Guatemala was violently subjugated to ensure the long-term elimination of the threats of radical insurgencies and autonomous indigenous movements. The countryside was penetrated by the military and people were coerced into civil defence patrols whose duty was to ‘protect’ villagers from subversives (Berger 1992).

Since the 1950s the United States had been providing the Guatemala government with military assistance worth $60 million for the fight against communism, despite evidence of massive state-sponsored violence against its people. Since the 1950s the United States had been providing the Guatemala government with military assistance worth $60 million for the fight against communism, despite evidence of massive state-sponsored violence against its people. This assistance went on training, technical advice, helicopters and other equipment. Following a visit to the country in 1982, when military repression had reached its peak, President Ronald Reagan declared that Efrain Rios Montt, the president at the time, was ‘totally dedicated to democracy in Guatemala’ (Brockett 1990:115). Reagan and Rios Montt shared a commitment to fight communism, a national security doctrine that was adopted after 1959 (Berger 1992).

Another country with somewhat similar experiences is Nicaragua prior to the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. In 1975, after 33 months of national siege, 3,000 peasants were executed while many more were detained and tortured (Brockett 1990). In 1977, according to Amnesty International, ‘the Northeast was under virtual military occupation… with frequent apparently arbitrary killings, torture, massive detentions and disappearances, as well as the confiscation of goods… and the burning of crops, homes and farm buildings’ (Brockett 1990:168). The purpose of the state terrorism, according to the National Guard, was to intimidate campesinos who might be impelled to collaborate with or conceal insurgents, to discover those campesinos already doing so and to locate the guerrillas.

After the Sandinistas took power in 1979 the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie turned to Washington for direction, uniting with the CIA-financed and directed counter-revolutionary forces
(Contras) attempting to overthrow the government. Ronald Reagan was hostile towards the main goal of the revolutionary programme – an increased national autonomy and a reduced external vulnerability (Spalding 1987). He provided strong support to the Contras whose policy of terrorism was directed at the civilian population. By 1986 close to 11,000 Nicaraguans had died in the war (Brockett 1990). It is worth noting that at the time Reagan and Jeane Kirkpatrick, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, argued for greater tolerance towards right-wing ‘authoritarian’ regimes than left-wing ‘totalitarian’ ones, as a result of the perceived threat to US security and economic interests in Latin America and the Caribbean (Dietz 1984; Human Rights Watch 1998). The goal of the Contras was achieved when the Sandinistas lost to the US-backed Union Nacional de Oposicion whose main elements were bourgeois industrialists and landowners (Broad 1993).

Argentina is another Latin American country with a disturbing human rights record and a history of violence and repression which have been continuously associated with growing inequality and poverty. In 1966 President Juan Carlos Ongania implemented the following authoritarian measures: the outlawing of all political parties; a prohibition on the formation of new parties; elimination of national and provincial legislative institutions as well as other elective bodies; removal of all judges from the Supreme Court; and a campaign against the press, universities and those manifestations of popular culture considered to be decadent by the regime’s moral censors (Smith 1989). In 1976 General Jorge Rafael Videla became president and here, according to Smith (1989), began Argentina’s second experiment in authoritarianism. Three years later Amnesty International accused the Videla government of holding 3,000 political prisoners and being responsible for the disappearance of between 15,000 and 20,000 citizens (Smith 1989). High levels of repression continued after 1979. In 1976, the year which Smith cites as the beginning of Argentina’s second experiment in authoritarianism, has also been identified by many scholars as the beginning of neoliberalism in this country.

During the same period many Brazilians also became victims of military repression. Immediately after the 1964 military coup up to 50,000 people were arrested. Six months later 8,000 were still detained. Hundreds of unionists were removed from office through arrests. Other individuals suspected of subversion were systematically detained, tortured and exiled. Between 1969 and 1973 local and multinational companies in Sao Paulo such as Grupo Ultra, Ford and General Motors financed army-supported paramilitary organisations to exercise repression and operate a network of secret prisons, widespread detention and torture (Seidman 1994).

Many other Latin American nations exhibited similar forms of authoritarianism. In El Salvador the civil war which lasted from 1979 to 1992 claimed more than 80,000 lives. Again, the state’s military apparatus terrorised civilians in its search for rebels (Tula 1994). In Mexico during the ‘Dirty War’ of the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of leftists, students and other anti-government activists disappeared (Sullivan 2002). In Peru the political violence of the 1980s, which continued into the 1990s, resulted in 40,000 deaths and 5,000 disappearances as well as many cases of torture and rape (Rights Action 2002). In Chile, three months after General Augusto Pinochet had overthrown the democratically elected President Salvador Allende in a military coup in 1973, the army had killed at least 1,500 people in a savage assault on trade unionists and political activists (Green 1995).
The Nature of the Economic Policies from the 1960s-1990s: Unveiling Neoliberalism

So far I have described the authoritarian form of governance along with the human rights violations and widespread military and ideological repression in a number of countries. Before examining the economic policies that existed under these regimes and their impacts on the working majority, some trends in the economic history of Latin America are highlighted to illustrate the historical continuity of the concentration of land ownership, wealth and decision-making power in few hands as well as the consolidation of the subordinate position of most Latin American countries within the global hierarchy of power.

Since the 18th century the profit-generating sector of the economy has favoured the export of agricultural commodities (Brockett 1990). With the emergence of the independent nation state, local elites (landowners and commercial groups) continued to advocate an expansion of the export economy which directly benefited. Many became shareholders in foreign enterprises in exchange for making local resources and labour available to foreign capital. This required further expropriation of land and labour from the peasantry. After World War II the commercialisation and internationalisation of agriculture along with a concentration of land ownership, intensified. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the Inter-Development Bank provided loans for the expansion of exports (Brockett 1990). Although import substitution was attempted by some governments in the 1950s and 1960s, by the end of the 1960s most Latin American countries were inserted into an emerging transnational economy in which patterns of production, finance and trade were articulated by MNCs (Smith 1989). In fact, even when there was state intervention to promote import substitution industrialisation, it favoured the advance of large capitalist producers – industries and estate owners, who later became the protagonists of the subsequent neoliberal policy model (North and Cameron, 2003). A short detour into the theory of neoliberalism assists further analysis.

The shift to what has become known as ‘neoliberal’ policies (trade liberalisation, privatisation, and deregulation) began in the late 1970s in response to the increasing debts faced by Third World countries, and the pressure to pay them. Many Latin American nations had already begun to borrow heavily to pay for the imports of industrial commodities (and even in some cases foodstuffs) while maintaining economies heavily based on agricultural exports. International banks, inundated with capital from oil-exporting nations at the beginning of the 1970s, encouraged intensive borrowing by developing countries, which served few purposes. First, lending was a way to generate funds to pay interest on the deposits of the oil-producing countries. Second, loans were used for political leverage – they went into the hands of military governments which were committed to eliminate any possible threat of communism within their countries. Third, these loans were exported back to Western banks as corrupt presidents and other government officials placed them in private accounts. The cycle of borrowing and debt was fuelled by the mid-1970s Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) crisis, the rising interest rates on loans by the late 1970s and the onset of recession in the industrial North in the early 1980s. These led to the drop in prices of raw materials from the South, increased borrowing of funds to pay for interest payments to commercial banks, and eventually the Third World debt crisis. The Reagan
administration used these challenged international economic conditions as a weapon to pressure governments to adopt more market-oriented policies. In order to receive loans from the WB or the IMF, governments had to agree to a programme of structural adjustment which followed the neoliberal model: drastically reducing public spending on health, education, and welfare (austerity); cutting wages or severely constraining their rise; liberalising trade and promoting export-oriented growth; removing restrictions on foreign investment; devaluing the local currency; privatising state enterprises; and embarking on radical deregulation. Although the pretext was to make Third World economies more efficient and capable of sustained growth, some analysts argue that true objective was to dismantle the Third World state as a potential agent of autonomous economic development (Bello, Cunningham, and Rau 1994).

As in much of the Third World, in Latin America the structural adjustment policies contributed to an escalation of poverty and inequality and deterioration in the living standards of the majority of the population. During the decade of SAPs implementation (1980-1990) the number of poor grew from 130 to 180 million (Bello, Cunningham and Rau 1994). A more detailed discussion on the impact of SAPs follows.

The core of the programme implemented by Latin American governments – austerity, trade liberalisation and deregulation – had been directly advocated by the Institute for International Economics (IIE) in US in its publication *Toward Renewed Economic Growth in Latin America* (1986). In 1989 the Institute convened a conference to explore the extent to which these reforms were indeed pursued in the region. The participants, including representatives from International Financial Institutions (IFIs), economic agencies of the US government and the US Federal Reserve Board, concluded the conference with ideas for reforms that were still needed in Latin America. John Williamson, a senior official at the IIE, made a list of 10 such reforms under the name ‘Washington Consensus’ consisting of: fiscal restraint; public expenditures in fields with high economic returns; tax reform; financial liberalisation; competitive exchange rate; trade liberalisation; removal of barriers to foreign investment; privatisation of state-owned enterprises; deregulation; and security for property rights (Williamson and Kuczynski 2003). The term ‘Washington Consensus’ has come to symbolise the neoliberal agenda that was (and continues to be) implemented in many Third World countries. The vehicles for neoliberal global restructuring are, among other organisations, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the IMF and the WB.

The implementation and the resulting impact of neoliberal policies on the economic and social development of Latin America in the 1990s will be discussed in the next section. First, however, some discussion of the economic agenda pursued by the military regimes (1960-1990) in various countries in Latin America is raised to illustrate that the context of policy-making (and therefore the resulting policies) was already conditioned by the strong presence of the neoliberal ideology.

Central America’s implementation of the agro-export development model (one of the components of the neoliberal transformation) gave wealth to some, but for much of the peasantry it meant loss of land, food supply and autonomy (Brockett 1990). The banana companies’ enormous landholdings, obtained at concessionary prices in the 1920s and 1930s, contributed to a rapidly expanding pool of landless peasants. In 1970, for instance, 72% of the land in Guatemala was owned by 2.1% of landowners. In 1981, 83% of the rural
population lived in poverty and 81% of all children suffered from malnutrition (Berger 1992). *Campesinos* were often forced off their land to encourage economic development schemes. As May (2001) states, the periods of greatest violence are all characterised by economic innovation and expansion.

Similar conditions manifested in other countries. In El Salvador export-oriented growth based on coffee was characterised by extreme inequality. The landholdings of six of the wealthiest families were equal to 80% of the landholdings of rural residents and 68% of the country’s population lived in poverty (Tula 1994). In Peru another component of the neoliberal transformation – structural adjustment, which removes price controls and state subsidies – began in the mid 1970s and provoked mass protests. Chile under General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) implemented almost a full neoliberal programme, which led to a huge increase in inequality (Green 1995).

Argentina is another country in which neoliberalism had started much earlier than the mid-1980s, as many economists and sociologists would claim. After the takeover by the military in 1955 a pattern of dependent development emerged in which rapid expansion was combined with growing subordination of the country to the advanced core regions of the world economy. In the late 1970s the Argentine authorities prescribed orthodox IMF stabilisation formulas: greater reliance on free market mechanisms; reduction of state intervention; opening the economy to the outside pursuit of comparative advantage; and liberal foreign investment laws put in place to attract international capital. Public expenditure on social welfare such as housing, health and education was further reduced. Workers and the middle class were made to bear the heaviest burden of the neoliberal strategy (Smith 1989).

The so-called ‘Brazilian miracle’ of the late 1960s and early 1970s not only produced a more unequal distribution of income, but also left low-income groups worse off in absolute terms. Poverty and unemployment increased alongside increases in the growth of GNP (Escobar 1995). From 1964 strict control on wage levels was imposed in order to reduce labour costs and attract foreign and domestic private capital to specific industrial sectors. Income inequality grew and income concentrated among the upper-middle classes. In 1970 half of all Brazilians earned less than the minimum wage at the time. The military government eliminated job stability regulations, giving employers more rights to take advantage of the existence of a large pool of unemployment workers (Seidman 1994).

These cases illustrate that capitalism in Latin America had begun gradually to acquire neoliberal characteristics much earlier than was officially proclaimed through the Washington Consensus in the mid-1980s. The economic policies during some of the bloodiest dictatorships were neoliberal in nature.

**The 1990s: Promises and Reality of the Neoliberal Agenda**

Today Latin American countries are more dependent than ever on external trade for several reasons: the restructuring of their economies around the export of non-traditional products; the repayment of their huge debts through the foreign exchange earned from these exports; and their adoption of free trade policies. These developments have not strengthened their
position in world trade because they are designed to transform Latin American economies into the captive markets of a single trade block dominated by North American-based MNCs and their local business associates (Halebsky and Harris 1995). The following discussion describes the continuation and development of neoliberal policies and practices during the 1990s and their impact on the working majority.

In Nicaragua neoliberalism resumed with full power after the 10-year rule of the Sandinistas had been brought to an end through a combination of military and economic interventions by the US with the help of the Contras. Following closely the IMF’s austerity recipe, Violeta Chamorro, who became president in 1990, fired 250,000 public employees. Industrial employment fell by a third and unemployment reached 22%. The government’s plan also froze education and health expenditure, raised electricity and water rates and reduced import tariffs and wages (Green 1995). As a result of the lack of funding for health care, a serious outbreak of haemorrhagic dengue occurred in 1995. Infant mortality rates reached the worst in the country’s history (Close 1999). Today 80% of the population lives in poverty, 30,000 families in the country’s northern and western regions are facing acute hunger and 8,000 children are severely malnourished (Vargas 2002).

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Trade liberalisation, a major component of neoliberalism, has been creating landless peasants in many countries through forcible displacement, low prices of cash crops, replacement of traditional crops with imports and the lack of price controls, access to credit and other government support. Such is the case of Mexico, for example, where as a consequence of the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, Article 27 of the Mexican constitution eliminated the ejido system of communal landholdings, allowing the selling, purchasing or renting of ejido land. Thus large agri-businesses, landowners and corporations were enabled to increase land acquisition, leaving behind poor landless communities without any social provision. Furthermore, trade liberalisation gradually eliminated national industries, especially micro-, small-, and medium-scale, as they were unable to compete with MNCs (CASA 2001). More than a million jobs have been lost, most of them in manufacturing, since Vicente Fox became president (Thomson 2002). Moreover, during the last 18 years of SAPs, there has been a market trend towards underemployment and informal employment as stagnant salary policies maintain wages below the minimum needed for subsistence (CASA 2001). The growth that Mexico has experienced benefits only the upper 10% of the population who own 40% of the country’s wealth (Stiglitz 2002). NAFTA has generated a quarter-trillion dollars in cross-border trade with the US, but it has done little to close the huge divide between the privileged few and the poor.

In Colombia peasants, indigenous people and Afro-Colombians, whose presence prevents the successful exploitation of natural resources by foreign corporations, were and continue to be evicted through campaigns of terror and massacres. The daily average of people being internally displaced in areas of untapped oil and gas reserves is 1,029 (Larsen 2002). The process of privatisation (of banks in particular) is another factor that negatively affects many rural Colombians, since it results in restricted credit for small-scale farmers which in turn makes their survival as farmers impossible due to their inability to compete with wealthy landowners. The lack of price guarantees and President Uribe’s plan to do away with the few surviving national agrarian institutions are making life difficult for small
cultivators (Mondragon 2002; Ferrer 2002). Furthermore, the President’s ‘New Programme’ includes labour reform that reduces overnight and overtime wages and reduces public sector salaries by 30%. All of the above have aggravated poverty greatly. Seven million Colombians are unable to afford even one square meal per day and two million peasants have no land to work on (Ferrer 2002). Half of the country’s children suffer from hunger and 40% of the population live in absolute poverty, unable to satisfy basic subsistence needs (Giraldo 1996).

In Argentina, when President Carlos Menem came to power in 1989, he adopted even more radical neoliberal policies than those of his predecessors, including a rapid downsizing of the state apparatus, drastic deregulation and an opening of the economy to the rigours of international competition. As a result blue-collar industrial wages could acquire only 40% of the market basket of basic goods and services, while unemployment surpassed 16%. Menem’s drastic neoliberal policies eliminated hyperinflation, but the economic growth experienced was uneven. As a result of his policies the poorest households lost 15% of their income, while the richest saw a 20% increase. Today beggars and homeless people are a common sight in cities (BBC 2001).

In Brazil in 1994, after four years of a reactionary neoliberal regime, 53 million people were living below the poverty datum line with no access to land or other means of production nor remunerated employment. Slave labour, wage enslavement and child labour continue to be widespread (Veltmeyer 1997). Today about 25,000 men, women and children work as slave labourers in rural Brazil. About 5.4 million children between the ages of five and 17 – of them 296,000 under nine – are known to work on charcoal ranches (Osava 2003). Almost half of all the arable land in Brazil is controlled by 1% of all landlords. While millions of peasants remain landless, 42% of large landholdings are left idle (Veltmeyer 1997).

All of the countries discussed so far have implemented drastic neoliberal policies, yet the majority of their populations have been left behind in increasing poverty and inequality. In fact, between 1997 and 2001 the number of poor in Latin America grew by more than 10 million (Sanches 2002), and since 1985 the number of children leaving school early to support their families has increased by 50% (Green 1995). As growth remains erratic, deepening social inequalities generate widespread protest (North and Cameron 2003). Continuous waves of resistance have been observed among the working majority throughout Latin America in response to austerity measures which reduce government spending on public services. Green (1995) documents anti-austerity protests between 1976-94 in 13 Latin American countries following events such as price increases, pay cuts, lay-offs, sale of state enterprises to MNCs and removal of food subsidies. All of the protests have been attended by injuries, arrests and deaths. With the growing inability of the state to respond to the needs of the masses, a wider variety of repressive techniques has been invented.

The 1990s to the Present: Where are the Human Rights and Democracy?

Contrary to the popular belief that democracy became a common feature of the political landscape of Latin America in the 1990s, the various forms of repression used by
Authoritarian regimes from the past continue to exist. In Guatemala during 1990 alone 1,513 political assassinations occurred and 238 people disappeared. The victims were union and religious leaders, workers, students and professors. In the countryside security forces have burned peasant crops, killed livestock, raped women and perpetuated massacres (Berger 1992). The ‘civil patrols’ that were formed under military orders, responsible for mass human rights violations, were to have been disbanded under the 1996 Peace Accords, but in reality have continued to operate in various areas of the country and have been allegedly responsible for new abuses (AI News 2002).

Amnesty International reports that the human rights situation in Guatemala deteriorated in 2002. A pattern has been observed of continuing threats, intimidation and attacks against human rights defenders and members of the legal community involved in efforts to combat impunity or seeking to implement key aspects of the Peace Accords. The remains of an indigenous human rights activist who was a lawyer were found in Guatemala on 17 December 2002 (Prensa Libre 2002). A few months earlier, in September, an accountant in the Rigoberta Menchu Foundation, which pursues prosecution against former military officers, was killed (AI News 2002).

Colombia is another country where horrifying human rights violations are occurring. President Uribe has granted the state security forces sweeping powers to arrest suspects without legal warrants. Civilians are the targets of the new measures as the government sees suspects lurking in every corner and possible guerrilla collaborators in every human rights activist, union leader and journalist. As part of the ‘democratic security’ policy a network of an estimated million civilian informants, which could allow for malicious accusations against neighbours or foes, has been set up (Ferrer 2002). Teachers, campesinos, union leaders and indigenous leaders are regularly abducted. A member of the Afro-Colombian community of Jiguamiando named Cristobal Hinestroza Paz was abducted by the paramilitary on 26 November 2002. Then he was found decapitated and his body cut into 77 pieces. On 10 January 2003 agents from the Colombian Administrative Security Department and the Attorney General’s office raided the Unitary Workers Federation offices in Cali. In Barrancaverrmeja 2,000 people were killed when the paramilitary took over the town. Thousands of campesinos have been massacred because of alleged connections to guerrillas. Union leaders say such raids, along with a growing number of arrests, abductions and killings of unionists and campesinos, are part of a plan by the government of Uribe to destroy the labour movement and all opposition to his authoritarian neoliberal policies (Interchurch Commission of Justice and Peace 2002).

Human rights activists are under attack in a number of other countries. In Honduras the treasurer of the local branch of the Honduran Human Rights Committee, Jose Callejas Pineda, was shot dead on 26 August 2002. He had been challenging organised criminals and big landowners. His death is the fifth unresolved killing of a human rights committee member in 14 years in this country. Other members of the human rights committee have been killed for defending impoverished peasants who occupied vacant fields (Gonzales 2002). In Nicaragua 300 peasant co-operative members were killed by the ex-Contra during the first three years of the neoliberal government of Chamorro. In Mexico since the 1994 Zapatista uprising hundreds of campesinos have been victimised by the paramilitary (WNU 2002).

In Brazil the fundamental rights of vast sectors of society continue to be violated. Torture is still part of the justice system and alarmingly high numbers of unlawful killings by police and death squads have been recorded. On 17 April 1996, 100 peasants marched along a highway to Belem in the state of Para to demand title to the land on which they
had settled. But at Eldorado de Carajas they were met by police gunfire which killed 19 people and injured over 40 others. Of the 155 officers who took part in the massacre only two were found guilty (Osava 2003). Moreover, thousands of street children are being murdered in Brazil by death squads and police, and with no consequences to the perpetrators (Diebel 2000).

In Argentina equally striking evidence of repression is found. The number of torture cases is increasing as is the country’s severe socio-economic crisis and glaring poverty (Valente 2002). Between 1998 and 2000 in the province of Buenos Aires, 3,013 reports of torture and police brutality were reported to the Secretariat of Human Rights, but only four went to trial (Valente 2003). Between 1999 and 2000 at least 60 minors have died in alleged clashes with the police (Valente 2002). The practices that existed during the bloodiest dictatorship in fact continue in many jails and police stations, and the perpetrators (police and private security forces) commit these criminal acts with complete impunity.

**Conclusion**

This article has provided an overview of the main patterns and trends that could be detected in the political and economic developments across Latin America between 1960 and the present. From the 1960s to 1990s countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador have exhibited substantially authoritative regimes, where the repressive apparatuses were responsible for massacres and human rights violations. Campaigns of terror were directed against insurgent rebel groups and anyone else who was perceived or alleged to have sympathy for, or cooperated with, these groups. The majority of those killed, ‘disappeared’ and tortured in state terror were civilians and members of non-armed, peaceful social organisations, usually justified by defence against subversion and the possible threat of communism.

In fact, many of the armed uprisings were born out of the brutal repression, inhumane treatment and neglect for human wellbeing that peasants and the urban proletariat were experiencing. Governments never inquired into or positively acted upon the conditions that gave rise to the uprisings. Armed revolutionaries had embraced the cause of the vast majorities of their populations who had been dispossessed and subjugated for centuries (Brockett 1990). These forms of resistance were, and continue to be, an inevitable expression of the oppressive nature of the economic, social and political structure of most Latin American countries.

Clearly the conditions brought about by changes adopted against the interests of the majority of the population could not be maintained without force. As the market became the driving force of the economy in many countries, the state’s role consisted of extinguishing any visible form of opposition from below and clearing the path for the drastic neoliberal policies that it implemented. Even when the Washington Consensus of the 1980s attempted to ‘solve’ Latin America’s underdevelopment, the WB, IMF and US did not find anything wrong with the political atmosphere. On the contrary, they conferred the task of economic transformations, which were now officially recognised as neoliberal, upon the most violent dictators, such as Guatemala’s Rios Montt who, in the eyes of Reagan,
was ‘strongly committed to democracy’. As the analysis in this paper has shown, neoliberal measures designed to increase the power of capital and keep the working class powerless were implemented by the most authoritarian governments.

By examining the continuation of trade liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation in the 1990s across Latin America and their impact on the population, the paper has illustrated that poverty and inequality have increased while social development has been greatly impeded. Advocates of neoliberalism still maintain that in the long term the ‘trickle-down’ would be felt even by those at the bottom of the economic ladder. This claim should be treated with a high degree of scepticism for two reasons. First, the neoliberal model of capitalism has been around long enough to enable us to draw conclusions about its ability to fight poverty. Second, it is hard to believe that even in the ‘long-term’ this form of capitalism will fulfil its promises given the human costs: forcible displacement of millions of peasants in ‘globalisation projects’; slave labour and sweatshops; growing squatter settlements and homelessness, creating more slum dwellers and street children; and increasing repression and persistent attacks on organised labour and social/human rights activists. Not only are there detrimental economic and social consequences. As this paper has demonstrated, neoliberalism has often been associated with authoritarian rule.

Today the military continues to serve economic development plans that advance the expansion of neoliberalism and the need to destroy subordinate class opposition (Berger 1992). Following the news closely even for a short time, say two weeks, one feels disheartened by reports of disappearances of unionists, assaults on human rights workers and massacres of campesinos, all amid increasing poverty, as the numerous examples in this article have shown. Yet President Hugo Chavez, whose aims are to resist the ‘savage neoliberalism’ imposed by the IMF and US and to promote the internal development of Venezuela for the benefit of the majority, is regarded as a dictator by the US Administration (Gott 2000).

In the past the acts of violence against civilians were justified as protection from subversion; today repression is legalised once again as a measure necessary to combat terrorism. A recent survey conducted by Chile’s Latino Barometro Organisation indicates that an authoritarian culture is once again on the rise (Ferrer 2002). In South America alone, 90,000 people have disappeared as a direct result of the operation of the School of the Americas and US counter-insurgency policies (Tricot 2002). Nevertheless, the number of joint US-Latin American military exercise and training programmes are increasing (Robinson 2002). Clearly no lessons have been learned.

Those who want to maintain their privileges unquestioned have always waged the war against the poor in Latin America. A conflict will always exist between neoliberalism (which claims to be about freedom of the market) and true democracy (freedom of choice for the majority); the former benefits the wealthy while the latter gives voice to the impoverished. As I have shown in the histories of most Latin American countries, the political counterpart of neoliberalism is authoritarianism. It is well known that in Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1980s there were military repression and human rights violations. Less acknowledged is the nature of the economic policies (neoliberal) and conditions (impoverishment of the majority) that existed at the time. Neoliberal economic policies are
widely recognised today. However, there are attempts to conceal the prevailing authoritarianism which shows up as direct acts of violence and widespread impunity.

What are the implications of these findings for the development of countries in the region? Since the assumption underlying this paper is that social and economic changes constitute development only when they lead to an improvement in the living conditions of the majority of the population, neoliberalism is therefore inherently incompatible with development or with a more inclusive and humane definition of progress. The many faces and stories of Latin America described in the introduction point to the idea that a liberating development cannot be imposed from above, but must be constructed from below by addressing the structural inequalities that have oppressed and continue to oppress vast sectors of society.

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Endnotes

1 Halebsky and Harris (1995) point out that even the civilian regimes which replaced the military dictatorships have been neither truly democratic nor sovereign. They exclude the popular classes from effective participation in the political process and their decisions are subject to the de facto veto of the military and the external dictates of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, the United States government and multinational corporations.

2 Green (1995) rightly argues that although neoliberalism theoretically supports a restricted concept of liberal democracy and the rule of law, in practice it has often been associated with authoritarian rule.

3 Trade liberalisation refers to free trade or the removal of any trade barriers, such as tariffs and quotas. Privatisation requires the sale of public enterprises and assets to private owners. Deregulation constitutes the removal of government restrictions and interventions on capital to allow market forces to act as a self-regulating mechanism. This process can take the form of labour market or financial deregulation (Weaver 2000).

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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING: LESSONS FROM THE US-CENTRAL AMERICA SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT

SHARON ERICKSON NEPSTAD

Abstract

Oppressed groups struggling for peace, justice and economic reform are increasingly appealing to the international community for support and assistance. Yet these groups face numerous challenges as they try to capture the attention and commitment of potentially sympathetic audiences. Given the success of the United States-Central America peace movement of the 1980s, this article focuses on the methods used by solidarity organisers to persuade members of US faith communities to participate in various transnational citizen peacemaking campaigns. These initiatives were designed to end the region’s civil wars and to promote opportunities for the poor of Central America to reconstruct their socio-economic and political systems without foreign interference. Based on archival research and in-depth interviews with solidarity activists and organisers, this article examines how the church – as an established, respected transnational institution – played a critical part in this movement. Additional attention is given to the role of missionaries, who served as a link between faith communities in the United States and Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. The article concludes with several lessons that international peace and justice movements can learn from the successes and failures of this case.

Introduction

Those experiencing conflict, human rights abuses, and economic exploitation are increasingly reaching across borders to solicit support from third parties. Although many of these appeals are aimed at governmental organisations, a plethora of non-governmental groups have emerged – such as Doctors Without Borders and Peace Brigades International – that provide concrete expressions of solidarity with those struggling for social and economic justice and peace (Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The growth of these grassroots groups raises a number of questions. How is transnational solidarity created? What are effective techniques for capturing the international community’s attention and commitment? How do organisers overcome cultural differences and geographic distances in transnational peacemaking efforts?

This article addresses such questions by exploring the role of the church in the US-Central America peace movement. During the 1980s, thousands of US citizens supported those working for land reform, equality and an end to the repression caused by the military regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala and the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries known as the Contras. Solidarity groups challenged the US government to change its foreign policy and cut military aid to Central America. Some citizens travelled to the region to document human rights abuses, to deter war-related violence, to assist with harvests or to accompany union leaders and political activists who had received threats from paramilitary forces. Many of these campaigns constituted ‘transnational citizen peacemaking’, which