

Musings on Some Neglected Aspects of Latin American Development

Raymond E. Crist

Research Professor Emeritus

Department of Geography

University of Florida

Gainesville, Florida 32611

MEXICO

I first entered the vast Indo-Latin culture area on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico in 1926. Going up the Usapanapa River from Puerto Mexico to the oil camp where I was to work, I noticed thatch-roofed huts surrounded by small clearings hacked out of the dense tropical rainforest. On these clearings the local Indian population raised for their own use crops of corn, beans, and squash. They also raised oranges and papayas, which they brought by dugout canoe to the small farmers' market at the oil camp and which they sold at what seemed like ridiculously low prices. Their lives were scarcely touched by the oilfield operations in the area or by the revolutionary activity that had shaken the nation to its foundations in the years since 1910.

Subsistence farmers have reappeared a half century later along the new highways that have been built into the area. They now build their huts and plant their crops of corn, beans, squash, and plantains on the right of way of the highway, the strip of land on which the landless squatters can grow food crops between the pavement and the barbed wire fence. Beyond the fence, the land is owned by large landholders who use it for the growing of bananas or plantains or for pasture on which beef cattle graze. Both these crops are for export to distant markets. The local labor force is thus marginalized socially, economically, and politically, as land and other food-producing resources become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands: This after the revolution that was fought for "land and liberty!" The identical situation was encountered in Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s, before Castro.

VENEZUELA

I spent the years 1928 to 1931 in geological investigations along the Llanos-Andes border in Venezuela and summarized my observations in the *Geographical Review* (Crist 1932). I spent a summer field season in 1954 in the same area to record some of the changes in the cultural landscape that had taken place during the intervening years. I visited the sector again in 1982 to chronicle some of the changes that had taken place during the previous quarter century, to collate observations made over the past half century, and to place this major physiographic boundary zone in a broader national context.

Early on in Venezuela, in what was then a remote peripheral frontier area, I became aware of and interested in the importance of land tenure on land management practices. Boundary lines were vague and land was concentrated in the hands of a few powerful families who held it largely on a de facto rather than a de jure basis. The grasslands were devoted to extensive ranching. The poor and the landless cleared their tiny plots in the wooded areas on which they produced their corn, beans, and yuca for domestic use as they had done for centuries.

With the death of Gómez in 1935, the plutocracy concentrated political power in Caracas as never before and well-paved roads reached out to the national frontiers. Today, those who produce cattle, sugarcane, cotton, and sesame for industrial processing are able to obtain massive credits or subsidies (*realazos*, as the Venezuelans say). The small farmers get few if any credits and little or no technical assistance. In many cases they have difficulty in getting to market the food crops they do produce.

CONCLUSIONS

If a universal, lasting development is to occur in Latin America, emphasis must be placed on foodstuffs that can be grown and consumed locally. Domestic consumers should have enough income to insure that their needs are met before vast acreages and subsidies are allotted to producers of crops for export. Even the Soviet Union and Cuba allot small **[end p. 71]** plots to farmers on which to produce food crops for home use and for sale locally.

Not only in Mexico and Venezuela, but in the Philippines, in Jamaica, in Puerto Rico, in Guatemala, in Ecuador--to mention but a few--small farmers who cultivated on rich alluvial soils a variety of food crops for their own use and for the local market have been displaced, effectively denied access to land, credit, and a market for any surplus they might produce. The concentration of land in few hands has gone on apace. It is worked in a highly mechanized, capital-intensive fashion to produce crops for export by companies accountable to the interest of no country. The huge profits go to the local elite or are banked abroad. This is the pattern of neocolonialism.

The world's leaders must somehow be made aware of the necessity to invest in farm people. The elite have the ability and the means to emphasize education in farming methods and techniques at the corn and rice-roots level. With enough encouragement and determination they could effect a peaceful revolution in tropical farming, thus making it possible for hundreds of millions of people to achieve a level of living to which human beings are justified in aspiring. A hungry world is not a firm foundation for modern technological society.

REFERENCE

Crist, R. E. 1932. Along the Llanos-Ardes border in Zamora, Venezuela. *Geographical Review* 22:411-22. **[end p. 72]**