

# 15. A Backward Glance to the Future: Geographical Change in the Cuchumatán Highlands of Guatemala (1500-1980)

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Retrospect and prospect are different ends of the same sequence. Today is therefore but a point on a line, the development of which may be reconstructed from its beginning and the projection of which may be undertaken into the future . . . . Knowledge of human processes is attainable only if the current situation is comprehended as a moving point, one moment in an action that has beginning and end.

Carl Sauer (1940)

## Introduction

First delivered to a conference audience some 40 years ago,<sup>1</sup> the above-quoted words of geographer Carl Sauer have a particular relevance for all those involved, like Sauer himself, in Latin American studies. If, furthermore, one accepts the view of the French scholar Jean Sermet that "almost always the present can be explained only by the past",<sup>2</sup> then there are surely few world regions where the employment of an historical perspective is more meaningful than Latin America. So deep-rooted are most of Latin America's political, economic, and social malaise that it is hardly surprising to encounter in the literature, from every position on the ideological spectrum, at least some awareness of the necessity of approaching contemporary issues and problems historically. As Sauer well appreciated, knowledge of the past is critical both to an understanding of the present and in contemplating the future. It is the purpose of this paper to apply these tenets in an appraisal of the events and circumstances of human life in the Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala between Indian-Spanish contact in the early sixteenth century and the conflict destined to scar the decade ahead.

## The Regional Setting

The Cuchumatán highlands, or Altos Cuchumatanes, are the most massive and spectacular non-volcanic region of all Central America. Lying to the north of the Río Cuilco, and to the north and west of the Río Negro or Chixoy, the Cuchumatanes form a fairly well-defined physical unit bordered on the north by the sparsely settled tropical lowlands of the Usumacinta basin and to the west by the Mexican state of Chiapas. The Cuchumatanes, with elevations ranging from 500 to more than 3600 metres, are contained within the Guatemalan departments of Huehuetenango and Quiché, and comprise some 15 per cent (approximately 16,350 square kilometres) of the national territory of the Central American republic.

During the first two centuries of Spanish rule in Guatemala the Cuchumatán country was part of the administrative division known as the *corregimiento* or *alcaldía mayor* of Totonicapán and Huehuetenango. This unit included all of the present day department of Totonicapán, most of Huehuetenango, and the Motozintla area of the Mexican state of Chiapas. Towards the end of the colonial period the *corregimiento* or *alcaldía mayor* of Totonicapán and Huehuetenango was made a *provincia* composed of two jurisdictions: the *partido* of Totonicapán and the *partido* of Huehuetenango. The jurisdiction referred to as the *partido* of Huehuetenango corresponds in approximate territorial extent to the area here designated the Cuchumatán highlands. Today about one-half million people inhabit the region, of whom some 73 per cent, or roughly three out of four, are Indian Ladinos, persons of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, comprise the majority of the remainder. The native peoples of the Cuchumatanes are of Mayan descent and speak several closely related languages belonging to Mayan stock, the most important of which are Aguacateca, Chuj, Ixil, Jacalteca, Kanjobal, Mam, Quiché, and Uspanteca.

## The Colonial Experience

During the fifteenth century, most of the Cuchumatán peoples came under the hegemony of the Quiché of Gumarcaah, a strongly Mexicanised group who, in the course of two or three generations, succeeded in establishing tribute jurisdiction over many communities throughout the highlands of Guatemala. By 1500 Quiché domination in the Cuchumatanes had diminished, and Indian groups in the region had emerged as

small, self-determining nations. Their hard-earned autonomy was not to last for very long. Between 1525 and 1530 native communities in the Cuchumatán highlands were confronted and defeated by an alien force far more formidable than anything they had come in contact with before: imperial Spain.

The Spanish conquest of the region was not accomplished without prolonged and bloody conflict. Resistance to the European invaders was widespread, but was particularly marked along the Mam, the Ixil, and the Quichean people of Uspantán. By 1530, however, Indian opposition in most parts of the Cuchumatanes had been brutally crushed, and the region entered an era of Spanish domination which lasted until 1821.

Throughout the colonial period prospects in other parts of Central America held a greater potential for the Spanish desire for wealth than did the Cuchumatán highlands. The slave trade in Nicaragua and Honduras; silver mining in the hills around Tegucigalpa; the cultivation of cacao in Soconusco, Suchitepéquez, Guazacapán, and Izalcos; cattle raising and the indigo dye industry in the lands to the south and east of the capital city of Santiago de Guatemala; all these activities, and others, were more attractive to materially-minded Spaniards than the limited entrepreneurial opportunities offered by involvement in the Altos Cuchumatanes, rugged, remote and with few major exploitable resources. With the possible exception of supplying much needed Indian labour to the cacao plantations of the Pacific coast, the region therefore had little direct participation in the great economic booms which had such a dramatic and long-lasting impact elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> If, in terms of its status with the mother country, Central America was indeed "the richest of the poor, or the poorest of the rich relations",<sup>4</sup> then the Cuchumatán highlands probably ranked among the Spanish Crown's least prized possessions.

This is not to say that, because of the region's physical isolation and limited economic or entrepreneurial potential, the land and the people of the Cuchumatanes were untouched by three centuries of Spanish rule. The colonial experience here was marked only by differences of degree, not of kind.<sup>5</sup>

Like all native groups throughout highland Guatemala, the Indians of the Cuchumatanes in the middle years of the sixteenth century were either persuaded or forced into leaving their old homes in the mountains

and taking up residence in new, church-dominated centres known as *congregaciones*. Established primarily with a view to converting the Indians to Christianity and to creating centralised pools of exploitable labour, the policy of *congregación* produced an orderly pattern of nucleated settlement which contrasted greatly with the predominantly random and scattered arrangement of pre-Hispanic times. Although the imprint of *congregación* persists to this day, the operation of the policy in the Cuchumatán highlands was not without its failures and frustrations. Particularly during the economically depressed years between 1635 and 1720, with Spanish authority in the region growing weak and less effective, many Indians abandoned the *congregaciones* for outlying rural areas. The centrifugal movement away from the *congregaciones* was accompanied by a revival of pre-Christian Mayan religion, a development which was apparently just as distasteful to the Spanish authorities as the fact that the Indians once again practising their age-old ceremonies and rituals were no longer contributing to the economic well-being of the colony.<sup>6</sup>

A number of devices were introduced by the Spaniards to control and exploit the human resources of the *congregaciones*, the most important of which were the *encomienda*, the *tasación de tributos*, and the *repartimiento*. Prominent and prestigious chiefly during the first century of colonial rule, the *encomienda* was a means whereby a privileged individual was granted the right to enjoy the tribute, and originally also the labour, of a certain number of Indians in any town or group of towns. The amount of tribute owed by a town was stipulated by the *tasación de tributos*, a court which assessed tribute-paying capacity principally in terms of age, sex, and marital status. Through the operation of *repartimiento*, labour was coerced from the Indians and channelled into a wide variety of menial and servile tasks.<sup>7</sup>

Coming to the New World first and foremost as entrepreneurs who sought to profit from the work of others, the Spanish conqueror and colonists turned to the acquisition of land only after their search for gold, silver, or a successful cash crop — a *produit moteur* — proved fruitless.<sup>8</sup> Apart from a few early titles in the Huehuetenango area, the taking up of land on the part of Spaniards began significantly only during the seventeenth century depression, when a frugal self-sufficiency was not without advantage. This trend continued throughout the eighteenth century as Spaniards who acquired land in the Cuchumatanes, particularly on the lush meadows of the Altos de Chiantla, became aware of the potential of the region for the raising of livestock,



especially sheep. Although sizeable *haciendas* were developed, precipitating conflict between Spaniards and Indians over land rights and boundaries, the emergence of the landed estate in the Cuchumatán region was not attained wholly at the expense of the territorial integrity of native communities. Some Indian towns, particularly in the south, may not always have had enough land to feed their populations and meet their tribute requirements, but they held on tenaciously to what little they had. Other Indian towns, especially those along the northern frontier bordering sparsely settled tropical lowlands, apparently never experienced a man-land crisis throughout the entire colonial period.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1

The population of the  
Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala (1520-1980)

Year	Population	Source
1520	260,000	Extrapolation of size of Indian armies recorded by Fuentes y Guzmán
1525-1530	150,000	Estimate based on size of Indian armies recorded by Fuentes y Guzmán
1550	73,000	AGI:AG966. <sup>1</sup> P/T <sup>2</sup> ratio of 5:1. Huehuetenango as 3.9% of Cuchumatán <i>tributarios</i> . <sup>3</sup>
1580	47,000	AGI:AG966. P/T ratio of 5:1. Huehuetenango as 3.9% of Cuchumatán <i>tributarios</i> .
1664-1678	16,162	AGCA:A3.16, leg. 1601, exp. 26391. <sup>4</sup> P/T ratio of 4:1.
1690	19,824	Fuentes y Guzmán, <i>Recordación Florida</i> . P/T ratio 4:1.
1760	21,276	AGCA:A3.16, leg. 950, exp. 17715. P/T ratio of 4:1.
1768-1770	23,418	Cortés y Larráz, <i>Descripción Geografico-Moral de la Diócesis de Goathemala</i> .
1778	27,505	AGCA:A1.44, leg. 6097, exp. 55507.

1779	28,047	AGCA:A1.44, leg. 6097, exp. 55507.
1782	23,031	AGCA:A1.44, leg. 6097, exp. 55507.
1783	25,027	AGCA:A1.44, leg. 6097, exp. 55507.
1784	24,828	AGCA:A1.44, leg. 6097, exp. 55507.
1788	24,678	AGCA:A3.16, leg. 246, exp. 4912. P/T ratio of 4.82:1.
1790	23,623	AGCA:A3.16, leg. 237, exp. 4705. P/T ratio of 4.82:1.
1797-1798	24,129	Hidalgo, <i>Gaceta de Guatemala</i> .
1801	27,477	AGCA:A3.16, leg. 243, exp. 4853. P/T ratio of 4.82:1.
1811	29,571	AGCA:A3.16, leg. 953, exp. 17773. P/T ratio of 4.82:1.
1825	34,691	AGCA:B.84.3, leg. 1135, exp. 26030-26045.
1880	136,467	Based on a national census taken that year.
1893	140,290	Based on a national census taken that year.
1921	171,615	Censo General de la República (1921).
1940	234,057	Censo General de Población (1940).
1950	266,908	Sexto Censo de Población (1950).
1964	388,904	VII Censo de Población (1964).
1973	487,836	VIII Censo de Población (1973).

1 AGI = Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain.

2 P/T = Population to *Tributario* ratio.

3 *Tributario* = An Indian tribute payer, usually a married male 18-50 years of age.

4 AGCA = Archivo General de Centroamérica, Guatemala City, Guatemala.

Under Spanish rule, the Indians of the Cuchumatanes were introduced not only to the conquerors' religion, language, and customs; they were also exposed, as were native groups elsewhere in the Americas, to an array of diseases inadvertently brought by the invaders from the Old World to the New. The effect of this transfer on immunologically defenseless native Americans was devastating, and may well have caused, in the words of one scholar, "the greatest destruction of lives in history".<sup>10</sup> Due to the ravages of epidemic disease, Indian numbers in the Cuchumatán highlands between 1520 and 1670 fell from possibly 260,000 to 16,000, a drop of over 90% in a century and a half. Although population doubled by the end of the colonial era over its nadir level of 1670, demographic recovery was both sporadic and intermittent because the Indians only slowly acquired immunities to the contagions long endemic to the Spaniards (see Table 1). Epidemic disease was therefore a debilitating peril with which native communities constantly had to contend. Its impact on Indian life was profound. When disease broke out, it invariably precipitated a chain of events, including catastrophic mortality, the inability of stricken towns to pay tribute, and the failure on the part of the Indians to plant their fields for the year ahead. Famine, misery, and a wretched existence were then never very far away, and served only to increase the susceptibility of the Indians to renewed outbreaks of pestilence. With the recurrence of such unforeseen human tragedies, imperial expectations soon proved naive and unattainable. Perhaps more than any other single factor, it was the unleashing of Old World diseases on a physiologically vulnerable Indian population which caused a shadow to fall between the idea and the reality of Spanish colonial rule, not just in the Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala but throughout the entire Hispanic American realm.<sup>11</sup>

### The Post-independence Experience

Anthropologist Robert Carmack is of the opinion that "the social condition of the Indians in Guatemala changed in cyclic fashion after independence had been achieved," and suggests that Indian life in general was subjected to less external strain during periods of Conservative as opposed to Liberal rule.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, the difference between the two parties which competed for power in nineteenth-century Guatemala was that the Conservatives favoured the maintenance of Hispanic-derived institutions which preserved the colonial *status quo* while the Liberals called for the establishment of a new social and economic order

which viewed progress as being attained by promoting links with domestic and foreign entrepreneurs. The Conservatives stood for "a strong Church; an elite of educated landholders and merchants to run the society and economy with a paternalist concern for the rural masses; a healthy suspicion of foreigners, combined with a respect for the Hispanic heritage of the country; and expansion of the economy along sound, proven methods with benefits reinvested at home."<sup>13</sup> The Liberals, on the other hand, supported "restrictions of clerical power and privilege; abolition of slavery; abolition of burdensome taxes on commerce; elimination of privileged and exclusive *fueros* (codes of law) and guilds; more egalitarian political and judicial institutions; public education; and economic development, especially road, port, and immigration projects."<sup>14</sup> Broadly speaking, in terms of the impact of party policy on indigenous mores, Conservative government meant the continuation of a way of life similar to the one led under Spanish domination while Liberal administration aimed at assimilating Indians into an outward looking, national Ladino culture.<sup>15</sup>

Guatemala declared its independence from Spain on September 15, 1821. Following the abortive Liberal efforts to create a Union of Central America between 1824 and 1839, Guatemala was ruled until 1870 by a series of Conservative administrations which, particularly when headed by José Rafael Carrera, effectively undid the reforms carried out by the preceeding Liberal government of Mariano Gálvez and created a stable, disciplined state founded on restored Hispanic institutions. The half-century which followed independence, therefore, saw little change in the overall pattern of Indian life in Guatemala, particularly in rural areas of the western highlands, such as the Altos Cuchumatanes, some distance from the administrative centres where Spanish and Ladino officials resided. It was not until the resurgence of the Liberals in 1871, under the leadership of Justo Rufino Barrios, that the predominantly communal, self-sufficient existence eked out for generations by scores of native communities began to be affected by the decisions made and directions taken by the national government.<sup>16</sup>

One of the components of the Liberal drive towards modernisation under Rufino Barrios was a land reform programme designed to abolish the collective system of Indian landholding in Guatemala by subdividing ownership of communal land among township inhabitants. Various attempts to encourage Indians to secure individual titles to their land met with little success. Consequently, native communal holdings



were often classified as "unclaimed land" and fell into the hands of Ladinos much more familiar with the legal aspects of landholding legislation than their non-literate and ill-informed Indian countrymen. The fate of the communal lands was sealed in 1877 with the ending of *censo enfiteutico*, a system, dating back to colonial times, whereby rent for the use of land was exacted from Indian communities as a unit. Legislation was also passed requiring individuals to demonstrate private ownership of land by possessing formal titles; the old community title was simply no longer recognised as a legal document. Although legislation governing landholding was radically altered, the Indian communities most affected by the changes were often unaware of them. By 1884, native communities throughout Guatemala may have lost possession of some 100,000 acres of farmland to ambitious Ladinos capitalising on Indian ignorance of the land tenure situation.<sup>17</sup>

Contemporaneous with these developments was a substantial foreign investment, particularly from German business interests, in Guatemalan coffee production. The environmental suitability of the Pacific piedmont for large-scale coffee cultivation together with the Liberal disposition towards *laissez-faire* enterprise resulted in the emergence of coffee as Guatemala's major export crop, a dominance it has held in the national economy from the time of Rufino Barrios up to the present day.<sup>18</sup> Organised on an efficient *finca* or plantation basis, coffee requires an intensive labour input only during its brief harvest period. It was the drafting of a seasonal workforce from among the native communities of the highlands to labour on coffee plantations on the Pacific piedmont that reshaped yet again the pattern of Indian life in Guatemala and, in the view of at least one writer, unleashed on the country the full force of capitalistic development.<sup>19</sup>

The methods employed to procure an adequate flow of migrant labour during the coffee harvest have varied over the years. Outright coercion in the form of a draft known as the *mandamiento* gave way to legalised debt peonage which in turn was replaced, in 1934, by the implementation of a vagrancy law requiring individuals holding less than a stipulated amount of land to work part of each year as wage labourers for others.<sup>20</sup> Although forced labour in Guatemala is generally regarded as having ended with the social reforms stemming from the "Revolution" of 1944, irregularities in hiring manpower for the coffee harvest have persisted. But the necessity of indenturing labour, by whatever means, has diminished since the 1940's simply because

explosive population growth and the need to earn more money to feed more mouths ensure a plentiful workforce, particularly from among the Indian population, many of whom live on tiny plots of land which cannot provide year-round employment and subsistence. Such is, and has been, the predicament of most Indian families in the Cuchumatán highlands.

In 1913, the archaeologist-explorer Robert Burkitt reported at the town of Nebaj, in the Ixil country of the eastern Cuchumatanes, "an unceasing coming and going of labour contractors and plantation agents getting out gangs of Indians for the Pacific coast."<sup>21</sup> Some of Burkitt's observations, phrased in his blunt and distinctive style, are worth quoting at greater length. He writes:

Years ago, when I first visited Nebaj, it was a different place from now . . . I had struck the place at an especially bad moment. The plantation agents were at the height of their activity, scattering money, advance pay for work, and every Indian was able to buy rum. The rum business and the coffee business work together in this country, automatically. The plantation advances money to the Indian and the rum seller takes it away from him and the Indian has to go to work again. Work leads to rum and rum leads to work. . . . I used to think that Chichicastenango was the drunkenest town in the country, but now I think it is Nebaj. My plans at Nebaj were upset by rum. There are two ruin places that I know of that are to be got at from Nebaj and I did nothing at either of them, and one of them I never even saw. The Indians I was going to take were never sober.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1930's, Raymond Stadelman noted that labour for the coffee harvest was regularly contracted in the Cuchumatán communities of Concepción, Soloma, San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, and Todos Santos.<sup>23</sup> For the last-mentioned community, a description of a common recruitment procedure and some idea of the misery it often entailed has been recorded by anthropologist Maud Oakes:

One morning early in January, 1946, Patrona, the wife of my neighbour Domingo, came to see me. Her eyes were swollen from crying. In very incoherent Spanish she told me that Domingo had signed a contract for himself and his son, Andrés, with Señor López, who owned the *tienda* in the village, to work on a coffee *finca* beyond Quezaltenango. She went on to say that she expected her baby in a month and a half, and how could she look after three children, get wood, and plant corn if neither Domingo nor Andrés was there to help her?

Domingo then entered the house and told me the whole story. The year

before, he and Andrés were both sick for two months, so sick that they nearly died. In consequence he was not able to plant his corn. When he was better he could not work for he still had no strength. He had only a little corn. He therefore signed a contract with Señor López for money. He was to receive sixteen dollars and for this he and Andrés, aged fourteen, would both have to work sixty-four days picking coffee on the *finca*. They would have to walk there and back, which would take four to five days each way. At the *finca* they would be given huts, too poor to keep out the mosquitoes, and unground corn: nothing else. If they got sick they would get no medical care: and all this for less than one dollar a week apiece.

"If you will pay my debt to Señor López," Domingo continued, "I will work faithfully for you: have no fear of it. I will carry cargo for you from Huehuetenango: I will be your mozo on your trips." This is how Domingo became my *mozo*, my man Friday.<sup>24</sup>

She continues:

One week or so after Domingo became my *mozo*, a young woman with a baby a year and a half old came to see me because she was a friend of my maidservant Simona and had heard from her that I was a kind person. She was sick with malaria. Her baby was very ill with a temperature of 104°. She had just returned from working two months on a *finca*. In fact she had run away from it before her time was up because the baby was ill and because she did not feel well herself. I examined the baby and gave it some medicine, and then gave the mother some food. Before she could finish eating the police came and with them the agent with whom she had signed the contract, to lock her up in the *juzgado*. The agent demanded her arrest and insisted that she be shipped back in a few days to the *finca* and finish her contract. It made not the slightest difference to him that both mother and child were very ill or that it would be freezing cold in the jail.

I went later to see the Alcalde, but he was out so I saw the *secretario* instead. He told me that the woman owed five dollars and fifty cents which she had not yet worked out at the *finca* and one dollar and twenty-five cents for the bus from Quezaltenango to Huehuetenango. He would give her eight days to pay the agent, otherwise he would ship her back. I told the *secretario* that I would be responsible for her debt. She was then let out of jail.<sup>25</sup>

Although there have been important qualitative changes in the nature of the "*finca* system" since Oakes' stay at Todos Santos in the 1940s, the equality and manipulation primarily responsible for the perpetuation of seasonal migration have not disappeared. One of the root causes is

chronic landholding disparity. Landholding within the predominantly Indian communities of the Cuchumatanes must be viewed in the context of national patterns of ownership and distribution. The fundamental characteristic of landholding in Guatemala in the present day is the concentration of sizeable amounts of cultivable land in the hands of a wealthy and powerful minority, while an impoverished but dignified peasant majority subsist on a tiny percentage of the total national farmland. Three basic landholding units may be identified: first, large-and medium-sized farms referred to as *latifundios*, which range in extent from around 45 to over 900 hectares and which contain the most fertile agricultural land in Guatemala; second, modest, single-family farms termed *familiares*, which vary in size from seven to 45 hectares; and third, small, fragmented holdings known as *minifundios*, which are less than seven hectares in area and usually lack sufficient resources to sustain a family all year round in work and food.<sup>26</sup> In the Cuchumatanes, the vast majority of landholders fall into the *minifundio* category and may be considered subsistence farmers, or *minifundistas*.<sup>27</sup>

The amount of land actually held and operated as a family unit can vary considerably from place to place. In a study involving 24 Cuchumatán communities in 1940, Stadelman found that the average family holding varied from 10.8 acres (4.5 hectares) in Santiago Chimaltenango to 2.7 acres (1.1 hectares) in San Antonio Huista. The usual holding of a family of five persons was found to be between three and six acres (1.2 to 2.5 hectares).<sup>28</sup> At that time it was reckoned that three arable hectares (7.5 acres) was the minimum amount necessary for independent family existence in highland Guatemala.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in order to supplement the income derived from insufficient holdings, able-bodied household members sought, and continue to seek, part-time employment as wage labourers on the coffee *fincas*, and also on the cotton and sugar cane plantations, of the Pacific coast. The doubling of the Cuchumatán population over the thirty year period between Stadelman's investigations and the early 1970s (see Table 1) has served only to further the reliance on seasonal wage labour. The survival of thousands of families is now directly or indirectly dependent on it.

Perhaps the best way to gain some appreciation of changing man-land relationships in the Cuchumatán highlands over the past 40 years is to focus on a specific community for which reliable and characteristic data exist. Santiago Chimaltenango, referred to simply as "Chimbal" by its Mam-speaking inhabitants, is one such community. In



the late 1930s, when studied by Charles Wagley, Chimal's entire 16,000 acres of arable and unarable land supported 1500 people.<sup>30</sup> An unequal distribution of land (largely brought about by the changes in the landholding system discussed earlier) resulted in over three-quarters of the Chimal population lacking the minimum amount necessary for independent family existence, estimated by Wagley at 120 *cuerdas*; the average landholding size was 101.5 *cuerdas*.<sup>31</sup> The plight of the majority of heads of household was depicted thus:

The larger landholders in Chimaltenango cannot supply enough work for their poorer countrymen and in consideration of the limited terrains of the village, it seems doubtful whether they will ever be able to do so. The coffee plantations, needing large supplies of wage labourers for a short harvest, fill in the gap. The time of the coffee harvest falls in the period when Chimaltecos may leave their own fields; thus they have an opportunity to augment their income by plantation labour with no great slighting of their own fields. Unless, therefore, the present disparity of holdings is made more equal by government decree or internal changes, the labour at the coffee plantations will remain an important part of their economy.<sup>32</sup>

Since the time of Wagley's study, the population of Chimal has more than doubled, thus exerting even greater pressure on the land resources of the community. In 1964, the Agricultural Census of Guatemala recorded the average Chimalteco landholding as comprising 52.3 *cuerdas*; today, John Watanabe estimates the average family unit as only 38.1 *cuerdas*.<sup>33</sup> Two factors have mitigated the scarcity of arable land and the swelling of human numbers: first, the employment, since the late 1960s, of chemical fertilisers and pesticides which have increased annual crop yields significantly, frequently as much as twofold; and second, the cash-cropping by Chimalteco *minifundistas* of small amounts of coffee. Both these developments, however, have come about only because the people of Chimal have associated themselves even more closely with Guatemala's agricultural export economy. In the first instance, the money needed to buy fertilizers and pesticides is usually earned by a period of work on a coastal plantation; in the second instance, coffee is grown in the knowledge that there is a demand for it outside of the community, in places far beyond the town of Huehuetenango where Chimal coffee is generally sold.<sup>34</sup>

In 1978, Watanabe recorded 64% of the Chimal population as participating in the labour migration to the coast, where the majority of migrants worked for two months or less.<sup>35</sup> Improvement in the transpor-

tation system has greatly increased accessibility and mobility, and, by enabling closer links to be maintained between the migrants and their home community, has significantly reduced the impact of the "culture shock" which often accompanied seasonal migration in the past. Indeed, according to Watanabe, Chimaltecos now regard the work they perform on coastal *fincas* "as an extension of their own economic activities, not as the movement into another economic system," and he makes the point that "a new radio or a gleaming watch don't make a person a Ladino, especially when the money to buy them was earned by an activity as characteristically 'Indian' as subsistence agriculture - migratory labour on the plantations of the south coast."<sup>36</sup> As the traditional distinctions between Indian and Ladino become increasingly blurred and arbitrary, so also do the interpretations about how labour is contracted. Indian *minifundistas* are apparently no longer completely at the mercy of *habilitadores* who sign up work parties by advancing money as wages to drunks on market day or during the community fiesta. Today, many *fincas* announce on the radio the workforce they need, the rates they pay, and the facilities they provide. These broadcasts penetrate even the most isolated highland communities where potential workers are listening. Upon hearing what, when, and where work is available, a human tide drifts down from the mountains to bring in the harvest. Most Chimaltecos, for example, move to the coast without having contracts arranged in advance.<sup>37</sup>

The Chimaltecos who comprise the seasonal wage labour force are representative of an ebb and flow which constitutes one of the great internal migrations of Guatemala. It was estimated that some 200,000 people, the majority of them Indians, were involved in this migration in the 1950s; by the end of the 1960s this number had risen to over 300,000 and in the mid-1970s was estimated at about 500,000.<sup>38</sup> Attached though he may be to his land and his community, and however unattractive the often intense heat of the lowlands may compare with his cool mountain home, the Indian *minifundista* throughout highland Guatemala, especially in remote peripheries such as parts of the Cuchumatanes, is confronted by a situation which leaves him little alternative but to migrate for part of each year in search of work to keep himself and his family alive.<sup>39</sup> There is a rather numbing resemblance between this contemporary migration and the ones which occurred during pre-Conquest and early colonial times when Indians from the highlands were expected, and required, to work on estates in the lowlands in order to meet the tribute demands placed upon them for *cacao*.<sup>40</sup>

## Future Prospects

Although the past two decades, chiefly through the operation of the Central American Common Market and revitalised foreign investment, have witnessed substantial growth in industry, manufacturing, and tourism in Guatemala, the agricultural sector, based on the production of coffee, cotton, and sugar cane for export, remains a vital component of the national economy. Just as the more recent economic ventures have been of benefit largely to a small group of local entrepreneurs connected to corporate enterprises outside the country, so the financial fruits of the agro-export sector have been enjoyed principally by large landholding families who have dominated Guatemalan political life for more than a century. Control of both the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy is in the hands of a ruling class in no way reluctant to employ the state apparatus in order to maintain its privileged position. At a time when the national economy is surging ahead at an average rate of growth of 6% per annum, the majority of Guatemalans are excluded from the "development" process and many, in fact, are becoming even more impoverished. They are also, by a campaign of terror and violence orchestrated by the ruling minority through its control of the Army, the National Police, and fanatical paramilitary groups, subjected to a fearful repression.<sup>41</sup> As the gap widens between the rich and the poor and as the nation, with the extermination of moderate liberal elements, becomes increasingly polarised between the Right and the Left, the prospect of a peaceful solution to the geography of inequality in Guatemala seems an unrealistic and impossible one to maintain. Nor, sadly, is the range of options available for implementing meaningful social change enhanced by an inflexible, primitive, and myopic U.S. foreign policy that views the evolving political situation in Central America, to quote the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, in terms of "do nothing or blast everything."<sup>42</sup>

In the Cuchumatán highlands, as throughout Guatemala, there are signs that the rural poor, through lack of any appropriate alternative, are beginning to sympathise with left-wing guerrilla groups currently active in a revolutionary armed struggle to overthrow a system designed primarily to benefit an established elite. The successful waging of guerrilla warfare is impossible without support at the community level in the form of shelter, food, and moral encouragement. The ability of the *Ejército Guerrillero de Los Pobres* (The Guerrilla Army of the Poor) and the *Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo Armado* (The Organi-

sation of the People in Arms) to engage the Guatemalan Army in open conflict suggests a broadening of the guerrillas' popular base. Such encounters have taken place regularly in the Ixil country of the eastern Cuchumatanes over the past few years, at Nebaj, Chajul, and San Juan Cotzal, and are now occurring in the heart of the region, in and around San Rafael la Independencia, San Juan Ixcay, San Miguel Acatán, Santa Eulalia, and Soloma.<sup>43</sup> Many of the Indian *minifundistas* who perhaps now regard guerrilla activity as being undertaken with the notion of one day improving their social condition have probably never even heard of a man called Karl Marx and in all likelihood have no better idea of what communism is than the thousands of soldiers conditioned into annihilating its perceived existence. If there is a current of feeling moving in the guerrillas' direction, it may stem, as at San Miguel Uspantán, from the heavy-handed presence of the national armed forces stationed throughout the countryside.<sup>44</sup> Alternately, it may just indicate that thousands of *minifundistas* are weary of the life they presently lead; weary of farming a miniscule plot of land incapable of adequately supporting a family; weary of migrating to the Pacific coast for part of each year in search of work to make ends meet; and weary of lowly paid wage labour on inefficiently managed plantations which, instead of raising commercial crops for export, could conceivably produce staples to feed malnourished local populations.<sup>45</sup> The lines of battle have been drawn. The confrontation has begun. To anyone who knows, and appreciates, something of the immense cultural richness inherent in so much of Guatemala, the prospect of the people who inhabit this already bloodied land facing a decade of brutal internal strife is a tragedy much to be lamented.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The words from part of Carl Sauer's presidential address to the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers which took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in December 1940. The speech was later published in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 31, 1941, pp.1-24 and also appeared, as "Foreword to Historical Geography," in J. Leighly (Ed.), *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), pp.351-379.



- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in R.C. West and J.P. Augelli, *Middle America — Its Lands and Peoples*, Second Edition, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976), p.58.
- <sup>3</sup> M.J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America — A socioeconomic History, 1520-1720*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp.374-389.
- <sup>4</sup> P. Chaunu and H. Chaunu, *Seville et l'Atlantique*, quoted in MacLeod, *op. cit.*, p.xiv.
- <sup>5</sup> W.G. Lovell, *Land and Settlement in the Cuchumatán Highlands (1500-1821): A Study in the Historical Geography of Northwestern Guatemala* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, Fall, 1980).
- <sup>6</sup> Lovell, *op. cit.*, pp.139-175.
- <sup>7</sup> Lovell, *op. cit.*, pp.176-196.
- <sup>8</sup> MacLeod, *op. cit.*, pp.374-375.
- <sup>9</sup> Lovell, *op. cit.*, pp.197-233.
- <sup>10</sup> MacLeod, *op. cit.*, p.20.
- <sup>11</sup> Lovell, *op. cit.*, pp.234-266.
- <sup>12</sup> R.M. Carmack, *Quichean Civilization — The Ethno historic, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p.220.
- <sup>13</sup> R.L. Woodward, *Central America - A Nation Divided*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.118.
- <sup>14</sup> Woodward, *op. cit.*, pp.92-93.
- <sup>15</sup> Carmack, *op. cit.*, p.220.
- <sup>16</sup> C.A. Smith, "Beyond Dependency Theory: National and Regional Patterns of Underdevelopment in Guatemala," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 5, No. 3, August 1978, pp.588-591.
- <sup>17</sup> C. Wagley, "Economic of a Guatemalan Village," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, No. 58, 1941, pp.59-61 and R.A. Naylor, "Guatemala: Indian Attitudes toward Land Tenure," *Journal of Inter American Studies*, October 1967, pp.627-630.

- <sup>18</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p.589, records coffee as comprising "50 per cent of foreign exchange earnings by 1871, 92 per cent by 1880, 77 per cent in 1929, 78 per cent in 1950, and 32 per cent in 1970."
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, pp.610-611.
- <sup>20</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, pp.589-590. Regarding the criteria upon which the vagrancy law was enacted, N. Whetten, *Guatemala: The Land and the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p.121 records those farming less than 6.9 acres as being required to work 100 days and those farming less than 2.8 acres as being required to work 150 days.
- <sup>21</sup> R. Burkitt, "Explorations in the Highlands of Western Guatemala," *The Museum Journal* (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia), Vol. XXI, No. 1, 1930, p.58.
- <sup>22</sup> Burkitt, *op. cit.*, p.58. While one can sympathise with Burkitt's frustration at having his plans for archaeological explorations disrupted because Indian guides and helpers were, in his own words, "drunk from morning till night," it is important to view inebriety as a response to, or symptom of, a deeper-rooted problem. In *Santa Eulalia — The Religion of a Cuchumatán Indian Town*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), p.100, Oliver La Farge offers the following perspective on the psychological condition of the Guatemalan Indian and his inclination towards alcoholic liquor: "While these people undoubtedly suffer from drunkenness, one would hesitate to remove the bottle from them until the entire pattern of their lives is changed. They are an introverted people, consumed by internal fires which they cannot or dare not express, eternally chafing under the yoke of conquest, and never for a moment forgetting that they are a conquered people."
- <sup>23</sup> R. Stadelman, "Maize Cultivation in Northwestern Guatemala," *Contributions to American Anthropology and History* (Washington: Carnegie Institute of Washington, Vol. VI, Nos. 30-34, 1940), pp.95-103.
- <sup>24</sup> M. Oakes, *The Two Crosses of Todos Santos — Survivals of Mayan Religious Ritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), p.241.
- <sup>25</sup> Oakes, *op. cit.*, pp.241-242.

- <sup>26</sup> Universidad de San Carlos, *Tenencia de la Tierra en Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos, 1971), pp.122-135.
- <sup>27</sup> Information concerning the number, size, and distribution of farm holdings in Guatemala is available from two national agricultural censuses, the first conducted in 1950, the second in 1964. The reliability of the published statistics to reveal the complete landholding situation is undermined by the fact that the 1950 agricultural census recorded only those farms containing one *cuerda* of land or more; that is, about 0.1 of an acre or about 0.04 of a hectare. Many *minifundios* in Guatemala are smaller than one *cuerda* and in fact were incorporated into the 1964 agricultural census, which placed no restrictions on minimum size of farm holding. This classificatory change in data collection accounts for the significant increase in total farm numbers in 1964 over 1950. Regardless of statistical inconsistency, however, the essential reality of land ownership in Guatemala remains the same; namely, a small percentage of the total farmland (14.3 per cent in 1950 and 18.6 per cent in 1964) is shared between a large percentage of farms (88.4 per cent in 1950 and 87 per cent in 1964), while a large percentage of the total farmland (72.2 per cent in 1950 and 62.6 per cent in 1964) is held by a small percentage of farms (2.1 per cent in 1950 and 2.9 per cent in 1964). Further discussion of the Guatemalan landholding situation is contained in Whetten (*op. cit.*, pp.92-106) and in L.B. Fletcher, *et. al.*, *Guatemala's Economic Development — The Role of Agriculture*, (Iowa: Iowa State University, 1970).
- <sup>28</sup> Stadelman, *op. cit.*, p.105.
- <sup>29</sup> E.C. Higbee, "The Agricultural Regions of Guatemala," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 37, 1947, p.180.
- <sup>30</sup> Wagley, *op. cit.*, p.82.
- <sup>31</sup> A *cuerda* is a land measure equivalent to about 0.1 of an acre or about 0.04 of a hectare.
- <sup>32</sup> Wagley, *op. cit.*, pp.82-83.
- <sup>33</sup> J.M. Watanabe, "Los Cambios Económicos en Santiago Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango," an article to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Mesoamérica*, the journal of the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica, Antigua, Guatemala.

- <sup>34</sup> Watanabe, *op. cit.*
- <sup>35</sup> Watanabe, *op. cit.*
- <sup>36</sup> Watanabe, *op. cit.*
- <sup>37</sup> Watanabe, *op. cit.*
- <sup>38</sup> L. Schmid, *The Role of Migratory Labour in the Economic Development of Guatemala*, Research Paper No. 22, (Madison: Land Tenure Centre, University of Wisconsin, July 1967), pp.1-2; B. Colby and P. van den Berghe, *Ixil Country — A Plural Society in Highland Guatemala* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p.33; and A. Riding, "Guatemala: State of Siege," *New York Times Magazine*, August 24, 1980, p.20.
- <sup>39</sup> C.A. Smith, "A Rejoinder" to P. McDowell, "Guatemalan Stratification and Peasant Marketing Arrangements: A Different View," *Man*, New Series, Vol. 11, 1976, pp.278-281.
- <sup>40</sup> A discussion of cacao tribute in pre-columbian and early colonial times may be found in J.F. Bergmann, "The Distribution of Cacao Cultivation in Pre-Columbian America," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 59, No. 1, March 1969, pp.85-96.
- <sup>41</sup> G. Aguilera Peralta, "Terror and Violence as Weapons of Counter-Insurgency in Guatemala," *Latin American Perspectives*, Issues 25 and 26, Vol. VII, Nos. 2 and 3, Spring and Summer 1980, pp.91-113 and Riding, *op. cit.*, pp.16-67.
- <sup>42</sup> C. Fuentes, "Dominoes — Again?," *New York Times*, September 7 1980.
- <sup>43</sup> *News from Guatemala*, Vol. 2, No. 9, October 1980, p.11.
- <sup>44</sup> Amnesty International, Publication AMR 35/08/80, an interview with Indian *campesinos* from San Miguel Uspantán, Guatemala, concerning Army harassment and the disappearance of nine peasant leaders from their region (October 1979).
- <sup>45</sup> Smith, "Beyond Dependency Theory," *op. cit.*, p.603, asserts that "Guatemala's coffee plantations...are notoriously inefficient, yielding less than one-fourth as much coffee as plantations in Brazil."