

Book Reviews

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Land or Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru, by Hugo Blanco. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973.

In the early sixties, Hugo Blanco emerged as an outstanding mass peasant leader of the Quechua Indians in the Peruvian highlands. Based upon his own Trotskyist militancy and experience, Blanco describes in his book how it is possible to transform a revolutionary programme into a revolutionary action among the peasantry. Blanco's revolutionary praxis follows an interrelated sequence that proceeds from a local to regional organisation, from local demands (particular abuses) to global demands (agrarian reform without compensation), and, finally, from mass social and political struggle to military struggle. Three important themes discussed in the first part of the book are: a) the development of the peasant unions, b) strategies for mass action, and c) the mistakes made during the course of the movement and how they could have been avoided. Although somewhat less important, the second part of the book consists of letters written from prison, and short stories on the Indian culture.

Before the military takeover in 1968, the agrarian problem in Peru had been one of the most critical in Latin America. 1.6% of the population owned 73% of the cultivated land. On the other hand, 80% of the rural population, constituting *hacienda* labour-tenants, *commeros*, and landless labourers, suffered the worst consequences of an accentuated territorial concentration. The rural population was mostly poor and illiterate, deprived as a class for its position at the bottom of the social pyramid, and without opportunities to improve itself under the suppressive treatment of the *mestizo* culture.

The peasantry in Peru constitutes about half of the country's population. Before the military regime's agrarian reform decree of June 1969, many of these rural proletariats lived on *haciendas*, a system which forced them into servitude. In the Cuzco area, the system of personal services persisted as part of the peasants' obligations to the landlords. The peasants living in 174 *haciendas* in the Valley of La Convencion as *arrendires* (labour-tenants), exchanged their unremunerated labour and servitude for a small plot of land. What created most resentment and hostility among the peasants of Chaupimayo was the pervasive and tyrannical rule of the landlords.

Abject neo-feudalist rural conditions and specific archaic forms of class-domination motivated Blanco to help organise and mobilise the Indian peasants through a syndicalist campaign. The peasant mobilisation was successful because the strikes carried out proposed progressive demands of improving working conditions. As the peasant mobilisation went on and intensified, as a result of strong opposition from the landlords, the most radical policy promoted by Blanco among the unions was the direct occupation of *haciendas* worked for the landlords. Later, as Blanco describes, the third stage was to eventually organise a peasant community power structure withdrawn from the traditional regional and national power structure.

The peasants carried out land invasions, at first peaceful occupations, by taking possession of private sectors of the *haciendas* to which the peasants had claims. The decisive factor in their success was unionisation, characterised by the development of a clear tendency towards the formation of a new type of sociopolitical consciousness. The invasions were carried out with prudence, method, and a degree of understanding. The invasions were clearly a direct challenge to the existing social order by threatening to delegitimise the regional and national government's political hegemony. Subsequently, the invasion sites became areas of brutal repression, forcing the mass movement militia into becoming a fighting guerrilla unit.

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Blanco attributes the movement's downfall to union rivalries, other external political factors, and the weakness of his own party (FIR—Revolutionary Leftist Front), which subsequently led to increased isolation from the masses. The mass movement in La Convencion deteriorated, as government repression penetrated the union's weakness and eventually crushed it. Hugo Blanco and other union leaders were arrested and jailed, leaving the struggle leaderless. However, the occupation of land could not be undone, and the only way to calm the movement appeared to be to legitimise the new situation. The military junta that had overthrown the Prado government in mid-1962 accelerated an agrarian reform that, as a result of the intense sociopolitical pressure, was pending implementation.

Blanco's book is the most descriptive and personal account of what happened in the Cuzco highlands in the early sixties. The importance of this work is that it goes beyond a simple historical review of the events. It is coherent in its analysis of particular circumstances and how, taken together, they suggest that the peasant movement in Peru emerged as a dynamic force of social protest. Hugo Blanco's book deserves wide circulation as a complement to the most recent literature on agrarian syndicalism and peasant movements, and specially in helping to understand one of the most significant peasant mobilisations in the last decade in the whole of South America. It gives a concise picture of the peasantry as a potentially explosive force that has made the Quechua Indians a more important political pressure group than ever before.