

Reflections on rural violence in Latin America

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ABSTRACT *In recent decades rural violence has escalated in many Latin American countries. Although there is a growing body of literature on the topic, there exist as yet few comparative studies. While there are undoubtedly multiple and evolving causes of violence, this exploratory article focuses on the relationship between sociopolitical violence and agrarian structure and state policy. Particular attention is paid to the impact of agrarian reform and counter-reform experiences on rural conflicts and violence. A contrast is also drawn with countries which have not undergone any significant land reform. The cases discussed are Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and several Central American countries (Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador). The complexity of rural violence is demonstrated and the case for further comparative studies is argued, so as to advance our knowledge on the causes, consequences and resolution of violence.*

During the past few decades sociopolitical violence has escalated to extraordinary heights in Latin America, being its most violent decades of the twentieth century and perhaps even of its entire postcolonial period.¹ Most of this violence has not been of an emancipatory kind. On the contrary, its purpose has been to prevent the empowerment of the subaltern classes and to reinforce the power of the dominating classes, especially in those situations where the latter was being challenged from below. To what extent this oppressive violence has been able to prevent the democratisation of society cannot yet be ascertained as these are still evolving processes. What can be established with some certainty though is that those in power are extracting a high price from those subordinate groups seeking to gain basic human and democratic rights, including the right to a decent livelihood. Thus the violence in Latin America in the last quarter of the twentieth century has been marked by its oppressive character, contrary to the liberating violence referred to by Barrington Moore (1969: 20) when he writes that: ‘Revolutionary violence may contribute as much as peaceful reform to the establishment of a relatively free society.’ A high proportion of the victims, and especially of the displaced population, come from the rural areas. Thus it is important to analyse rural society so as to understand the economic, social and political origins of violence in Latin America and to find a resolution to this problem. Of course, especially in this age of globalisation, it is impossible to

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ignore the multiple and close relations which exist today between the rural and the urban and, at the same time, the country's linkages with the rest of the world.

This article explores the relationships between agrarian structure, agrarian reform and rural violence in Latin America. These connections are examined from an historical perspective in which the global processes of transformation are privileged. Factors such as the political regime, market relations, technological changes, type of crop (for example coca) and the actions of the state have a significant bearing on the type of conflicts and violence in the countryside. Nevertheless the degree of influence of these factors varies to a great extent according to the characteristics of the agrarian structure and the existing social relations. In particular the influence of agrarian reforms, and/or peasant demands for agrarian reforms, on rural violence is examined by considering the cases of Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and several Central American countries. I am focusing on these countries as they have all experienced periods of intense social conflict and violence over the past few decades. While all these countries were (and most still are) characterised by high land concentration, they differ insofar as some have attempted radical land redistribution (Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, Peru and Nicaragua) and others have either introduced only mild agrarian reforms (El Salvador and Colombia) or none of any significance (Brazil). Furthermore, some countries (Guatemala and Chile) experienced major agrarian counter-reforms, in which much of the expropriated land was returned to its former owners, while in others the co-operative agrarian reform sector was subdivided into private family farms (Peru). In the cases of Chile and Nicaragua, both situations happen simultaneously, ie the dismantling of the reformed sector resulted in land being returned to former landlords as well as being assigned as private family farms to former or new beneficiaries (a process referred to as *parcelación* or parcelisation). These differences in agrarian reform implementation and its unravelling make it possible to examine the extent to which these changes, or lack of changes, have had any influence on rural conflicts and violence.²

Also in this article some initial comparative insights, arising from the various cases which have been examined, are presented. I am all too aware that these need to be developed further but hope that they might constitute a starting point for more comprehensive comparative analyses. The purpose of this article is more limited and should be viewed as exploratory. Nevertheless, it is a necessary step for further comparative studies which have been conspicuously lacking in recent decades. Studies of rural conflict and violence have so far largely focused on a particular country. It is my belief that comparative studies, by providing a wider analytical framework and context, can make an important contribution towards a better understanding of the causes and consequences of rural violence.

Agrarian structure and social origins of rural violence

Already in 1928 José Carlos Mariátegui (1955: 27) was writing that the Indian and peasant question in Peru had its roots in the land problem. Paraphrasing Mariátegui, I argue in this article that Latin America's potential for rural violence is largely rooted in its unequal and exclusionary agrarian socioeconomic system,

although its manifestation depends on a variety of factors, including particular political circumstances. Thus tackling the structural aspect of rural violence involves radically transforming the agrarian system so as to achieve greater equity and democratic participation. The following questions arise: to what extent has rural violence abated in those Latin American countries which have implemented agrarian reform programmes? And, has rural violence continued or even increased in those countries which have not undertaken significant agrarian reform? I am aware that rural violence has multiple causes and many facets but it is my contention that, without endeavouring to solve the land problem, rural conflicts and violence cannot be fundamentally resolved. It is not by accident that the recent pacification processes in Nicaragua and El Salvador have resorted to land distribution as one way of resolving the armed confrontations and intense social conflicts in those countries.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, which was characterised by decolonisation and the beginning of the Cold War, the peasantry played a significant role in the socialist revolutions in Third World countries like China, Vietnam and Cuba. This prompted scholars to devote attention to the study of peasant movements, rebellion and revolutions.³ Such emancipatory movements were often accompanied by violence from those seeking change as well as by those opposing it. The irony and tragedy is that, although the peasantry often paid a high price in terms of loss of life, injury, displacement and economic hardship for their participation in these major transformations, they rarely achieved their desired objectives nor the promised emancipation. This does not mean the peasantry made no important gains but that most of these accrued to other classes or groups. While in some European countries the peasantry achieved significant gains through their violent struggles, such as the abolition of serfdom, ownership over land and major social and political rights, the Latin American case presents a less encouraging outcome. While in certain historical situations social and political violence has led to progressive changes which have improved the condition of the peasantry, the question which needs to be explored is to what extent this also applies to Latin America.⁴ Generally, violence has been directed against the peasantry to ensure its subjugation and exploitation for the benefit of the dominant classes. This article only deals marginally with this wider historical issue but hopefully future research will throw more light on this broader and more complex, but fundamental, question.⁵

Rural violence has been endemic and persistent throughout the history of Latin America. The conquest and colonisation of Latin America by the Iberian countries has probably been the most dramatic and violent episode in its history. The agrarian system which emerged from the Iberian colonisation has been a major source of conflict and violence in the countryside. Large landed estates were established using violence during the Spanish and Portuguese conquests in which peasant communities lost their lands and many were subjected to servile relations. This system was controlled by landlords who owned vast *latifundia* or plantations, thereby monopolising much of the best land and establishing a variety of tenant and labour relations with the peasantry which enabled the extraction of an economic surplus from them. Forced labour on large landed properties, as well as slavery on plantations, were common in the early colonial

period. Peasants had to pay rents to landlords by providing unpaid labour services on the landlord's estate and in some cases also paid rents in produce or even money for gaining access to some of the cultivable land or pastures of the estate. Much of the indigenous peasantry was displaced and organised into communities which were largely confined to marginal regions and lands.

The large landed estates (*latifundia*, *hacienda*, *estancia*, or plantation) dominated the agrarian economy and society from the colonial period to the agrarian reform period of the 1960s to the 1980s (Chonchol, 1994). With the emergence of lucrative export markets, first for plantation products such as sugar, tobacco, cocoa, coffee and cotton, slavery was a common way of obtaining labour during the colonial period. Violence was endemic in such harsh and repressive labour systems, leading sometimes to indigenous and slave rebellions. A second wave of exports, this time of wheat and livestock products, during the second half of the 19th century further extended the dominance of the estate or *hacienda* system. Landlords were eager to gain advantage of the new lucrative export markets of the emerging industrial nations of Europe and the USA. They expanded the estate's frontiers and further transformed independent peasants into tenants or wage labourers as demand for labour increased. This in turn unleashed new forms of peasant protest as well as reviving old ones. This time peasant demands centred on the high rents tenants had to pay, seeking a reduction in labour services, less onerous sharecropping agreements or better wages and working conditions. Indigenous communities continued their struggle against the usurpation of their land but with little success as the boundaries continued to shift in favour of the estates. Such protests were often repressed either directly by armed gangs in the employ of landlords or by the military and police. Peasant actions were generally peaceful and their demands were expressed through petitions, the judiciary, strikes or land invasion, and everyday forms of resistance. Only in extreme cases has the peasantry participated in revolutionary wars such as in Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua during the twentieth century.

It was only with the Great Depression of the 1930s and the subsequent import substituting industrialisation process that the economic and political predominance of the landed oligarchy began to wane in Latin America. But the centrality of the large landed estate for an understanding of rural conflicts and violence is such that Eric Wolf (1973) distinguishes three phases in the history of the peasant movements in Latin America, each phase being linked to a particular stage in the development of the estate or *hacienda* system. The conflicts as well as the type and degree of violence vary in each phase. It is the third phase which is of particular relevance for our analysis. In this phase peasant struggles, while becoming more varied, centre principally around demands for agrarian reform, expressed sometimes through land invasions of estates for the right to form trade unions, and for better wages and working conditions. Since the Second World War these types of protests and demands have become more common. These peasant struggles are part of wider processes of political change. Sometimes it is these wider political transformations which give peasants an opportunity to express their demands and occasionally achieve some success. Thus alliances with urban groups are vital for peasants in determining the degree of success of their fight for justice. In turn peasant struggles themselves also influence the

direction of the political changes in the country.

Distinguishing phases of peasant protest and patterns of development within a broad historical and theoretical framework, either within a structural-functional modernisation or Marxist paradigm, has been much criticised since the 1980s, especially by postmodernists and post-Marxists. Such broad generalisations were eschewed in favour of more local and actor-orientated studies which emphasised agency, identity, everyday life experiences and life-projects. There has been a shift from structure and the macro context to actors and the micro context, as well as from class to ethnicity and gender (Meertens, 2000; Moser & Clark, 2001). While some of these new paradigms in the social sciences add fresh perspectives to social phenomena and illuminate hitherto neglected issues, they should not, in my view, detract from efforts which seek to understand the broad patterns of development and change. It is necessary, however, to avoid the dangers of determinism, unilinearity and single progressive patterns in these wider comparative studies, which should be sensitive to the insights provided by post-Marxists and postmodernists. Such exercises are useful as they help us to understand the broader forces which have shaped the past and are conditioning the present.

In short, the colonial and postcolonial agrarian system was highly exploitative and oppressive. Under such conditions peasants had major grievances, especially the peasant communities which had lost their best, if not all, their land. The expansion of the estate at the expense of community lands continued in some regions of Latin America into the middle of the past century. Tenants also had many grievances concerning the high rents they had to pay and their precarious position. With the spread of wage labour new conflicts emerged concerning the low wages and harsh working conditions on the estates. Thus it comes as no surprise to find that such an unequal and exploitative agrarian system was a fertile breeding ground for violence. As mentioned, this system was imposed and maintained through violent means on a conquered and colonised population but it was also contested by violent means by those who were oppressed. Every so often peasants rebelled against the oppressive and exploitative agrarian relations via the Tupac Amaru rebellion in the 18th century in Peru, for example, and the many slave revolts in the Caribbean islands and Brazil (Genovese, 1979).

The violent struggle for land

It is a well known fact that the Cuban revolution in 1959 and Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union a few years thereafter provoked a major rethink of US policy towards Latin America. Rightly or wrongly the Cuban revolution was interpreted as a largely agrarian revolution in which the peasantry played a prominent role. US policy makers and the Latin American elite feared that the Cuban example might encourage further guerrilla movements and peasant insurrections throughout Latin America. As in Cuba these might succeed in overthrowing the dominant class and spreading socialist regimes throughout the hemisphere. The US administration under John F Kennedy took the initiative in launching the Alliance for Progress, with the aim of bringing about the modernisation of Latin America through reforms so as to avoid possible socialist

revolutions. One important aspect of this enterprise was to encourage Latin American governments to undertake agrarian reform programmes. For this purpose the US regime was willing to provide substantial financial as well as technical assistance. It was claimed that a major source of rural conflicts, rebellion and revolution was to be found in the traditional latifundist agrarian system which condemned much of the rural population to poverty. It was believed that land redistribution and the spread of private family farming would turn a potentially insurrectionary peasantry into a conservative and stabilising social force in the countryside. And many Latin American governments did indeed design agrarian reform programmes under the influence of the Alliance for Progress (Thiesenhusen, 1989). Several questions arise in this regard. Did peasant organisations, peasant movements and peasant violence play any significant role in this process? Did the agrarian reform succeed in bringing about the social and political incorporation of the peasantry and thus reduce conflicts and violence? Or, on the contrary, did the agrarian reform open a Pandora's box and lead to further political and social instability and violence? I shall now attempt to discuss these questions as well as related issues by examining the experiences of Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and Central America.

Chile's agrarian reform and violent counter-reform

The Chilean case illustrates the implementation of a relatively non-violent agrarian reform, despite its radical character. Unfortunately it is also a clear case of a later agrarian counter-reform which was imposed by an authoritarian state through state-directed violence. During the agrarian reform period from 1964 to 1973 the number of violent deaths did not exceed a dozen. This is remarkable when considering that about half the country's agricultural land was expropriated and that many peasants took direct action in a largely successful attempt to speed up the expropriation process by engaging in widespread farm seizures, which steadily escalated from 13 in 1965 to 1278 in 1971 (Kay, 1992: 140). But after the military coup in 1973, which overthrew the socialist government of President Allende, the fatalities spiralled into the thousands in the countryside. Peasant activists, trade union leaders, beneficiaries of the agrarian reform and indigenous people were the principal victims of the repression unleashed by the authoritarian state. Torture, detention without trial, disappearances, imprisonment for political reasons and widespread terror became the norm. It was a class war in which repression had the clear purpose of destroying the peasant movement as part of the wider aim of the military government to crush any possibility of a resurgence of a revolutionary movement which might dare to challenge the power of the bourgeoisie and of the capitalist system in Chile. While in some instances landlords took an active part together with the military and the police force in hunting down certain peasant leaders (especially those who had been involved in the takeover of their farms), this happened only in the initial phase of repression. In general, violence was controlled from the top by the state, the armed forces and, in particular, the secret police, which was under the direct command of President General Pinochet, who was also the head of the army.

The peasant movement was disarticulated by the state, and the once influential

peasant trade unions, whose membership comprised over two-thirds of all agricultural workers by the end of the Allende government, became a shadow of their former selves (Kay, 1992: 139). But the landlord class was also forced to accept some changes as often only part of their properties were returned and the remainder was sold to peasant beneficiaries or to other groups. Over a third of the expropriated land was returned by the military government to its former owners, less than half was distributed to some of the agrarian reform beneficiaries and the remainder was sold by tender to capitalists (Jarvis, 1992). Almost half the former agrarian reform beneficiaries did not receive any *parcela* as this new family plot of land was known. The *parcelas* resulted from the privatisation and subdivision of the collectives and state farms of the reformed sector. Landlords also had to face the competitive winds of the new neoliberal policy, which drove many of them to bankruptcy and resulted in the emergence of a new class of agricultural entrepreneurs who were able to exploit new export markets, radically transform their production patterns and make innovations.

By giving individual land titles to peasant *parceleros*, the counter-reform fulfilled a long-held peasant aspiration. However, *parceleros* (owners of a *parcela*) were a minority of the peasantry. Over half sold their *parcela* because they could not keep up their payments for the land or went bankrupt (Silva, 1992). Nevertheless the parcelisation process was a significant factor in stabilising the countryside. With the agrarian reform and counter-reform, a new agrarian structure emerged in Chile. The estates had either been expropriated or transformed into modern capitalist farms, which now account for less than half the land landlords once possessed, while the peasant farm sector has doubled the areas under its control (Jarvis, 1992). Although the neoliberal policies ushered in by the military government have led to a new process of land concentration, the agrarian system is today less unequal and more flexible compared with the pre-agrarian reform period (Hojman, 1993).

Land conflicts and rural violence in general have abated since the transition to democracy in 1990 (Gwynne & Kay, 1997). It is highly unlikely that mobilisations such as those during the agrarian reform period will ever be witnessed again. But in recent years peasants belonging to *mapuche* indigenous communities have invaded some farms, claiming ownership rights, or some other ancestral right, and demanding that the government expropriate these farms for their benefit. Despite Chile's agricultural export success, there remains the unresolved indigenous issue, which has resulted in the largest rural mobilisations since the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973. The *mapuche* conflict arises from their lack of land and their marginalisation from the benefits of the country's remarkable economic growth since the mid-1980s.

In an earlier article (Kay, 1980) I explained the relative absence of rural violence in pre-1973 Chile compared with other Latin American countries in terms of its political system and the manifold patron-client relations which landlords developed with the peasantry. Furthermore, Chile's significant mining sector and relatively early industrialisation offered an outlet for rural poverty through large-scale rural outmigration. Various electoral reforms, especially from the late 1950s onwards, gradually allowed the peasantry's increasing participation in the political system (Kaufman, 1972). Political parties began to compete

for the peasant vote, thereby putting the peasants' demands for unionisation and agrarian reform on the political agenda. Peasants did not need to resort to violent actions to press their demands, as legal channels were being opened for expressing their claims. However, during the Allende government peasant demands for land escalated as the peasantry seized what they saw as an historic opportunity. The Allende regime was sympathetic to their claims and was unwilling to use the repressive apparatus of the state when peasants illegally seized farms. Instead the government accelerated the expropriation process, even though it was against farm seizures. This drove not only large landowners but also middle-sized farmers into increasingly militant opposition; they thus welcomed the military *coup d'état* as they saw this as the only option for avoiding further expropriation and as a means to regain, if not all, at least part of their expropriated landed property. Thus the agrarian reform destabilised the political system instead of stabilising it (Lehmann, 1992). But I do not think that the agrarian reform was the key factor in Allende's overthrow, as argued by Loveman (1976), although it was a contributory factor. In my view it was Allende's avowed aim to pursue Chile's democratic transition to socialism—which challenged the power of the whole capitalist class—the increasing economic crisis, and his inability to control the urban and rural social movements which led to his violent overthrow by the military.

Peru's violence before and after Sendero Luminoso

In the early 1960s rural conflicts and peasant demands for agrarian reform intensified in Peru. In the wake of the Cuban revolution, guerrilla movements also made their appearance. One of the most notable peasant movements at the time was led by the Trotskyist leader Hugo Blanco, who was largely active in the valley of La Convención (Hobsbawm, 1969). Tenants refused to pay rents to landlords and demanded the expropriation of their estates. However, this movement quietened down a few years later when the Belaúnde government largely acceded to their demands by expropriating many of the estates and redistributing the land in private ownership to the former tenants. President Belaúnde's 1964 agrarian reform was clearly designed for political purposes and was confined to only those areas where rural conflicts were most intense. By distributing land to the insurrectionary peasants the government hopes to buy social peace as well as to have a free hand in repressing the incipient guerrilla struggle. It succeeded on both counts.

Meanwhile General Velasco Alvarado's radical and sweeping agrarian reform from 1969 to the mid-1970s, after an initial relatively quiet period, led to further violence, as many peasants were against the direction taken by the agrarian reform. There was resistance to the statist and collectivist character of the agrarian reform but above all there was opposition by the indigenous peasant communities, who protested against their partial, if not full, exclusion from the land distribution process. Peasants from these communities began to invade the newly created state or collective farms demanding that part, if not all, of the land should be transferred to them. Violent clashes ensued, resulting in many deaths and hundreds of wounded persons. It was this dissatisfaction among peasant

community members or *comuneros* which the maoist Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) organisation would exploit so ruthlessly and violently.

Peru is a tragic illustration of an agrarian reform policy which, while solving some problems, also opened the way for new grievances and conflicts in the countryside, thereby leading to the emergence of the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla movement. By destroying feudal relations and the political and social power of landlords and capitalist farmers (referred to as *gamonalismo*), the agrarian reform left a power vacuum which the state and/or the peasant organisations were unable to fill. The collectivist character of the agrarian reform was not suitable for much of the country as it overlooked the importance of the estate's internal peasant enterprises (tenants and sharecroppers) and did not adequately address the problem of the external peasant enterprises, ie the land shortage and historical grievances of the peasant communities (Kay, 1982). This led to much disillusionment with the agrarian reform which, together with the power vacuum, offered the opportunity for the rise of Sendero.

It was only when peasants from indigenous communities revolted by invading land belonging to the reformed sector and the collective and state farms faced increasing economic difficulties that the government started to transfer some of the reformed sector's land to peasant communities and to parcelise the remainder for the benefit of the existing beneficiaries, ie subdividing it into peasant family farms (agrarian reform *parcelas*). However, these measures came too late and were also insufficient to prevent the rise of Sendero Luminoso. While the peasantry had a secondary influence on the initial design of the agrarian reform, which was from the top down and of a state-capitalist, corporatist type, it nevertheless unleashed the largest peasant movement ever in Peruvian history, thereby significantly changing the outcome of the agrarian reform. Despite all the agrarian reform's imperfections and failings, some of which could have been avoided, it was a necessary and crucial step towards addressing the underlying causes of rural violence in Peru. But the disastrous violence unleashed by Sendero Luminoso was very expensive in terms of loss of human life, and destruction of villages, communities and livelihoods, as well as provoking a massive displacement of rural people, largely to urban centres.

The rise and fall of Sendero Luminoso. Thus in the Peruvian case the agrarian reform unwittingly sowed the seeds of an intensification of violence, probably the greatest violence ever experienced in Peru since the colonial period. The slogan of the revolutionary movement throughout most of Latin America was 'Land or Death' during the 1960s. In Peru hundreds of thousands of peasants and rural workers joined organisations which succeeded in pressurising the state to expropriate hundreds of thousands of hectares. While 166 people died between 1958 and 1964 as a result of clashes in the countryside, this is less than those who died in the first 10 days of August 1991. While 166 deaths are 166 too many, this figure has to be compared with the over 20 000 people who died as a consequence of political violence during the 1980s (Degregori, 1992: 413). Furthermore, it is estimated that, up to the early 1990s over 200 000 people have been displaced by the war unleashed by Sendero (*ibid*: 419). But the agrarian reform cannot by itself be blamed for this violence as other factors contributed to

it, such as Peru's entrenched racism and marginalisation of its indigenous population. It is these deep-seated resentments and frustrations, particularly of those *comuneros* who had become 'de-peasantised' and 'de-indianised', which Sendero was able to mobilise in the first stages of their violent trajectory from the 1980s to the mid-1990s (Favre, 1984). Sendero Luminoso offered a new identity and mission to the sons and daughters of *comuneros* who, thanks to the various reforms of the Velasco government, had been able to improve their education and, in some instances, gain access to provincial universities, but had then been unable to secure an adequate job and were thus frustrated in their upward social mobility. These youngsters became a fertile recruiting ground for Sendero which used them to gain access to, and support from indigenous communities. Nevertheless, it is my view that, without this fatal flaw in the design and implementation of the agrarian reform, Sendero would never have been able to develop into such a deadly force. This is corroborated by the fact observed by many researchers that, in those areas where the agrarian reform did redistribute land to the peasant communities, either during the initial expropriation process or, more often, after *comuneros* had invaded the collective or state farms, Sendero was unable to make many inroads. Researchers have also noted that those communities and reformed sector farms which were well organised and/or which had close links with urban-based political parties, largely of the civilian (non-insurrectionist) left, were best able to resist the incursions by Sendero (De-gregori, 1992).

Although the agrarian reform in Peru was a major factor in the subsequent violence, it was a turning point in the country's history and an essential, though far from sufficient, step for beginning to resolve the agrarian and indigenous question which originated with the Spanish conquest and acquired new dimensions over the centuries. The agrarian reform was a critical precondition for this historical task. However, Sendero would never have been able to achieve such prominence and wreck so many lives if Velasco's agrarian reform had put the peasant communities at its centre from the start, instead of only marginally incorporating them in the land redistribution process.

There are a number of reasons why Sendero Luminoso initially succeeded in gaining control over large areas of rural Peru. First, there was the unresolved land issue of peasant communities. Second, there was endemic racism as well as continuing discrimination against and poverty of indigenous groups. Third, there was a social and political vacuum arising from the destruction of the oligarchical order and the weakness of social and political institutions, in short a weak civil society. Fourth, a new type of young cadres had come into existence, composed largely of students, many of whom were sons and daughters of indigenous peasants, and whose possibilities for social advancement were restricted, creating a powerful resentment against the existing sociopolitical system. Fifth, the initial organisational and ideological capacity of Sendero's leadership and its peculiar brand of maoism appealed to the socially excluded. Sixth, the state took inappropriate action to combat Sendero, which further aggravated the situation, for example, in a disastrous military response, using violent counter-terrorist measures, which involved mass violations of human rights. In the years 1988 to 1991 Peru had the highest figure of 'disappeared' people in the world (Starn,

1996: 244). Peasants were often caught in the crossfire of the battle between the Senderistas and the state violence of the armed forces and the police. Some *comuneros* and communities at first supported Sendero, which tapped into their grievances and promised a new future. However, once the armed forces and the police abandoned their brutal counter-terrorist actions and started to change their attitude towards the peasantry by seeing them as possible recruits in the fight against Sendero, instead of as terrorists, the situation began to shift in favour of the state. Thus in the years 1983 to 1984 the number of civilian casualties caused by the military declined by more than two-thirds (Starn, 1996: 244). When the balance of forces began to shift in favour of the state and the senderista peasants began to suffer heavy casualties, many active and passive supporters shifted their allegiance to the state or became neutral. Although Sendero is still active in some regions, largely in the Huallaga valley coca producing region, it is only able to launch sporadic and minor actions which no longer threaten the stability of the country.

Various factors account for Sendero Luminoso's defeat. First, the increasing disillusionment and alienation of many people with Sendero's dogmatism, rigidity and use of violence. This ideological rigidity led the group to make mistakes and to be unwilling to learn from them. This lost them support in the peasant communities in particular. Senderistas closed rural markets, displaced, often through violent means, the traditional leadership in the peasant communities and imposed their own young cadres as new leaders, used extreme violence in meting out 'justice' and used violence in an increasingly indiscriminate manner, thereby employing the same terrorist tactics which the military had used initially and which had claimed many innocent victims (Starn, 1996: 243). Second, Abimael Guzmán, known to his supporters as 'Presidente Gonzalo', is no Tupac Amaru, Emiliano Zapata or 'Che' Guevara, as he lacks their charismatic appeal. Although initially the organisation which he created was able to recruit a new frustrated, de-indianised and marginalised intellectual group of indigenous origin whose mobility was blocked, his authoritarianism, dogmatism and brutal actions in the end sowed the seeds of his capture by the security forces in 1994 and the demise of his organisation. Third, the inability of Sendero to protect those communities which had been sympathetic to it from the counter-terrorist methods adopted by the police and the military also lost it support. Many communities were no longer willing to risk the lives of their members for an organisation which had promised much but was unable to defend them from the human rights abuses of the state's 'law and order' forces. Fourth, the existence or formation and development of the *rondas campesinas* in many highland communities was a key factor in Sendero's defeat. The *rondas* are a sort of vigilante committee organised by members of the communities themselves. They already existed in northern Peru before the emergence of Sendero and had been formed to prevent cattle rustling (Gitlitz & Rojas, 1983; Starn, 1991; Huber, 1995). When the government realised that it could not defeat Sendero on its own it encouraged the formation of organisations similar to the original *rondas*, the so-called Civil Self-defence Committees (Comités de Autodefensas Civil, CDC) throughout the central and southern highlands. According to Pérez (1992: 474, my translation): 'The great paradox of the *rondas* is that, originating from the

violence, they sowed the basis for peace'. Finally, the changing strategy of the government and the military towards the *rondas* also contributed to Sendero's defeat. Instead of seeing the *rondas* as potential terrorist organisations sympathetic to Sendero the government began to realise that these were genuine grassroots associations which were attempting to defend the livelihoods of their members and compensate for the shortcomings of the state in terms of its inability to protect them against rustling and crime, to administer justice as they saw it and to provide essential services. With the changing attitude of the government towards the *rondas* the military began to establish links with them and to provide them with weapons, albeit in limited numbers and of the most simple kind. In some areas a military–*rondas* or rather military–CDC alliance developed which, however, after the waning of Sendero was largely discontinued by the communities in question (Starn, 1996: 244–245).

In summary, the key actor behind the defeat of Sendero Luminoso was the peasant communities who had also been its principal victims and who were initially victims of the security forces as well. It was only once Sendero had been defeated and people could visit the areas which had been under its control again that the true extent of the havoc it had created became evident and the difficult task of reconstruction could begin (Wilson, 1997). In the areas where Sendero had been most active, as in Ayacucho, the changes brought about in the countryside by the years of violence has been profound (Degregori, 1996). Complete villages had been destroyed or abandoned and whole local economies and social networks disrupted or uprooted. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) had to abandon their social and economic development projects (Smith, 1992). The death toll was extremely high as was the number of displaced population and refugees (Coronel, 1999). It will take many years of concerted efforts by the community, the government and NGOs to rebuild the economic and social fabric of these communities.

Colombia's enduring violence

Colombia, rightly or wrongly, conjures up in the minds of many an image of perpetual violence. It is seen as the Latin American country where violence has been the most widespread and persistent. Indeed, Colombians themselves refer to one of their historical periods from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, as '*La Violencia*' (The Violence) (Fals Borda, 1969). Tragically the 1980s and 1990s would be even more violent in terms of the greater intensity, variety, intricateness, and geographical reach of the violence, leading some authors to refer to it as '*Las Violencias*' (The Violences) (Sánchez & Meertens, 2001: 194). This has even led to the establishment of the specific profession of *violentólogos* (literally, violentologists) in Colombia, who specialise in the study of violence (Sánchez & Avilés, 2001: 6). The manifold aspects of violence in Colombia and its changing characteristics throughout the country's history make it difficult to analyse and comprehend. Violence in Colombia is a complex web of interacting, multifaceted and evolving factors. Its causes and manifestations are multiple. It is thus not surprising to find that interpretations about violence in Colombia tend to differ more markedly than for other Latin American countries. The state itself has been

involved in many illegal acts of violence, perpetrated by the armed forces, the police, and paramilitary groups linked to the state.

In Colombia the linkages between the land problem and violence are particularly complex. But despite the varying interpretations as to the causes and consequences of violence in Colombia most authors tend to agree that the land question is a major factor in explaining the country's violent history. In what follows I will adopt the useful periodisation of Colombia's violence presented by Meertens (1997). The first period is characterised by an upsurge of violence during the 1930s. During these years Colombia witnessed a growth of peasant organisations and actions, particularly in the rich coffee-growing areas. Through their organisations peasants demanded the abolition of feudalist, oppressive and exploitative labour-services which tenants had to pay to landlords. They also campaigned for the right to cultivate coffee on their tenancy and to acquire property rights. The government, in its attempts to diffuse peasant-landlord conflicts, which were often accompanied by violence, enacted a Land Law (*Ley de Tierras*) in 1936 which sought to modernise the traditional estates, to provide land titles to those smallholders who had not yet legalised their occupation of a piece of land (often belonging to the state) which they had been cultivating for many years, and to redistribute land to tenants by expropriating those estates which were considered to be inefficient by leaving much of their land uncultivated. However, this legislation backfired as landlords proceeded to expel tenants, often by violent means, and as the government did not have the resolve to confront them.

The second period was *La Violencia* (from the late 1940s to the 1960s) during which there was a dramatic escalation of homicides particularly affecting the countryside. Between 1946 and 1966 the number of people killed exceeded 200 000, ie 1.56% of the total population was slain, which amounts to 2.8% of the population aged 15 years or over. Colombia still had the highest violent death rate in the world in the early 1960s (Oquist, 1980: 9, 10). The government, dominated by the Conservative Party, unleashed a wave of repression against the peasant movement, as it feared its increasing strength. As a consequence of this state terror some peasant organisations evolved into a guerrilla movement and their target was not so much the landlord class but the government. However, the guerrilla movement was co-opted by the Liberal Party, the principal opposition party to the government, which in turn led to the Conservative Party organising its own armed bands. The conflict became a struggle between the two political parties for control of the government and the country. Thus the *Violencia* was a political competition among elites through violent means, often on a regional level. Peasant demands were cast aside and banditry became common. This political banditry was part of an individual strategy tradition characteristic of small and medium coffee farmers. Conflict and violence were also common between landowners and sharecroppers, many of whom were on medium-sized farms (Sánchez & Meertens, 2001: 41). Meertens depicts this type of banditry as being similar to the 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' analysed by Scott (1985). The peasant movement had been fractured and disarticulated, thereby dissolving into factionalism, where peasants either supported conservative or liberal armed groups.

The third period in the 1970s was less violent. The agrarian system became more complex with the development by a 'capitalism from above', as some landlords modernised their estates. This was complemented by a 'capitalism from below', ie the emergence of a new class of capitalist farmers who were mainly former tenants able to purchase the land they were cultivating and who later even managed to accumulate land. Towards the end of this period the main national peasant organisation, *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* (ANUC), declined (Zamosc, 1986) leaving a political vacuum which was occupied by the guerrillas and increasingly also by other armed groups such as those linked to drug traffickers or dealers, the paramilitary and the self-defence militia.

In the fourth period of the 1980s and 1990s violence again dominated the political scene. The revolutionary guerrilla groups extended and consolidated their geographical reach and political influence thanks to successive governments' inability to tackle the problems in the countryside. The drug dealers also entered the scene and extended their reach, particularly in the areas of colonisation, as the cultivation of coca shifted from Peru and Bolivia to Colombia. Landlords as well as peasants are involved in coca growing and this blunts the class conflict as they both oppose the state's attempts to eradicate coca cultivation and fight the drug dealers. The US government has exercised a growing influence in shaping Colombia's policy towards the coca problem, which has become increasingly militarised. Legitimate social demands by the rural population have been portrayed by government propaganda as a drug issue and thereby justified repressive measures or, at best, allowed it to ignore the real crisis faced by the peasantry and indigenous groups.

As a result of this new complex of violence 25 000 to 35 000 people were killed annually during the 1990s, which is significantly higher than previously (Meertens, 2001: 132). About 13% of these violent deaths can be considered political, as they were perpetrated by agents of the state or members of the armed groups in conflict largely with the civilian population (Meertens, 2000: 89).

While it is mutually convenient for the government of Colombia and the United States to attribute these principally to drug traffic, it is increasingly evident that much of it is, in fact, politically motivated; that, while some killings are obviously the result of guerrilla activities, far more are a consequence of state terrorism, perpetrated by the army or by para-military forces whom they sanction ... It is no coincidence that while counter-insurgency has generated almost three times as many casualties among non-combatants as among the guerrillas, and has created a refugee population of 600 000 internally displaced peasant families, drug traffickers have acquired 21 percent of the country's arable land (Ross, 1997: 28, 30; the data refer to the early 1990s).

More recent estimates that 1 200 000 people have been displaced by the violence (58% being women and girls), forcing largely rural inhabitants to escape to the cities (Meertens, 2001: 134). In one survey 30% of displaced people said they were fleeing from the guerrillas, 35% blamed paramilitary units and 15% claimed the army had forced them to move (*The Economist*, 5 April 1997). A recent study by the Colombian Commission of Jurists, a human-rights group, identified that in the year 2000 the paramilitaries were responsible for almost half the non-combat killings, the guerrillas for 11% and the military for much of the remainder (*The*

Economist, 21 April 2001). It is difficult to know how reliable these figures are but they reveal that the rural population suffers at the hands of all four key political actors in this conflict: the state, the paramilitary, the guerrillas and the drug mafia. But it is notable that one of the key demands of the guerrilla rebels is agrarian reform, which continues to be a major aspiration of the peasantry and landless rural workers.

In short, analysis of the Colombian case reveals, in the words of Meertens (1997: 249; my translation) that: 'During the 20th Century the peasant struggles for land and the reactions by landlords, as expressions of the class struggle in the countryside, have been blurred not only by the variety of regional structures but also by their constant insertion in political conflicts of another kind, whose divisions cut across class lines. Perhaps this has been the most important characteristic of Colombia's rural history.' This statement is particularly valid if one remembers that the drug mafia has penetrated the Colombian political system up to the highest level and has thus become a major actor in the country's political conflicts.

Brazil's landless peasant movement

In Brazil the principal protagonist in the countryside over the past few decades has been the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), or Landless Rural Workers Movement, which has some 500 000 adherents, making it the largest peasant movement in South America. It has spearheaded over 1000 land invasions or farm seizures, demanding the expropriation of the land occupied which is generally unused land belonging to the landlords' estate. The MST is a combative and well organised group whose strategy is to occupy uncultivated farmland. These actions come as no surprise as land inequality is particularly acute in Brazil, where only 4% of farm owners control 79% of the country's arable land (Veltmeyer *et al*, 1997). Furthermore it is estimated that Brazil has 2.5 million landless peasants. In these land occupations a variety of peasants are involved, mainly rural semi-proletarians or proletarians, such as wage workers, squatters, sharecroppers and tenants (Petras, 1998a). By 1994 the landless peasants had pressurised the government through direct action, which included blocking highways and sit-ins at local offices of the state's agrarian reform institute (INCRA), to settle over 120 000 families on land since the beginning of their actions in the mid-1980s (Veltmeyer *et al*, 1997: 181, 192). Furthermore, during his first term of office from 1994 to 1998 President Fernando Henrique Cardoso settled 285 000 landless peasant families on expropriated plots and his aim is to grant formal titles to a further 400 000 families who have been occupying land abandoned by previous owners by the end of his second term of office in 2003 (*The Economist*, 17 July 1999: 60).

In this struggle for land there have been many casualties as landlords and their hired gunmen (*pistoleros*) acted with impunity. Many protestors also died and were wounded in clashes with the militarised police. According to estimates from the Catholic church, almost 1000 land-related killings have taken place since 1985 (Padgett, 1998: 32). Serrill (1996: 35) vividly describes one of the major violent confrontations in 1996 between the police and the landless peasants in

their battle for land.

Some 1500 peasants from northern Pará state in the Brazilian Amazonia wanted land, and they were hungry enough, desperate enough, to take bold action to get it. On April 17 they blocked a highway in Eldorado de Carajás to draw attention to their demand for the right to settle on idle farmland nearby. To their consternation the state government responded with busloads of heavily armed military police. After the cops fired a volley of tear gas, the peasants charged, waving machetes, hoes, scythes and a few pistols. The police opened fire with automatic weapons. The result was the bloodiest confrontation in the 30-year history of Brazil's agrarian reform movement. Nineteen demonstrators died and 40 more were wounded by the police fusillade. The scene, filmed by a local television newsman and broadcast repeatedly the following day, stunned all of Brazil.

The MST leadership is aware of the need to forge linkages and make alliances with urban organisations in order to extend public support for their goals. It has thus developed connections with the urban left and the Workers Party (PT), which have not been without tensions, thereby being part of a wider project of social and political transformation. In the last presidential elections in 1998 the MST mobilised support behind Luiz Ignácio da Silva (nicknamed Lula) who came second in the presidential race. In short, the MST is the most dynamic, creative, inspiring and influential political movement in today's Brazil (Hammond, 1999).

The actions of the MST illustrate how old-style class struggles, though with some new features, have resurfaced in the contemporary world. Except for Argentina, Brazil was the only country in Latin America which by the 1990s had not yet undertaken any significant agrarian reform. This lateness can be explained by the political power of landlords, who were able to block any earlier attempts at agrarian reform, and by the state's decision to open the Amazon region for colonisation, thus relieving some of the pressure for land from the impoverished mass of landless peasants. This colonisation of the pioneer frontier provided a temporary 'safety-valve' by releasing the social tensions in the countryside as it provided possibilities for movement and improvement for some rural workers. However, the colonisation itself was a violent process. Much of the violence in the frontier region resulted from actions of landlords and other capitalists, who claimed the land colonised by the pioneer peasants (the *posseiro*) as their own and often expelled them by force, especially after they had cleared the land. Certain major development projects also resulted in violence because of the forced displacement of populations and negative impact on the livelihoods of the local population and on the environment (Hall, 1989). The lack of an institutional infrastructure in the frontier region also meant that violence was often used to resolve conflicts rather than the legal or administrative mechanisms of the states. Violence was also used as a means of social control and in particular for dominating labour. By preventing the intensification of conflicts in the region of origin of the migrants the colonisation created new conflicts and violence in the frontier region (Foweraker, 1981).

In short, the widespread violence in rural Brazil is an expression of the struggle for land and survival by the rural poor. Thus agrarian reform is still a major issue in Brazil, is crucial to tackling rural poverty and is one of the root causes of rural violence.

The Chiapas rebellion in Mexico

At first sight the Chiapas peasant rebellion led by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), which burst onto the political scene on 1 January 1994, does not appear to support my proposition that rural conflict and violence are more likely to occur in a highly inegalitarian and exclusionary agrarian system. After all Mexico had the first and most significant peasant and agrarian revolution in postcolonial Latin America. The consequence of this was that the oldest and one of the most extensive agrarian reforms ever to be implemented in the region took place in Mexico. But with the modernisation of agriculture and the vast irrigation projects of the northern provinces of the country new inequalities and conflicts appeared as government policy clearly favoured capitalist enterprises, which led to the rise of modern forms of neolatifundism. The *ejido* agrarian reform sector received comparatively little support from the government, just enough for the ruling party (PRI) to retain its control in the countryside through a web of clientelism and sporadic repression. Nevertheless, since the revolution the country has enjoyed relative political stability and, although violence remains ever present, it is at a lower level than in many other Latin American countries.

However, on further reflection the Chiapas rebellion can be interpreted as providing additional support for the proposition put forward in this article.⁶ Chiapas is Mexico's most southern and indigenous region, bordering Guatemala, where the agrarian reform had the least impact and landlords remained the dominant force. The Chiapas region is characterised by extreme poverty, inequality and repression. Unlike other regions of Mexico, where peasants gained land through redistribution after the revolution, in Chiapas peasants have steadily lost land to outside ranching and logging interests. In this context, the Zapatistas emerged as a self-defence group aimed at the indigenous people's survival. Thus the Chiapas rebellion is not only a struggle for land but also for an inclusionary development process and democracy. As Burbach (1994: 113) argues:

this is not a single-minded revolt of indigenous peoples focused only on retaking their lands and expelling the rich who have exploited them. Nor, as demonstrated by the two thousand Indians who rose up in arms on January 1st, is this a 'foco' movement in which a few guerrilleros try to goad the rest of the populace into supporting them. And this is not a *Sendero Luminoso*-like struggle in which an Indian or peasant army is intent on destroying all who stand in its way in order to seize absolute control of the state ... What distinguishes the EZLN from its predecessors is that it is not bent on taking power in Mexico City, nor is it calling for state socialism. Its objective is to spark a broad-based movement of civil society in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico that will transform the country from the bottom up.⁷

Furthermore, Chiapas is a rebellion against neoliberalism and globalisation, against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the USA and Canada, and especially against the 1992 amendment of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, one of the main gains of the agrarian movement of 1910–17, which put an end to the agrarian reform. The ending of further land distribution and the threat to peasant subsistence through cheap food imports from the USA and Canada following the NAFTA agreement are some of the main

reasons for this rebellion (de Janvry *et al*, 1997; Harvey, 1998). The peasants' maize and cereal cultivation is endangered by the government's neoliberal policies, under which the state has withdrawn subsidies, credit, technical assistance and other services to the peasant sector (Barros Nock, 2000). Maize is a crop which is not only important for the economic survival of the peasantry but also has cultural and symbolic significance.

In short, the rebellion in Chiapas is fuelled by the exclusionary impact of Mexico's agricultural modernisation on the peasantry and by fears that Mexico's integration into NAFTA will marginalise them further. Mexico's peasant farmers cannot compete with the large-scale mechanised maize and cereal farmers of North America unless special protective and developmental measures are adopted in their favour. Indeed, the Chiapas rebellion has come to symbolise the new character of social movements in the countryside in Latin America which are the forefront of the struggle against neoliberalism (Veltmeyer *et al*, 1997). The peasantry is striking back and it would be a serious mistake to dismiss these new peasant and indigenous movements in Latin America as the last gasp of rebellion (Petras, 1998b). Whether they will lead to the resurgence of the left as claimed by Petras (1997) remains to be seen. But they undoubtedly reveal that these new movements are shaping new class and ethnic identities in which the protagonists are affirming their own collective history and will to influence present events in their best interests.

War and peace in Central America

In Central America the rapid growth of agricultural exports during the 1950s and 1960s intensified grievances and conflicts in the countryside. Landlords expanded their landholdings, often encroaching on peasant areas, or limiting the peasantry's possibilities of gaining access to land, as well as expelling tenants from the estates or transforming them into wage labourers. The agro-export speculative boom widened inequalities and, in some instances, negatively affected rural workers' living standards. The rising protests and mobilisations in the countryside subsided where the political system was more open to peaceful change and where governments responded with redistributive measures and made efforts to reduce inequalities, such as in Costa Rica and Honduras. It has to be acknowledged that conflict and violence were also less intense in Costa Rica, which already had a far more egalitarian agrarian structure by the 1950s. In Honduras there were fewer conflicts and violence in the countryside as the peasantry suffered less from land shortages, land tenure insecurity and landlord domination compared with other Central American countries (Ruhl, 1984). But where governments failed to implement reforms and resorted to increasing repression, like in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, the protests escalated leading to major social revolts and escalating violence (Booth, 1991).

The land issue was not only an important factor in the history of violence in Central America but also played a key role in the Central American peace accords by which Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador are attempting to find a resolution to the civil war which has ravaged their countries. A few figures are useful to gauge the magnitude of these civil wars. According to some estimates

300 000 people were killed in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua during these conflicts and two million people (about 13% of the total population) were displaced, forced either to flee abroad or to safer parts of the country. The majority of these violent acts were committed by government forces and a much smaller proportion by paramilitary forces, death-squads and guerrilla groups (Pearce, 1998: 590–591). In 1986 President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica took the initiative in searching for a political solution to the civil war in these countries. His efforts were rewarded with the Esquipulas II 1987 agreement signed by various countries, which paved the way for the ending of the civil wars. But peace agreements were not finally signed until 1990 in Nicaragua, 1992 in El Salvador and 1996 in Guatemala.

Nicaragua. In Nicaragua land was highly concentrated and the dictator Anastasio Somoza was the largest landowner in the country. The Sandinista revolution which overthrew Somoza in 1979 implemented a radical agrarian reform expropriating almost half the country's agricultural land and benefiting over one-third of the peasantry. The expropriated estates were organised into state farms, in some cases into production co-operatives, and only a small proportion of the expropriated land was distributed directly to the beneficiaries as private family farms. The Sandinista government feared that subdividing the large estates would result in the loss of economies of scale and above all endanger the country's export earnings, as peasant beneficiaries might switch from export to subsistence crops. A collectivist emphasis was also underpinned by socialist political and ideological factors. Landlords and other social forces opposed to the revolution started to organise an armed struggle to overthrow the government. They received much support from the US regime during the Reagan administration as part of its cold war fight against any socialist movement or revolution. The counter-revolutionary groups (named 'the *contras*') exploited the dissatisfaction of many peasants with the agrarian policy of the Sandinista government and the collectivist character of the reformed sector. The armed conflict between the *contras* and the government severely disrupted the economy and agricultural production. But the peasants succeeded in pressurising the Sandinista government to adopt a less state-centred agrarian reform. After 1984 some reformed enterprises were transferred directly to peasant beneficiaries in either co-operative or individual ownership. This shift in policy was also provoked by the desire to reduce the influence of the *contras* among the peasantry and to stimulate food production (Utting, 1992). Following this policy change, the amount of expropriated land redistributed to peasant beneficiaries in individual ownership trebled from 8% in 1981–84 to 24% in 1985–88 of total expropriated land (Enríquez, 1991: 91–92). Peasant beneficiaries also gained more favourable access to scarce inputs, modifying the earlier advantageous treatment given to state farms. However, civil war and the resulting economic deterioration of the country meant that peasants still faced a difficult situation. The Sandinista agrarian reform also provoked a major organisational effort of the peasantry (Enríquez, 1997). In 1981 the government helped to set up a national peasant and farmers organisation called Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG) which one-fifth of all peasants had joined by 1987 (Blokland, 1992: 154). UNAG

managed to wrench a greater degree of autonomy from the state over time and has remained the most important peasant and farmer organisation in the countryside to this day.

Despite the change in policy the Sandinistas failed to win the support of the majority of the peasantry, as shown by the 1990 election results in which only 36.3% of the national rural vote went to the FSLN, the government party, compared with 44.2% of the urban vote (Horton, 1998: 261). It is most likely that the FSLN would have achieved a better electoral result in the rural areas if they had distributed individual property rights to peasant beneficiaries from the beginning of the agrarian reform. This would have driven fewer peasants to support the *contras*. As Horton (1998: xii) writes: 'The great majority of *contra* field commanders and combatants were peasants from Nicaragua's mountainous interior ... It is possible that 30 000 Nicaraguans fought at some point with anti-government forces, making the *contras* one of the largest armed mobilisations of peasants in contemporary Latin American history.' The Sandinista government certainly misunderstood the character of the pioneering peasantry (*colonos*) of the frontier region, where the rural workers and smallholders aspired to become peasant farmers and, through capitalisation, perhaps even capitalist farmers. They viewed the Sandinistas' agrarian policy as detrimental to their individualistic aspirations as the government organised them into co-operatives or collectives and disrupted the private marketing system which they preferred to the state purchasing monopoly. These frontier rural workers and peasants were enmeshed in a variety of patron-client relations with the *finquero* landowners who were their patrons, providing them with services and often employment as well. These clientelistic ties, while being exploitative, did provide a certain security to the rural population which the government policy undermined. As the landlord properties of the *finqueros* were expropriated they began to take up arms against the government. They used their clientelistic links to recruit the discontented peasantry to the ranks of the *contra* army, which received financial, material and logistical support from the US government (Martí i Puig, 2001).

Nicaragua's civil war of the 1980s had devastating human and economic costs. 'Out of a population of approximately 3.5 million, 30 865 Nicaraguans were killed during the war. Over 350 000 Nicaraguans, mainly from rural areas, were displaced by the war' (Horton, 1998: xi). This pushed the Sandinista government to sign peace accords brokered by Costa Rica's president Oscar Arias, together with other Central American countries. These accords called for an end to outside aid to the *contras* in return for democratic elections in Nicaragua. This led at first to a temporary ceasefire and after the defeat of the FSLN in the 1990 elections to a permanent ceasefire and demobilisation of the *contras*.

The victory of Violeta Chamorro in the 1990 elections led the new government to change the agrarian reform. Land redistribution to both sides in the civil war was seen as a key element of pacification. Although the civil war had come to an end, this partial counter-reform opened up new conflicts and bred new violence. This arose from the chaotic situation in the countryside, with multiple claims over land. Landlords were reclaiming expropriated land, beneficiaries wished to subdivide the state farms and collectives and gain private property titles as well as prevent landlords and *contras* from acquiring land from the reformed sector,

the *contras* were demanding a plot of land in return for giving up their weapons and those landless who had been bypassed by the Sandinista agrarian reform were also demanding land. It thus comes as no surprise to find that sporadic violence erupted in the countryside, especially when we consider that 'as of 1995, 47 per cent of the nation's total farmland was without legal title and former owners had filed 7185 claims to 25 per cent of total farmland' (Horton, 1998: 279). The paradox is that although the *contras* had contributed to the victory of the anti-Sandinista forces, some of them took up arms again to fight for a piece of land, as the government either failed to respond to their demands or was too slow in doing so. Thus the former 'peasant-*contras*' felt that they had been manipulated and betrayed by the *contra*-elite (the *finqueros*), who had been their patrons and leaders of the *contra*-army, and the USA. While most of the expropriated *finqueros* managed to recover all or part of their expropriated land, many of the peasant-*contras* were left high and dry. In their frustration and resentment these ex-*contras* took up arms again, fighting this time against the new government, they are thus referred to as the *recontras*. They believe that it is only through violence that they can get governments, of whatever political persuasion, to meet their urgent demands for land so as to satisfy their deep aspiration for a private farm.

Guatemala. Like other countries discussed in this article, much of the violence in Guatemala originates from struggles over resources, especially land. In Guatemala these conflicts not only have a class dimension they also have an important ethnic dimension. Rural society in particular is split between the *ladinos*, or so-called whites, and the *indígenas*, or Indians. Most of the *ladinos* are *mestizos*, ie of mixed white and Indian blood, are Spanish speaking and adopt Western dress and an urban life style. The *indígenas* speak one of the many indigenous languages of the country, are the majority population in the rural areas, and largely wear their own traditional dress, especially the women. There are, of course, differences within each category. *Ladinos*, comprise landlords, merchants, money lenders, civil servants, and so on, occupying the upper echelons of rural society, which is dominated by the *hacendados*, or landlords. Meanwhile the *indígenas* are the subaltern group, which is composed of a great variety of ethnic groups, which have their own language and identity; dominant among them are the Mayan population. Thus class relations have a clear ethnic dimension.

In the early 1950s a frustrated peasantry increasingly resorted to violence, demanding agrarian reform. One of the main measures taken by the Arbenz government in 1952 was the implementation of agrarian reform in the expectation that this would enhance social justice and reduce violence. Many US-owned plantations (mainly owned by the United Fruit Company) were expropriated as well as many *haciendas* owned by the *ladino* oligarchy. Together United Fruit and the *ladinos* conspired to overthrow the Arbenz government. They succeeded in 1954 and the CIA was heavily involved in the overthrow. In the 18 months of his administration Arbenz distributed land to some 100 000 peasant families (Brockett, 1988). After his overthrow a violent agrarian counter-reform ensued in which much of the expropriated land was returned to landlords. Over 200

peasants were murdered in the first few weeks after the fall of Arbenz.

This counter-revolution sowed the seeds for a harvest of violence. It aggravated the land problem and was a major factor in the renewed violence and ensuing civil war which was to last for 36 years. In the 1960s various guerrilla groups emerged in the wake of the Cuban revolution and the government started a counter-insurgency war. Between 1978 and 1985 alone 'half a million people out of a national population of 8 million became internal refugees: 150 000 fled to Mexico as political and economic refugees; and 200 000 found their way to other countries such as the United States' (Warren, 1993: 25). Political violence also shaped the flows of internal migration as people sought to escape from areas of high violence to more secure zones (Morrison & May, 1994). Furthermore, 'it is estimated that perhaps 200 000 civilians, primarily highlands Indians, had been killed or "disappeared" during the 36-year civil war which ended with the signing of the historic Peace Accords in December 1996' (*The Economist*, 16 October 1999: 67).

The roots of this violence, as Winn (1992: 265) writes, 'can be found in the aborted "revolution" of 1944-54, which challenged ladino control of Indian lands and labor, and in the brutal repression that followed ... This experience politicized many Indians, some of which joined the ladino-led Guerrilla Army of the Poor ... The fear of a leftists revolution based on Guatemala's Indian majority detonated the ensuing conflict.' For the guerrillas it was a war of emancipation and a struggle of liberation against the exploitation of peasants by landlords, as well as against an oppressive state. Meanwhile, for the government and the military it was a war against communist subversion and the menace from within. In the military's view guerrilla terror had to be met with counter-terror. 'But all were aware that there was also an ethnic dimension to the conflict, in a society where the lines of class and ethnicity often overlap' (*ibid*). This civil war acquired genocidal overtones as governments practised a 'scorched-earth' counter-insurgency campaign in the indigenous highlands against the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerrilla movement and its supporters (Jonas, 1997: 6). The military saw the Mayan population as being the main supporters of the guerrillas and thus the indigenous peasantry became victims of the military's indiscriminate violence.⁸

With the signing of the Peace Accords on 29 December 1996 between the government and the URNG a period of four years was established for its implementation. While the demobilisation of the URNG forces has been achieved, the downsizing of troops and dismantling of paramilitary groups has only partially been realised. Despite the Peace Accords, life for ordinary citizens is hardly peaceful. 'There is a growing spiral of violence, due mainly to criminality and common delinquency, but also to "social cleansing" death squads and the lynching of presumed delinquents. Meanwhile, former members of the army and security forces direct or participate in organized crime and extrajudicial executions. The impunity they enjoyed in the past continues to exist' (Molina, 1999: 4).

Thus Guatemala still has a long road to travel before it achieves a reasonable degree of democracy, equity and peace. But the Peace Accords have undoubtedly been a major turning point despite several setbacks, like the assassination of

Bishop Gerardi in 1998, which is widely believed to have been the work of right-wing forces as he had exposed the human rights violations of military and paramilitary forces, finding them responsible for most of the country's 36-year-long civil war's 200 000 deaths (*The Economist*, 23 June 2001: 62). The road to peace is indeed boggy and may yet unravel as the original deadline of December 2000 for the full implementation of the Peace Accords has been postponed to 2004; even then they might not be completely implemented. For example, the Socio-economic and Agrarian Accord which committed the government to guarantee a basic social safety net and implement a series of reforms, such as in land tenure, has so far only partially been realised (Burgerman, 2000). The indigenous population is still awaiting greater constitutional guarantees concerning their collective identity and human rights, while the peasants' demand for land still remains unfulfilled. Thus major challenges still lie ahead for the Guatemalan state and its citizens.

El Salvador. The extreme inequalities and exploitative conditions in rural El Salvador led to a peasant uprising in 1932, which was brutally suppressed by the armed forces and landlords. According to some estimates 30 000 to 40 000 people were killed, although others put the figure at 20 000, out of a population of only one million at the time. No wonder that this massacre is referred to as *La Matanza* (The Killing). Indians in particular formed the target of this slaughter (Pearce, 1986). The massacre ensured the continued domination of the landed oligarchy for many decades to come. It was only when the peasantry and rural wage workers felt their livelihoods increasingly under threat in the late 1970s that conflicts escalated again and threatened to engulf the country in civil war. Research has shown that there is a significant relationship between patterns of land tenure, changes in land use and sociopolitical conflict (Brockett, 1994: 187). The modernisation of estates and the shift to agro-exports displaced many peasants, as well as food crops, thereby pushing up food prices and making it more difficult for agricultural workers and food deficit smallholders to survive.

The government decreed an agrarian reform in March 1980 to deal with the rising tide of conflicts, to reduce peasant support for revolutionary groups and in a bid to gain greater backing for the regime from the peasantry. But the agrarian reform soon met powerful opposition from the landlords, which limited its effective implementation and unleashed a period of civil war lasting until the end of 1991 (Seligson, 1995; Paige, 1996). The government's expectation that the reform would lay the basis for lasting social stability and peace were frustrated as the landed oligarchy was able to mobilise its allies in the armed and security forces against the completion of the expropriation process. The alliance between the agro-export elite and the military resulted in the brutal and often indiscriminate repression of the peasantry, thereby driving many of them into armed resistance (Stanley, 1996). Nevertheless, the 1980 agrarian reform in El Salvador managed to distribute between one-fifth and one-quarter of the land to one-fifth of rural labour. However, the agrarian reform failed to offer anything to the large mass of the landless as the beneficiaries were largely limited to the estate's small tenants and to some of its workers. Production co-operatives were organised on most of the expropriated farms but about a fifth of their land area was cultivated

individually. Only a small proportion of expropriated farms were subdivided and distributed individually to beneficiaries as private peasant family farms (Pelupessy, 1995).

The 12 years of civil war from 1980 to 1991 claimed between 200 000 and 300 000 lives (Booth & Walker, 1993: 156), the overwhelming majority of which were the victims of the armed forces and death squads. The death toll equalled about 1.5% of the population and the war displaced another 30% from their homes (Brockett, 1994: 175). Nevertheless, the agrarian reform weakened the power of the landlords, thereby opening the doors for peace negotiations (Mason, 1999). With the signing of the peace agreement on 16 January 1992 the civil war formally ended, the guerrillas were brought into the peace process and became a political party. This institutionalisation process was seen as a way to reduce conflicts or at least to find peaceful mechanisms to resolve them, and thus reduce violence.

But sporadic violence continues in El Salvador, not least from the police and paramilitaries, as the root causes of the conflict remain to be solved. While the government limited its intervention during the peace negotiations to the political aspects of the conflict, the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front—FMLN), the main guerrilla group, focused on the socioeconomic sources of the conflict, though without much success. The agrarian reform of 1980 remains unfinished; the second phase was never implemented as it met strong resistance from the landlords. Thus the peace agreement remained largely limited to the reintegration of former combatants and refugees (Burgerman, 2000). There is even the possibility that some beneficiaries might lose their land as they are unable to pay the debt arising from the agrarian reform (Kowalchuk, 1998). The country's high demographic density and rural unemployment, its land shortage and intensity of cultivation, which has negative ecological consequences, makes it difficult to find a solution to the rural poor's demand for land. Also, the continued expansion of agro-exports are leading to further peasant displacement, conflicts and violence. Without overlooking the difficulties, I agree with Pearce's (1986: 303) conclusion that 'only an agrarian reform carried out within a broad process of radical social transformation can possibly pave the way for lasting peace and development in El Salvador'.

Unequal agrarian systems, exclusionary modernisation and violence

I have argued in this article that a highly unequal agrarian system, the associated exploitative social relations and the exclusionary modernisation processes are important factors, in some cases the most prominent ones, in explaining conflicts and violence in rural Latin America. The analysis has also revealed that there are other significant factors which influence the character and evolution of conflicts in the countryside. However, in a preliminary essay of this kind those determinants which are not rooted in the agrarian system, and especially in the land tenure structure, have been given less emphasis. In this sense, this is, as yet, a limited comparative analysis of some Latin American countries which has shown that no single and simple answer can be given regarding the causes of rural violence, its persistence or re-emergence, or possible ways of regulating it, let

alone resolving it. While some commonalities can be found there are also variations arising from the structural peculiarities of each country, as well as from the different actions of landlords, peasants, the state and other significant actors such as urban groups, political parties and the US government.

In this article I have endeavoured to analyse in particular the relationships between agrarian structure, agrarian reform and rural violence so as to be able to examine the proposition that one of the major causes of violence between landlords and peasants is rooted in the highly unequal agrarian system. It follows from this proposition that countries which have a more egalitarian agrarian system have a less violent rural society compared with countries with a more polarised land tenure system. In the emergence, development and resolution of rural conflicts the state plays a crucial role and thus policy makers can learn from previous experiences such as those discussed in this article. While the analysis developed in this article has shown that, in the long run, these propositions can be regarded as generally valid, the various relationships are far from direct and immediate because of a variety of other intervening factors. Thus, for example, countries which have undertaken agrarian reforms have often experienced increased violent conflicts in the initial phases, although they may have subsequently achieved a greater degree of stability. Countries in which land conflicts were particularly intense have generally sought to pacify the countryside through an agrarian reform policy. While agrarian reform might be a precondition for a more integrated and stable rural society, the reduction of rural violence depends ultimately on the successful institutionalisation of conflicts in which aggrieved social groups can pursue their claims through legal and political channels, as well as on the development, solidity and embeddedness of democratic institutions and practices. In short, the resolution of the land and violence problems are part and parcel of the process of democratisation of society. In what follows I will draw together the case study findings within a comparative perspective.

As for causes of agrarian reforms these have in some cases been instigated from below as a consequence of revolutions or peasant rebellions, as in Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua. Indeed, the Cuban revolution of 1959 can be considered as a catalyst for many of the agrarian reforms which were implemented subsequently throughout the region by inspiring guerrilla and peasant movements, as well as giving a warning signal to governments. Some Latin American governments realised that without agrarian reform they could face the prospect of widespread peasant rebellions and possible socialist revolutions in their own countries. The US administration supported, and perhaps even instigated, such a perception among these governments by launching the Alliance for Progress programme for the Americas. While many of the agrarian reforms since the Cuban revolution have been implemented from above by the state, they have often been instigated from below by peasant pressures or insurrections. These agrarian reforms were often meant to be pre-emptive to avoid future Cuban revolutions in the hemisphere. However, once agrarian programmes were proclaimed this opened new spaces for political action by peasants which in some instances made it possible for them to influence the further progress of the agrarian reform. Landlords, of course, also took measures to prevent agrarian reforms altogether, to limit their scope, or even to reverse them. The final

outcome depended on a variety of factors such as the correlation of political forces, the alliances which landlords and peasants were able to establish with other groups in society, largely urban, in support of their particular objective, and so on. The greater the relative autonomy of the state the more likely it was to tackle the land problem and to impose its model of development on the contending forces in the struggle over land and resources in the countryside. While the degree of autonomy of the state varies between Latin American countries, it was far more limited in comparison to South Korea and Taiwan, for example, which were able to carry out a sweeping agrarian reform, extract a sizeable agricultural economic surplus from peasant farmers to finance the initial stages of industrialisation, and to maintain social and political stability in the country, albeit in an authoritarian manner (Kay, 2001). Thus in Latin America the state was far more dependent on or influenced by social forces which in the end determined the outcome of the agrarian reforms. The agrarian reforms in South Korea and Taiwan are judged as having been successful and an important ingredient in their economic success but this has not generally been the case in Latin America.

Agrarian reforms did not always prove to be the anticipated panacea in Latin America as governments failed to fulfil their promises by distributing far less land than expected and by providing insufficient economic and technical support to the reformed sector (Thiesenhusen, 1995). Thus agrarian reforms often led to further violence because of the peasantry's frustrations with the slow pace, limited scope and top-down implementation of the reform programme. However, more often peasant demands for agrarian reform met fierce resistance from landlords and repression by the state. But when governments did initiate some land redistribution landlords often managed to block the agrarian reform and in some instances were even able to overthrow the government and regain part or all of their expropriated land often using violent means either directly by employing hired gunmen, using paramilitary organisations or relying on the repressive power of the state. Thus the land issue has been shown to be central to many of the conflicts and violence in the countryside and therefore needs to be addressed if governments wish to attain some degree of social and political stability in the longer run, even though in the first instance it might provoke further violence. Governments have to tackle the land issue head on as half way measures may only worsen the problem. For example, those countries which either blocked agrarian reforms or only implemented very limited agrarian reforms experienced further violence, as in Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Brazil. In Brazil, despite the rise of the MST, the increasing demands of the poor peasantry for land, and the transition to civilian rule during the 1980s, the government has so far only undertaken minor land redistribution. Landlords have been able to block any major agrarian reform in Brazil because of the peculiarities of its federal political system in which rural regions are over-represented in parliament. This has given landlords great influence in the national political system as they control many of the rural states. Thus peasant mobilisations have been met with violence from landlords and the federal states.

In some countries the lack of progress with agrarian reform has led to the rise of guerrilla movements which have been able to mobilise the disenfranchised rural poor. This has provoked counter-insurgency actions by the state, with support

from the US government during the cold war period, so as to fight a real or imagined communist subversive threat. These counter-insurgency actions have been responsible for most of the violent deaths and massive displacements of rural populations in the Central American region, acquiring almost genocidal characteristics against ethnic communities in the case of Guatemala (Falla, 1994; Kruijt, 1999). The counter-insurgency battle in the post-cold war era acquired a new dimension, as in the case of Colombia where repressive operations against the peasantry have been launched under the guise of, or linked to, the war against the drug mafia and the forceful eradication of coca cultivation through military operations. In 2000 the government launched the US-backed 'Plan Colombia' by which the US administration has provided billions of dollars of aid, largely of a military kind, to start a major offensive against the drug crops. This has already resulted in the forceful destruction of tens of thousands of hectares of coca fields either by aerial spraying or by manual eradication of the plants. This has provoked the ferocious protests of tens of thousands of coca peasant farmers ('illicit peasants'), who have seen their livelihoods threatened, as well as the expected opposition from the guerrillas and paramilitary groups. This militarisation of the war against drugs threatens to further escalate violence within Colombia and even to spread it to neighbouring countries.

Countries which implemented radical agrarian reforms, or threatened to do so, as in El Salvador, provoked the wrath of landlords and thus have also not been free from violence. In Guatemala a popular agrarian reform led to the overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954 and to a violent counter-reform in which much of the expropriated land was returned to former landowners. However, this just aggravated and postponed the problem by a decade or two in Guatemala, leading to far more violence subsequently. In El Salvador the 1980 agrarian reform led to 12 years of civil war in which peasants bore the brunt of the violence. Some land has been redistributed but landlords have been able to block the subsequent phases of reform. The land issue thus still remains to be resolved in El Salvador and continues to be a potential source of further conflicts and violence. In Chile, the massive agrarian reform, but above all Allende's 'Chilean road to socialism', were key factors in the military *coup d'état* and the ensuing counter-revolutionary violence. However, a significant proportion of the expropriated land was transferred as individual family farms to some of the agrarian reform beneficiaries. Since the transition to democracy in Chile in 1990 few violent conflicts have emerged, because of the severity of the earlier repression by the authoritarian government but also thanks to the parcelisation process which satisfied some—albeit a minority—of the peasants' demands. However, in recent years land conflicts have emerged in the southern region as *mapuches* have seized land which they claim is rightfully theirs. In a way the chickens are coming home to roost since, during the military government, much of the land which the Allende government had expropriated from landlords and transferred to *mapuche* communities was returned to their former owners or sold to large forestry plantations.

Mexico is perhaps the only case in Latin America where agrarian reform achieved important political goals from the point of view of the new dominant class interests. For over seven decades the agrarian reform and the Mexican

state's ability simultaneously to incorporate, co-opt and repress the peasantry ensured one-party rule and relative political stability. It has to be borne in mind, however, that a significant factor in the peasants' acquiescence has also been the state's violent repression of armed or unarmed independent peasant movements. This relative stability was only shattered in 1994 with the neo-Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas and, as analysed earlier, this region was the weakest link in Mexico's agrarian reform. In 2000, for the first time since the PRI came to power, a candidate from the opposition was elected to the presidency, signalling a further move towards democratisation of the country. This might well facilitate a resolution to the Chiapas conflict.

In Peru agrarian reform at first opened the gates to further violence. But with the 'reform of the agrarian reform', in which land from the reformed sector was redistributed to peasant communities and the remaining reformed sector was subdivided into family farm *parcelas*, and with the defeat of Sendero Luminoso the prospects for social stability in the countryside and a less violent rural society have much improved. It has to be remembered that the first experiences with agrarian reform in Peru proved very hopeful. In the mid-1960s President Belaúnde Terry's agrarian reform in the Valley of La Convención managed to pacify and tame a once insurrectionist peasant movement. Former serf-like tenants got private property titles over their tenancy with the agrarian reform, and became capitalised family farmers, joining the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie. But the subsequent agrarian reform of General Velasco Alvarado created many expectations which he was unable to fulfil, thereby leading to further violence. In particular, the exclusion of many indigenous peasant communities from the land distribution process led to new conflicts and violence. This flaw in Peru's agrarian reform was ruthlessly exploited by Sendero thereby opening one of the most violent chapters in Peruvian history, but one which has come to a close with Sendero's defeat.

In Nicaragua, despite the initial popularity of the revolution and the extensive agrarian reform, its statist character alienated many peasants and limited the number of peasant beneficiaries. Much of the rural violence, however, was a result of the war waged by the *contras* against the Sandinista government, generously supported by expropriated landlords and the US government. The *contras* were able to recruit many of the peasants dissatisfied with the agrarian reform. While the post-Sandinista governments' agrarian counter-reform has created new sources of conflicts and violence, they expect that the subdivision of the collective and state farms into family farms, and their distribution to some of the former beneficiaries and the *contra* fighters, might ultimately pacify the countryside. The greater the number of landless peasants who can be settled, the greater the chances of reducing rural violence. But so far the situation is uncertain as many landlords have been able to reclaim some or all of their expropriated land, leaving less land available for redistribution.

The Colombian case presents a more problematic picture because of marked regional variations and the country's turbulent history, which make generalisations more difficult. However, it supports to some extent the propositions put forward in this article. For example, successive governments tried to appease those areas experiencing the most intense land conflicts with minor or localised

agrarian reforms. Thus the Land Law of 1936 was designed to reduce rural conflicts and violence by distributing some public lands to land-hungry settlers (*colonos*) and squatters. Governments also tried to curb the revolutionary potential and autonomy of rural workers by sponsoring or supporting parcelisation programmes of estates which were experiencing major labour conflicts, largely in the coffee growing regions (Bergquist, 1986). Rural workers, by becoming small coffee farmers, were drawn into the clientelistic web of the bourgeois parties and the state competing for credit, subsidies, and so on. The peculiarity of the Colombian case is shown by the ability of landlords belonging to competing political factions of the dominant class to mobilise their respective peasant constituencies through a variety of patron–client relationships for their own personal or partisan interests, thereby fanning the flames of violence. Thus rural violence during the period of ‘*La Violencia*’ acquired feudalistic characteristics as much of the violence originated locally rather than being generated by the state. ‘And while some of this local violence was employed by large landowners against peasants, much of it did not correspond to class divisions but rather to political clan identities and local clientelistic relations’ (Safford, 1995: 144). This impeded the unity of the peasant movement. Although, with the rise of powerful guerrilla movements, rural conflicts have acquired a clearer class character in the past two decades, this in turn has been distorted by the widespread influence of the drug mafia on almost all aspects of Colombian life. In short, violence in Colombia has been a multifaceted process whose causes and focus have shifted and evolved through time, as well as displaying regional variations. Nevertheless, rural violence has generally been the expression of an ongoing struggle for land leading to a rearrangement of property relations, generally in favour of landlords and rich farmers.

The relevance of the land issue has also been manifested in the Central American Peace Accords in which land redistribution was a significant ingredient for attaining the demobilisation of the warring factions and achieving a certain degree of political stability. It is also worth noting that Argentina and Costa Rica, the two countries with relatively less rural violence during the period analysed, largely the second half of the twentieth century, have a far more egalitarian agrarian structure and a larger middle class sector of commercial farmers compared with other Latin American countries (Barraclough, 1973). Demands for agrarian reform have not figured prominently in the struggles of the peasantry in these countries but instead have centred on better prices for agricultural produce, on access to more and cheaper credit, protection against foreign competition, lower rents for tenancies, improved wages and working conditions, and so on (Edelman, 1999).

Conclusions

What are the prospects under neoliberalism? The shift from a state-centred inward-directed development process to a neoliberal market- and export-orientated model has brought to an end the state-led agrarian reform programmes and opened the door to agrarian counter-reforms as well as market-led or negotiated agrarian reforms on a willing-seller and willing-buyer principle (Deininger, 1999;

Zoomers & van der Haar, 2000). The new economic model has also weakened the power of traditional peasant organisations with the drastic fall in permanent rural employment and the rapid rise of casual and temporary forms of labour employment (David *et al.*, 2000). Labour markets have become more flexible, competitive and dispersed, making it difficult to develop organisations and solidarity networks among rural workers. Nevertheless, new peasant and indigenous movements have emerged, like the MST in Brazil and the EZLN in Mexico, which will make it politically difficult to continue to impose the neo-liberal model upon the peasantry regardless of its consequences and which keep the agrarian reform agenda alive. It is possible that rural conflicts will become more violent than in the past as the state has been weakened in its mediating and incorporating capacity as well as in its ability (and willingness) to deal with the negative effects of the current unequal and exclusionary pattern of rural modernisation and globalisation. Whether this new peasant and indigenous movement can ensure that market forces are harnessed for a participatory, inclusionary and egalitarian development process remains an open question (Kay, 1999).

Concluding, I have endeavoured to show that the roots of Latin America's rural violence are to be found in its highly unequal agrarian system. I have argued that an important first step towards dealing with rural violence entails resolving the land question so that landless and poor peasants can gain access to sufficient land and economic resources to ensure a sustainable standard of living and proper participation in society. Furthermore, development strategies and modernisation processes have to become inclusionary, which is difficult to achieve within the current context of globalisation as it tends to exclude the rural poor. Political changes are also required as agrarian reform can only be a first step in the process of tackling conflicts and violence in rural society. This, in turn, necessitates the further democratisation of Latin America's social and political systems. This article is only an initial exploration but it is my belief that further comparative analysis can provide a fruitful way of improving our understanding of rural violence in Latin America and thereby finding better ways of dealing with it.

Notes

This article is a much revised version of a paper originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of German Latin American Research (ADLAF) on 'Violence and Conflict Regulation in Latin America', Hamburg, 25–27 November 1999.

¹ For example, it is estimated that as a consequence of sociopolitical violence over 150 000 people died in Guatemala (1968–96), over 75 000 in El Salvador (1979–95), 44 000 in Colombia (1963–98), 30 000 in Nicaragua (1982–98) and 30 000 in Peru (1981–95). Furthermore, millions of people have been forcefully displaced by the violence (Allen, 1999: 5).

² Ideally the case of Bolivia should also have been examined, as a major agrarian reform resulted from the 1952 revolution and new land reform legislation was introduced in the 1990s. But limitations of space (and time) have precluded such a possibility.

³ Some of the classical texts are by Moore (1969), Wolf (1969), Migdal (1974) and Paige (1975). All these studies are comparative and historical in focus, dealing with major structural changes. Except for Moore they all include cases from Latin America. Authors who deal specifically with Latin American peasant movements, rebellions, resistance, uprisings, insurrections or revolutions are Landsberger (1969), Stavenhagen (1970), Huizer (1972), Stern (1987) and Huber and Safford (1995),

- among others. There are, of course, many other important books on peasant movements but they deal with specific countries and do not attempt comparative analysis or generalisation across the region.
- ⁴ What is required are more studies of the kind done by Barrington Moore, who did not refer to Latin America. Such studies would analyse in a comparative manner the social origins of dictatorship and democracy, and the role played by landlords, peasants, the state and violence in the making of modern Latin America. Such a project has to tackle the critiques of Moore's theoretical framework as well as incorporate, where appropriate, the insights provided by new theoretical developments since he published his *magnum opus* in 1969. For a pioneering attempt to apply some of Moore's insights to Latin America, see Kaye (1976). Surprisingly, Moore has had little influence and few followers in Latin America itself (Baud, 1998). The recent attempt by Valenzuela (2001) to assess Moore's model reaches the conclusion that it is inapplicable to Chile and thus to Latin America. He argues that the Conservative Party and to some extent landlords were a major democratising force in Chile. Although he provides some useful insights, in my view, his analysis is flawed because of his limited and formal conception of democracy. He also fails to consider some key texts on Chile which validate Moore's model, though not always all of his propositions. Furthermore, landlords have used violence either directly, by hiring gunmen, gangs or death-squads, as in Colombia, Guatemala and Brazil, or indirectly through their influence on the state and its repressive apparatus. Thus landlords, rather than contributing to the democratisation of Latin America, have generally reinforced authoritarianism and obstructed even minimal democratic rights for the subordinated classes (Huber & Stephens, 1995).
 - ⁵ There have been some fine studies on particular countries, such as Mexico by Womack (1972), Knight (1986), Tutino (1986) and Katz (1988); Colombia by Zamosc (1986); Central America by Brockett (1988); Bolivia by Rivera (1987); and Peru by Degregori (1992, 1996) and Stern (1998). But these studies lack ambition to make wider theoretical generalisations as they do not engage in comparative analyses. In my view Latin America agrarian and rural studies would be much enriched by research of the scope and vision that can be found in the writings of Moore (1969), Wolf (1969), Tilly (1978), Skocpol (1979) and Scott (1985). The book edited by Huber and Safford (1995) comes closest to a Moore-like project for Latin America. The comparative analysis of peasant movements in Latin America by Landsberger and Hewitt (1970), which was published over 30 years ago, unfortunately remains an exception.
 - ⁶ This momentous movement has a multiplicity of causes and its significance for Mexican history cannot yet be adequately determined as it is still an evolving movement whose ramifications go well beyond the land issue. The interpretations of the Chiapas rebellion are truly varied. For example, Pablo González Casanova (1996) mentions nine causes for the Zapatista uprising, among them the crisis of the traditional *hacienda*, increasing landlessness and poverty, the politicisation of the indigenous peoples and the institutional violence of the dominant groups in Chiapas.
 - ⁷ For a comparison between the EZLN movement in Mexico and Shining Path in Peru, see Lora (1999). For a historical comparison between peasant revolts in Chiapas and some Andean countries, see Gosner and Ouweneel (1996).
 - ⁸ For a study which explores the gender dimension of Guatemala's violence during the civil war and traces the intricate links between political violence and the systemic violence connected with class inequalities and gender and ethnic opposition, see Green (1999).

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