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Land and Labor Relations in Guatemala's 1952 Agrarian Reform: Rethinking Rural Identities

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Abstract

This article explores local histories of Guatemala's 1952 agrarian reform in the department of Sacatepéquez. It argues that applications of the land reform law were situated within a preexisting context of local rivalries rooted in conceptions of identity that were tied to community, land, and labor. By analyzing the way that individuals interacted with the agrarian reform and each other, this article also suggests that oversimplified understandings of Guatemala's rural population tend to minimize the contested nature of agrarian reform. Instead, this article closely examines local politics in order to understand how involved individuals deployed social categories in pursuit of land.

Keywords: agrarian reform, rural politics, Guatemala, campesinos, local history.

Resumen

Este artículo explora las historias locales de la reforma agraria de Guatemala de 1952 en el departamento de Sacatepéquez. Plantea que la implementación de la ley de reforma agraria tuvo lugar en un contexto preexistente de rivalidades locales, relacionadas con concepciones de identidad asociadas a la comunidad, la tierra y el trabajo. Al analizar la manera en que los individuos interactuaron con la reforma agraria y entre ellos mismos, el artículo también propone que visiones simplistas de la población rural de Guatemala tienden a minimizar la conflictiva naturaleza de la reforma agraria. En cambio, este trabajo examina en profundidad la política local para comprender cómo los actores involucrados emplearon categorías sociales para conseguir la tierra.

Palabras clave: Reforma Agraria, política rural, Guatemala, campesinos, historia local.

Introduction

In 1952, Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz announced the passage of *Decreto 900*, commonly known as the agrarian reform law. This controversial program sought to transform the Guatemalan countryside through reforming existing land tenure practices in a way that would dissolve large, unused, single-owner holdings and redistribute this land to rural people that owned little, if any land. In 1944, Guatemala had experienced a revolution that ended military dictatorship and ushered in democratic rule. The first president of the Revolution, Juan José Arévalo, saw the expansion of suffrage, the passage of a labor code, and the creation of numerous social welfare programs like public health initiatives and literacy campaigns. Arbenz, his elected successor, carried on this reformist project by addressing Guatemala's most pressing issue—land tenure.

The most controversial of all revolutionary legislation, the agrarian reform polarized the Guatemalan population and led to sweeping generalizations about the rural people that the law was intended to benefit. Through the law itself and related publications that detailed the intended outcomes of the reform, the state revealed its goal of reducing an incredibly diverse rural population into a few categories: 1) *campesinos*, 2) *mozos colonos*, which historian Greg Grandin defines as “plantation resident worker[s], usually indentured but at times in a sharecropper arrangement,” (2011, p. 203), and 3) *arrendantes*, or renters. In turn, this population would collaborate to reform land tenure patterns in an equitable way in a wholehearted embrace of this revolutionary measure. Yet documentation on the affected properties reveals a different story, one full of local complexities and lengthy struggles for land acquisition. When a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed coup overthrew Arbenz in July 1954, one of the first measures that the counterrevolutionary government took was to nullify *Decreto 900* and begin the process of reversing expropriations, continuing these struggles. This article argues that *Decreto 900*, though beneficial, also caused or exacerbated preexisting intra- and inter-community rivalries. Participants often framed these conflicts around the type of labor relations individuals had with one another and with landowners and on longer histories of competing land claims.

Several trends are prevalent within existing literature on Guatemala's 1952 agrarian reform. Some works tend to heavily focus on a top-down perspective that allows for broad claims to be made about the period as a whole. One important subfield focuses on the international geopolitical significance of the law against the backdrop of the Cold War. Because the law directly affected the powerful United Fruit Company, scholars have traced the connections between company executives, the US White House, the CIA, and journalism that painted the Arbenz government as communist and as a Soviet puppet, thus calling for the expansion of the containment policy to Guatemala (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 2005; Cullather, 1999; Gleijeses, 1992; Immerman, 1982). While certainly essential for understanding the changing nature of U.S.-Latin American relations and the Latin

American Cold War, this scholarship does not closely examine local and national histories of the agrarian reform.

Others have taken up this challenge, and broadly, two categories of scholarship exist: one that focuses on structural analyzes of land tenure in Guatemala and the resolution *Decreto 900* hoped to provide and one that examines the history of the 1952 agrarian reform from a social history perspective. Within this first camp, scholarship has situated the agrarian reform and the types of power relationships evident in land tenure patterns within a *longue durée* narrative with roots in colonial period (García Añoveros, 1987) while others placed Guatemala's agrarian reform in a comparative framework with Bolivia and Cuba to make a broader argument about regional land tenure patterns and efforts to overcome what the author portrays as an obstacle to development (Mendívar, 1969). Others evaluated the land tenure situation and the ways that the 1952 agrarian reform intended to restructure Guatemalan society (Paz Cárcamo, 1986) and provided an in-depth legal analysis of the law and an examination of the ways that various types of holdings (state, municipal *ejidos*, and private property) were affected (Paredes Moreira, 1963). This body of literature has been instrumental in helping scholars understand the broader impact (both real and potential) of *Decreto 900*, its legal intricacies, and the ways that contemporaries hoped it would address structural inequality. However, it does not examine the interactions that ordinary people had as they navigated the contours of the law.

More recently, scholars have begun to emphasize local histories of the agrarian reform, building on earlier scholarship by focusing on lived experiences. For example, scholarship under this broad umbrella has analyzed the history of the reform at the intersection of the agro-export economy and rural labor organizing among banana workers (Forster, 2001) and explored the ways that national peasant organizations and ethnic identities shaped the implementation of the reform (Grandin, 2011). In particular, Jim Handy's groundbreaking work illuminated the complexities that existed at the local level, as individuals navigated ways to maintain their ethnic identities in the face of new political and labor identities (Handy, 1994). Patrick Chassé has examined the linkages between conservation, agricultural modernization, and the 1952 law, both in top-down intentions and in the ways individuals framed their petitions and decided which new technologies to utilize (Chassé, 2020). Julie Gibbings examines the application of *Decreto 900* in the Verapaces, exploring how participation in the reform discursively shaped racial identities. She argues that Q'eqchi' Mayas often saw *Decreto 900* as an opportunity to reclaim land that had historically belonged to them and that the state and outsiders had unjustly taken away (Gibbings, 2020, Chapter 8). My article joins this body of literature, arguing that in Sacatepéquez, local politics and histories profoundly shaped both the implementation and the undoing of the agrarian reform.

More broadly, this article challenges historians to question the oft-assumed static nature of social categories. Individuals regularly held and shed labels such as campesino, mozo colono, and arrendante, for example, and these concepts took on different meanings

depending on historical context. As Jeffrey Gould (1990) argues for Chinandega, Nicaragua, many informants simultaneously categorized themselves based on the form of labor they engaged in and as campesinos, the latter a collective identity that referenced a tie to agriculture and living in rural villages (Ibid., p. 7). In the case of Michoacán, Mexico, Christopher Boyer articulates how campesino identity operated in relation to, but independently from ethnicity and class. This category was deeply embedded within post-revolutionary political movements and thus paralleled state efforts to create a new type of “revolutionary citizen” (Boyer, 2003, pp. 20-23). Applying both of these arguments to the Guatemalan agrarian reform is useful in understanding how people used these categories and gave them new and contextualized meanings, revealing local divisions that took on new dimensions and meanings in the pursuit of land. Rural people deployed various strategies in pursuit of their interests in a way that at times brought them into direct conflict with one another, thus complicating both contemporary assumptions about a unified rural working class and at a historiographical level, urging a deeper contemplation of the histories of social categories.

The archival records from *Decreto 900* serve as the source base for this article. Organized by department, *expedientes* contain the documentation concerning each denounced finca, providing the historian with a record of those involved in denouncing the property, the response of the landowner, and the interventions of the various layers of state bureaucracy charged with implementing the reform. These unique sources allow one to trace not only the words and actions of those in power but also those perspectives of ordinary people who utilized this law to acquire land. Like all sources, these records have limitations, as they were mediated through local and state organizations, often recounting hearsay or incorporating the biases of the writer. They do not capture the full context of local conditions, nor do they often record oral conversations, thus privileging people who had the means to write and record their perspectives. And, finca files are often incomplete. Still, these records provide a glimpse into the diverse lived experiences of the agrarian reform and force the historian to question generalities and assumptions about popular receptions of and perspectives on a law intended to improve their quality of life. But before diving into the specific cases in Sacatepéquez, it is first necessary to explore how the agrarian reform law was intended to function.

Decreto 900 in theory

On June 17, 1952, the Guatemalan congress passed *Decreto 900*, a law intended to bring more equity to land distribution patterns in Guatemala in a way that improved production while not completely dismantling all private property. The lengthy law carefully defined which properties could be expropriated and which could not, basing these decisions on the

size and usage of the property. First, all property with an area of less than two *caballerías*¹ did not qualify for expropriation. Properties whose area ranged from two to six *caballerías* could be subject to expropriation if less than two-thirds of the arable land was uncultivated. Properties larger than six *caballerías* that were not cultivated or were rented out as a debt peonage arrangement or as a way to “complement deficient salaries” for seasonal laborers did qualify for expropriation (García Añoveros, 1987, p. 343)². According to the 1950 Agricultural Census, only 3% of the nation’s *fincas* were larger than ten *caballerías*, indicating the law’s intention to redistribute underutilized land rather than completely remake the nature of land ownership (Handy, 1994, p. 83). Recognizing that many landowners held title to numerous small plots, the law also stipulated that land registered under different numbers to the same person was to be considered a single property (García Añoveros, 1987, p. 333). To compensate a landowner for affected property, the state would issue bank bonds based on the declared tax value of the land (García Añoveros, 1987, p. 333). Importantly, land considered to be forest reserves, land that supported agricultural businesses, and collectively held land as *comunidades indígenas*, or local Maya organizations, was exempt from expropriation (Handy, 1994, p. 90).³

The law detailed two beneficiaries from expropriation: the nation and ordinary Guatemalans. Land that was expropriated for the nation was to be redistributed to *campesinos*, *mozos colonos*, and renters, in lifelong usufruct, with priority given to those who already occupied or worked the land. Importantly, these categories reflect labor relations to the *finquero*, or landowner, and a relationship between individuals and the land that they worked. As the next section will discuss, in some cases it was these relationships—not an allegiance to the more abstract notion of a broad *campesino* identity—that crystallized into clear divisions among rural people seeking land. The law stipulated that the same three categories of people—*campesinos*, *mozos colonos*, and renters—could receive allotments of up to 25 *manzanas*⁴ as private property (García Añoveros, 1987, p. 333). These categories not only mattered to lawmakers but also to the people themselves, as they used these terms to distinguish themselves from others, creating difference where the state saw only similarities.

Title IV of Decreto 900 detailed the reform’s hierarchical structure, which was comprised of committees that would handle denunciations, appeals, expropriations, and redistributions. The President held the highest authority, and two other national entities existed, the *Departamento Agrario Nacional* (DAN) and its advisory component, the

¹ A *caballería* is 45 hectares, according to García, 9, or approximately 110 acres, according to Handy, 90.

² García Añoveros provides the full text of Decreto 900 as an appendix.

³ The Arévalo government legally recognized the *comunidades indígenas* in 1946; see Handy (1994: 149-150) for further explanation of this process.

⁴ A *manzana* is 0.7 hectares, according to García (1987), p. 9, or approximately 1.7 acres, according to Handy (1994: 13).

Consejo Agrario Nacional (CAN). At the departmental level operated the *Comité Agrario Departamental* (CAD) and at the municipal level, the *Comité Agrario Local* (CAL). Initial denunciations went to the CAL, which then investigated and gave its opinion to the CAD. Individuals could appeal through the CAN and even to the President (Handy 1994, p. 91; García Añoveros 1987, p. 355). After the 1954 coup, the counterrevolutionary government used a similar hierarchy to process revocation demands, with petitions first going to the *Junta Agraria Departamental* (JAD).

Importantly, representatives from both the *Confederación General de Trabajadores de Guatemala* (CGTG) and the *Confederación Nacional Campesina de Guatemala* (CNCG) served on the CAN and the department of Sacatepéquez's CAD, respectively, linking the implementation of the law to revolutionary organizations. The CNCG was active in Sacatepéquez, helping organize local chapters of *uniones campesinas*, or campesino unions. Supporters of the measure credited these federations with representing marginalized populations and organizing people and goals into coherent action. Opponents to Decreto 900 deplored this institutional presence as indicative of Arbenz's supposed strategy to quickly move Guatemalan society through capitalism and toward a socialist stage. They claimed that the CNCG and the CGTG representatives favored their members in decisions, and a US Embassy memorandum prepared for President Eisenhower even went as far as to state that all CNCG and CGTG officials involved in the agrarian reform were communist (Handy, 1994, p. 124).⁵

These revolutionary organizations used education to teach people about the new opportunities that the government had created. A contemporary *cartilla*, or primer, explained to readers the nature of Guatemala's then current situation and the intended consequences of the reform. While the cartilla does not indicate its dissemination or usage, literacy campaigns were a common part of the revolution's social agenda. It is likely that this cartilla served a similar purpose, as its short phrases are accessible for new readers and its images clearly depict the central messages to an illiterate viewer or a non-Spanish speaker, a very likely possibility given that twenty-four languages were spoken in Guatemala at the time.

Each full-page spread established a direct contrast between the Guatemala of "Today" and the future Guatemala "with the Agrarian Reform," detailing a problematic contemporary situation and indicating how the law would transform and eliminate it. For example, one central message was how campesinos no longer would have to cultivate land for the finquero but instead would practice individual cultivation that would allow for the existence of "many capitalist campesinos and farmers" instead of a small elite landowning class (*Cartilla de la Reforma Agraria*, n.d, p. 4-5; p. 10-11). This new class of farmers would enjoy the possibility of owning a home, receiving fair wages, and accumulating savings

⁵ Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA), Documentos desclasificados (DOC DES), DES11, Memorandum for the President, January 15, 1954; "Actividades campesinas y obreras en funciones en el DAN se coordinan," *El Imparcial*, 18 March 1953.

(*Cartilla*, n.d., p. 15). At a more collective level, the cartilla argued that the agrarian reform would not only improve individual lives but would also modernize Guatemala, ushering in the possibility of public investments such as roads, businesses, water and electricity services, agricultural diversification, and new farming technologies (*Cartilla*, n.d., p. 17-21; p. 29).

Though the cartilla's author is unnamed, its format makes it plausible that either the central government or a campesino organization created it in an effort to inform the populace about the functions and goals of the law and to encourage readers to take advantage of the opportunities that Decreto 900 afforded to them by denouncing any qualifying property. It also communicated the ways that the government intended the law to be implemented, the societal changes it wished to introduce, and the political identities it wished to impart. A close analysis of the archival record from one department, Sacatepéquez, allows for an understanding of Decreto 900 in practice and the ways that ordinary people shaped the outcomes of this revolutionary measure.

Decreto 900 in Practice

Local histories of the agrarian reform elucidate the on-the-ground complexities and necessarily embed the reform within larger and longer historical processes and relationships that directly affected its efficacy and success. According to the resulting 1950 Census, Sacatepéquez was the fourth smallest of Guatemala's twenty-two departments in terms of population, counting 60,124 people across its sixteen municipalities (Censo, p. 1). The department of Sacatepéquez is useful for an analysis of this process as its proximity to the capital city meant that literature, news, and CNCG representatives easily contacted individuals there; at the same time, the department was not the site of large-scale agro-industry, so the majority of the claimants filing denunciations were individuals from the nearby towns, not seasonal migrant laborers.

The 1950 Guatemalan census identified the presence of "two ethnic groups" in Guatemala—indigenous and ladino, two categories that contemporaries mapped onto society while recognizing that these identities were fluid and situational (Censo, p. xi). The Census introduction explained how these two categories also encompass multiple racial identities, as ladino, defined as non-indigenous, also included people from "the yellow and black races." (Censo, p. xii). In the same vein, census personnel recognized that who people considered "indigenous" was also a broad definition and depended on local contingencies; thus, census takers reported how local leaders categorized their constituents (Censo, p. xii).

Prior to this moment, a 1946 study by the Instituto Indigenista had examined the criteria different departments used to determine who was indigenous. In the department of Sacatepéquez, language use was the most important variable, and respondents indicated that the use of "lengua," or an indigenous language in the home or all the time was the primary ways that local people determined who was indigenous. Similarly, residents of Sacatepéquez also considered an individual's manner of speaking Spanish (with accents,

with grammatical errors, with loan words, etc.) as a key marker of indigeneity (Goubaud Carrera, Cuadro No. 2). With these criteria in mind, in the late 1940s, census officials counted the nation's residents and conducted detailed analyses of rural conditions in order to advise the revolutionary government on how exactly to proceed with rural development.

In ethnic terms, the census reported that 52% of Sacatepéquez's population was indigenous, which mirrored the national demographic almost exactly. In Sacatepéquez, the overwhelming majority of indigenous people were Kaqchikel Maya, with less than 1% of this population speaking another indigenous language (Censo, pp. 8-10; Instituto Indigenista Nacional, 1946, Cuadro No. 5). However, 65% of the department's ladino population lived in the departmental capital of La Antigua and nearby Ciudad Vieja, both important colonial cities and two of the three most populous municipalities in the department. In comparison, only 11% percent of the indigenous population that resided in these two urban centers (Censo, pp. 8-9). Thus, when the ethnic breakdown of municipality is considered, and these two municipalities excluded, we have a very different demographic picture of ethnicity in Sacatepéquez, with the remaining fourteen municipalities being overwhelmingly indigenous.

The Agropecuario Census of 1950 also provides useful insight into the ways that ethnicity intersected with agricultural labor. The census reported that Sacatepéquez had 6,687 fincas, but of these, only 59 fincas were greater than 1 caballería, and 54% were less than five manzanas. Thus, the majority of finca laborers worked on land that Decreto 900 could not affect. This was not a department with largescale agro-industry. Similarly, of the 17,182 workers engaged in agriculture in the department, 65% worked on fincas smaller than five manzanas while only 8.5% worked on fincas that could possibly qualify for expropriation (Censo Agropecuario, Tomo III, p. 32). As the law prioritized finca workers in redistribution efforts, one might expect that these laborers would have to ward off others' efforts to denounce and hopefully benefit from the redistribution of these larger—and less numerous—fincas.

Regarding ethnic demographics in the agricultural sector, the distribution of land to laborer makes evident that ladinos had more land available to them (9.6 manzanas) than indigenous laborers (3.5 manzanas) (Censo Agropecuario, Tomo III, p. 131). The census also provides a breakdown of ethnicity according to the type of labor relation one had to the finca, including data on the number of finca owners, administrators, renters, mozos colonos, and occupants for the department. Both ladinos and indigenous people worked as renters and colonos, with 69% of renters and 61% of colonos being categorized as indigenous. And while there were more indigenous than ladino owners, likely due to the fact that the census collapsed small and large landowners in the same category, 89% of the department's administrators were ladino (Censo Agropecuario, Tomo III, p. 153). These numbers reveal a landscape marked by small landholdings and a few larger fincas which were likely to have been administered by a ladino person. Both indigenous people and ladinos labored in lower-class positions, and the census does not provide a breakdown of

these roles based on municipality. Still, based on the provided data, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of ladinos who worked as colonos and renters likely did so in the municipalities of La Antigua and Ciudad Vieja.

Thus, a close analysis of the history of the agrarian reform in the department of Sacatepéquez can reveal how individuals who were regularly in contact with national politics and the broader market economy navigated yet another significant intervention in their lives. It was a department with regular interaction between ladinos and indigenous people and a region marked by subsistence agriculture that existed alongside limited commercial agriculture. It had a population that engaged in different types of labor and relations to the land, working as owners, administrators, *mozos colonos*, and renters. Decreto 900 records indicate that individuals filed forty-two denunciations against properties within the department's jurisdiction; the majority, thirty-five cases, resulted in some expropriation. While I have reviewed all the files for the department, my intention here is not to provide a comprehensive account of the agrarian reform in Sacatepéquez. Rather, I have prioritized moments of conflict as a way to gain insight into how people deployed social categories in moments of disunity, thus allowing us to understand how interactions with the reform and identities, union membership, and local politics affected outcomes.

The Finca of San Sebastián, in the municipality of San Miguel Dueñas, exhibits competing claims to the same property. The finca first entered the written record for Decreto 900 proceedings on September 25, 1952, when CAL president Patrocino Arenales wrote a concerned letter to the CAD reporting falsified denunciation papers and exploitation. According to Arenales, a man that he referred to as “don Trinidad Palencia G.” had been “daily defrauding the poor campesinos” by collecting individual fees for denunciations. Arenales learned of this when Palencia turned in completed paperwork, including the ocular inspection, a task that the CAL was supposed to complete and then file. Arenales indicated that would reject the denunciation, but he felt obligated to report this “unscrupulous leader” who he also labelled as “reactionary and anti-agrarianist.”⁶ The record does not indicate Arenales' status in the town, but as CAL president, it is likely he was a pro-Arbenz local leader. Additional records in this file indicate that Palencia, too, was a local leader; he had been mayor in 1947.⁷

⁶ Archivo General de Centroamérica (AGCA), Decreto 900, Sacatepéquez, San Sebastián, Paq. 3, Exp. 3-A. Letter from Patrocio Arenales to CAD, 25 Sept. 1952. Arenales mistakenly uses the verb “somos” instead of “son” in the sentence that indicates this description of reactionary and anti-agrarianista, but from the context, it is clear that he does not mean to describe himself and the CAL in this way but instead is clearly referencing Palencia and his faction. AGCA, Decreto 900, Sacatepéquez, San Sebastián, Paq. 3, Exp. 3-A, Letter from Wenceslao Gordon y Gordon, 16 Dec. 1952. All future references to AGCA come from the Sacatepéquez records in the Decreto 900 collection, so I simply list paquete and expediente number.

⁷ AGCA, San Sebastián, 3:3-A.

Palencia did not remain silent in the face of Arenales' accusations. In October 1952, Palencia wrote that he was not a swindler but rather was a leader who was trying to help campesinos in San Miguel Dueñas reclaim lands they had been trying to recover for eighteen years from the Falla Aris family. Palencia led a *comunidad agraria campesina*, an organization comprised of rural farmers, that like *comunidades indígenas*, received legal status in 1946 but importantly was not synonymous with a *unión campesina* (Handy, 1994, p. 123-124). He claimed that the community had received this land as *ejidos* during the colonial period and had collectively cultivated it until the 1871 Liberal Revolution, when the state privatized the land and took it from the town.⁸ Palencia then insisted that the community had purchased these disputed lands from the family on an unspecified date for 34,900 pesos and one real, and while the landowner accepted payment, he never relinquished the land. Palencia and *comunidad agraria* members signed this letter either with their written signature or a thumbprint.⁹ In a similar letter that Palencia addressed to the president, he tied San Miguel's struggle to that of the Guatemalan proletariat and referenced the dictatorial regimes of Miguel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920), Jorge Ubico (1931-44), and Ubico's handpicked successor Juan Ponce Vaides, the leader that the 1944 Revolution had overthrown. Reflecting his ability to leverage history and contemporary political discourse, Palencia argued that the people of San Miguel Dueñas were a microcosm for the Guatemalan nation, and he implored the president to give them this disputed land.¹⁰

Trinidad Palencia was not alone in denouncing San Sebastián on behalf of the agrarian community of San Miguel Dueñas. In January 1953, a man named Juan Santos Girón Vega, also from San Miguel Dueñas, denounced the finca. Meanwhile, a group of San Sebastián's *mozos colonos* created a *unión campesina* with the help of the Secretary General of the CNCG, Leonardo Castillo Flores and filed a denunciation. This petition succeeded; despite the landowner's appeals, the CAN gave them 12 *caballerías* and 53 *manzanas*. This decision greatly angered Santos Girón and Palencia, the representatives from the agrarian community, who in subsequent communication argued that the CAN had favored the *mozos colonos* only because they had organized as a *campesino* union and in doing so had clearly indicated their political allegiance to the Arbenz regime.¹¹ For this reason, argued Santos Girón and Palencia, the *mozos colonos*—and not them, in their words the historic owners—had received a favorable decision.

In protesting the CAN's decision and appealing to the President, Girón Vega argued that the government unjustly applied the law, which privileged *mozos colonos* over local *campesinos* and thus denied the rightful owners their land. Justifying this stance, he informed the President that the landowner intentionally hired people from nearby

⁸ Handy uses a newspaper account to report on this case, and he marks an earlier date, 1722, as when the community lost title to its land.

⁹ AGCA, San Sebastián, 3:3-A, Letter from Trinidad Palencia et. al, 1 Oct. 1952.

¹⁰ AGCA, Ibid., undated letter to President Arbenz from Trinidad Palencia et. al.

¹¹ AGCA, San Sebastián y anexos, 3:2; AGCA, San Sebastián, 3:3-A.

communities such as Ciudad Vieja, San Antonio Aguas Calientes, San Lorenzo, and Alotenango to be *mozos colonos* on the finca in order to prevent San Miguel Dueñas residents from successfully expropriating the finca. This claim also introduces the possibility that the landowner understood the tensions between members of different communities and had preemptively attempted to further thwart the efforts of San Miguel Dueñas residents to recover their land.

The municipal secretary of San Miguel Dueñas wrote a letter in May 1954, arguing the CAL was “a committee of the landowner (*comité patronal*)...because they are anti-agrarianists as they are defending the rights of the landowner and they do not look after the good of the people.”¹² Further, the secretary angrily suggested that if the CAN did not rule in favor of the *campesinos* from San Miguel, then it would be because the “Falla Aris men have bought off many functionaries and thus they can keep doing what they want and the people will never be able to recover their lands.”¹³ Though unlikely any alliance existed between the owner and the CAL, the secretary discursively linked the two due to their shared opposition to the San Miguel Dueñas residents. Trinidad Palencia, too, did not miss an opportunity to voice his opposition to the decision, writing that the property qualified for further expropriation because it

was not simply a large landholding (*latifundio*), but rather was a vast and systematically exploitative estate, in accordance with the measures and forms that the law of the Agrarian Reform rejects and intends to eliminate, as primitive and anti-economic measures: rent based on payment in specie for *campesinos*, multiple personal loans for them and the persistence of insufficient salaries (whenever there are salaries).¹⁴

These letters make clear that not only did some San Miguel Dueñas residents believe their land had been unjustly taken but that their relationship with the *finquero* was one laden with exploitation. Despite these emotional appeals to justice and to the foundational principles of the revolution, the president did not reverse the CAN’s decision.

Exasperated, Girón Vega wrote a final letter in 1954, protesting this ruling and arguing that the CAL had lied in claiming that the *mozos colonos* were from San Miguel. He wrote, “The mentioned Agrarian Committee, before procuring the wellbeing and the prosperity of the rural working class, defends the interests of the eternal dispossessors of the land and the usurpers of the national riches...[and] has mocked the fundamental objective of the October Revolution’s Agrarian Reform...”¹⁵ Just as the CAL had accused Trinidad Palencia of being anti-agrarianist, now Girón Vega levied this exact harmful label

¹² AGCA, San Sebastián, 3:2, letter from Municipal Secretary of San Miguel Dueñas, 3 May 1954.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ AGCA, San Sebastián, 3:3-A

¹⁵ AGCA, San Sebastián y anexos, 3:2, letter from Juan Santos Girón Vega to the CAD, 9 Feb. 1954.

against the CAL, against Castillo Flores and the CNCG, and against the functionaries of Decreto 900.

The case of San Sebastián also makes clear once again that the idealized, collective identity of the campesino that often was conveyed through official materials did not match reality, as residents of one town competed with others to gain access to the same limited resources. This case also underscores alternate forms of organizing that predated the revolution, and as Gibbings argues for the Verapaces, a different logic that centered on historic claims to lands rather than unifying as a local branch of a new national entity (Gibbings, 2020, p. 341-2). Embedded within this difference is the issue of collective ownership of land, which was ultimately what the Girón Vega and Palencia faction desired, and private property, the structure that the CALs pursued. The case underscores the importance of recognizing the different relationships that people broadly categorized as campesinos had with the land and with their labor, a relationship that the next case of Finca Candelaria continues to unpack.

In August 1952, the *unión campesina* of Alotenango denounced Finca La Candelaria of the same municipality, and in January 1953, the CAD ruled in their favor, awarding an expropriation of 6 *caballerías*.¹⁶ After the 1954 coup, owner María Cristina Fernández began to pursue the return of her property, writing to the departmental Junta Agraria Departamental (JAD), that the campesinos had disrupted her coffee production. She also insisted that expropriation had been illegal but transpired because the union leadership had “terrorized” the agrarian inspectors, thus forcing them to file expropriation paperwork.¹⁷ While the finca’s file does not include reversal paperwork, a February 1955 letter from *unión campesina* members to the JAD indicated that it had taken place, as Fernández refused to let them harvest their crops on this land, a violation of the law and a significant loss.¹⁸ Then, in June 1955, Fernández offered to donate two *caballerías* to individuals from Alotenango who had previously been *arrendantes* or *mozos colonos* on her finca. She explained this choice by writing, “...we don’t want for these lands to pass into the hands of people who, far from being good workers, only dedicate themselves to agitating those who peacefully work their lands.”¹⁹ In other words, she discursively coded unionized campesinos as troublemakers. For her, people who seized the opportunities the revolution offered harmed Guatemala, and she used her privileged position to reward individuals that she perceived to be rejecting these options, in this case, people who had worked for her and had not unionized or denounced her finca. Clearly, she understood local rivalries and hoped to build a patronage network with local campesinos through granting them a small portion of her finca.

¹⁶ AGCA, La Candelaria, 1:6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, letter to Junta Agraria, 14 Dec. 1954.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:6, letter to Junta Agraria Departamental, 3 Feb. 1955.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:6, letter from María Cristina Fernández viuda de Lowenthal, 16 June 1955.

Fernández's decision aroused fear and action from the campesinos who had received expropriated land and had subsequently planted coffee, beans, and corns with Banco Agrario loans. In August 1955, and with much consternation, three of these individuals—Ciriaco Coc Aqual, Valentin Marroquín Tuchan, and Candelario Ruiz Camrey—wrote to ask President Castillo Armas for protection against unjust eviction. These men detailed how Fernández planned to give their land to other campesinos, and they expressed amazement that the government would take away cultivated land.²⁰ In framing their arguments in this manner, they distanced themselves from their revolutionary-era organizing and instead positioned themselves as economically productive farmers whose activities aligned with the nation's broader goals of creating an agrarian middle class, thus making the issue squarely about agricultural production. The archival record trails off here, not indicating if the president replied. However, subsequent documents do indicate that in December 1955, local officials allocated some land to Fernández's previous employees. some of the land was allocated.²¹

The case of La Candelaria underscores the ways that rural people who organized in uniones campesinas often competed against others who had not unionized and how landowners were embedded into these local histories. After the coup, some landowners sought to punish those who had denounced land, so they evicted Decreto 900 recipients and in this case, allocated land to individuals they deemed to be "loyal" and "hardworking." This sent a depressingly powerful message throughout rural Guatemala about the limitations of national organizing and the importance of local patronage networks, even when highly unequal and exploitative.

Other cases, like the disputes over Finca Manzanales, reveal interpersonal discord between community members that is not a clear divide based on labor relations. In this case, residents from Santa María Cauque competed over a finca they believed qualified for expropriation. Perhaps recognizing how the government prioritized conservation and agricultural modernization, the finquero, Carlos Monteros, had evicted his renters in 1951 and began to reforest some of his land, plant other parts with wheat of the Supreo 211 variety, and carefully apply various fertilizers, all as a collaborative agricultural experiment with the *Instituto Agropecuario Nacional* (Chassé, p. 72-73).²² Thus, between this collaboration and the ways he used his land, Montoneros did not believe his finca to qualify for expropriation.

However, in July 1952, a father and son duo named Jacinto and Maximiliano Alvarez denounced Manzanales. In April 1953, they reported that other townspeople were

²⁰ Ibid., letter from Ciriaco Coc Aqual, Valentín Marroquín Tuchan, and Candelario Ruiz Camrey to Director General de Asuntos Agrarios, 29 Aug. 1955. The names in this letter are handwritten and not entirely clear; I have tried to be as accurate as possible in reproducing the spellings of these names.

²¹ Ibid, 1:6, letter from Juan Pac Quexel, et. Al to President Castillo Armas, 19 Jan. 1956.

²² AGCA, Manzanales, 2a:6, letter from Alberto Cabrera and Sebastian Asturias et al, dated 7 May 1953; Ibid., letter from Rodolfo Rivera Ariza to Carlos Monteros, 14 Oct. 1952.

angry when they heard about this action, as they labeled the Alvarezes “communist” and had them kicked out of the local church. Jacinto reported to the CAN that the town “made war against him in a cruel and relentless way.” According to the Alvarezes, these same individuals, despite their supposed outrage, organized as a *unión campesina*, denounced the finca, and intentionally left them off the list of potential recipients.²³

Later reports revealed that the finca’s recently evicted renters were the supposedly enraged individuals who organized as the *unión campesina*. In late April 1953, this group of thirty campesinos learned of the CAD’s recommendation for expropriation and subsequently decided to occupy the land and divide it amongst themselves before waiting for an official decision to be handed down through the proper legal channels.²⁴ This occupation, what many contemporaries termed an illegal land invasion, was not unique to Finca Manzanales; newspaper and US embassy reports regularly related similar events, using these “invasions” to classify the agrarian reform as chaotic and violent.²⁵ When Manzanales’ owner decried this illegal action, the *unión campesina* wrote that they “realized that the Revolution of October of 1944 had brought us economic progress and a way forward [una economía y un Adelante y un progreso]...” and thus felt it their duty to seize the land they believed the law had rightfully awarded them.²⁶ In September 1953, the CAN officially approved the expropriation, but the celebration proved short lived.²⁷ In January 1955, the finquero reported to the new Junta Agraria that the “leftist campesinos” had invaded his finca and had deforested his land through an illegal expropriation. The JAD agreed and reversed the expropriation a month later.²⁸

In the case of Manzanales, the local dispute was between the *unión campesina* and the Alvarez family. The sources do not make clear why this division existed or why the Alvarez family did not, or could not, join the union. Both sides leveraged the label “communist” to draw negative attention to their rivals, as the Alvarezes claimed that this term had been derogatorily used to exclude them from land claims, remove them from church, and more broadly, damage their personal reputations. Clearly, townspeople understood the discursive power of this label against the broader backdrop of land seizures

²³ Ibid., letter from Jacinto Alvarez to CAD, 27 April 1953; letter from Maximiliano Alvarez to CAD, 27 April 1953.

²⁴ Ibid., report from Inspector Roberto Cabrera, 4 Sept. 1953; Ibid., CAD decision issued 14 April 1953; Ibid., handwritten letter from *Unión Campesina* indicating they had measured and distributed the affected land, 23 April 1953.

²⁵ CIRMA, DES34, telegram from US Embassy in Guatemala City to Department of State, June 10, 1954; CIRMA DES12, AmEmbassy Guatemala, Despatch 551 to Department of State, December 29, 1953; “Condena la agresión entre los campesinos,” *El Imparcial*, 27 Jan. 1953; “Queman campos cultivados para hacerlos aparecer como abandonados y repartírselos,” *El Imparcial*, 27 Mar. 1953; “Mil campesinos toman los terrenos por motu propio,” *El Imparcial*, 20 Jan. 1953; “Mas despojos de fincas que no entran en lo especificado por la Ley Agraria,” *El Imparcial*, 29 Jan. 1953.

²⁶ AGCA, Manzanales, 2a:6, letter from *Unión Campesina de Santa María Cauque*, 13 July 1953.

²⁷ Ibid., CAN decision 17 Sept. 1953.

²⁸ Ibid., letter from Carlos Monteros to JAD, 20 Jan. 1955; JAD reversal, 22 Feb. 1955.

and international geopolitics, and they strategically used this powerful language in pursuit of their own interests. Although much remains unanswered, not all cases have documentation that so transparently reveals tensions between townspeople or between finca employees and other townspeople, but the case of El Volante y La Pila in nearby Sumpango highlights how identities based on different types of labor relations, connections to the land, and union membership were not unique to La Candelaria and Manzanales.

Competition between *mozos colonos* and local *campesinos* also occurred in the denunciations against finca El Volante y La Pila, in the municipality of Sumpango. On September 26, 1952, Ignacio Tomás led a group of 48 *campesinos* in denouncing the finca, arguing that they were *mozos colonos* who had “dedicated their lives” to cultivating the owner’s land but had insufficient land of their own, as the owner only gave them three acres apiece (Handy, 1994: 245). Again pointing to the state’s goal of increasing agricultural production, Tomás claimed that his group wanted to produce more crops and promised to do so if given additional land.²⁹ The *finqueros*, members of the Pérez Rosales family, disagreed with the CAD’s decision to expropriate land, providing evidence such as aerial photographs and topographic maps to argue that the disputed land had inclinations of 30-70%, making it legally unfit for expropriation.

Meanwhile, the same claimants wrote to the CAL in October 1952, once again expressing their desire to receive additional land from the finca.³⁰ In response to this letter, Mario Pérez Rosales wrote to the CAN, insisting that the 48 claimants were not all *mozos colonos*; in 1952, he had completed labor contracts with only 38 individuals and had collectively given them 48 *manzanas*, which, when distributed evenly, was more than what they claimed to have received. Thus he not only challenged the legality of the expropriation order based on the condition of the land itself, he also questioned the integrity and accuracy of the claimants’ statements.³¹ The CAN apparently sided with the claimants and ordered the expropriation of 2 *caballerías* and 26 *manzanas*; subsequent records indicate that it was redistributed.

The pre-coup paperwork in this file does not indicate the names of recipients, nor does it give any indication that there were competing claims to this finca. However, documentation from the coup’s aftermath tell a more complicated story. First, and not surprisingly, an April 1955 order reversed the Decreto 900 decision, indicating that recipients who had previously been *mozos colonos* could stay on the finca in this capacity, with the landowner providing them land to cultivate in exchange for their labor. Additionally, the JAD tasked Pérez Rosales with designing a finca improvement plan, indicating how he would increase production and living standards.³² These measures reveal the counterrevolutionary state’s fixation on quelling popular organizing while still

²⁹ AGCA, El Volante y La Pila, 4:2, denuncia form dated September 26, 1952.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, letter from *mozos colonos* of el Volante y la Pila to the CAL, 6 Oct. 1952.

³¹ *Ibid.*, letter from Mario Pérez Rosales to CAN, 24 Jan. 1953.

³² *Ibid.*, 4:2, Acuerdo de Revocación, 19 Apr. 1955.

attempting to modernize agricultural production. Guatemala's counterrevolutionary government began to propose solutions like finca improvement plans for structural problems, thus rendering problems technical and solvable through expert intervention rather than political change, a phenomenon that would become fairly commonplace in Cold War Latin America (Olsson, 2017; Buckley, 2017; Wolfe, 2017).

Despite these allowances, individuals who had received land did not easily acquiesce. In an inspection report dated May 23, 1955, the Inspector General wrote to the President detailing that the finca's expropriated land had not been equally distributed. Instead, he reported that the campesinos,

making use of the favor that the past government had dispensed on them for their adhesion and their tendencies, have taken the finca's best land and have left the *mozos colonos* with the worst land, practically condemning them to suffer hunger and deprivations, then and in the present this is happening, meanwhile the campesinos who received the land (*campesinos parcelarios*), to date still have their reserves of corn, but the *colonos*, for several months now have had to buy this grain for the maintenance of their respective families.³³

Here, the inspector painted an interesting picture of life on the finca. He did not indicate if these campesinos were the ten people in the original claim that the owner insisted were never employees. Or, it is possible that competing denunciations had occurred against this property and that the finca's file is incomplete. What we do know is that the inspector claimed to witness various living conditions among finca residents, and he surmised that those with a better status only held this position because of their support for the previous regime. The archival record does not describe finca conditions from a resident's perspective but only that of the inspector, an employee of the counterrevolutionary state. Still, what is clear is that conditions for at least some of the *mozos colonos* was still quite dire while others classified as campesinos had received expropriated property that they were still cultivating. Still, despite this momentarily stable status, anyone who had not been a *mozo colono* prior to the denunciations faced the threat of eviction.

In January 1956, a group of campesinos who had not been *mozos colonos* but had received land on El Volante y La Pila, wrote to the President, imploring him to protect their lands. They insisted that they were not invaders but had legally received this land and had cultivated it. They reported that they were being prevented from accessing their land to harvest their crops, and they asked for the President's intervention.³⁴ It is not clear from the written record what transpired over the next six months, but in July, finquero Mario Pérez

³³ Ibid., letter from Inspector General to President, 23 May 1955.

³⁴ Ibid., letter from campesinos to President, 16 Jan. 1956.

Rosales responded, indicating that he had fulfilled the law by employing his former *mozos colonos* but that the other recipients were still illegally planting lands they had received under Decreto 900 and thus were enjoying his lands for free, “unjustly depriving me of these lands, that have since been ruled unaffordable.”³⁵ In late August, the Minister of the Interior (Gobernación) affirmed Pérez Rosales’ request that the land be returned, but at a September inspection, these *campesinos* were still planting the land without paying any rent or providing labor in exchange for land use. At this point, the government issued an order that the *campesinos* could complete their harvest but had to leave the lands by February 28, 1957; any efforts to enter or cultivate the *finca* after this date would be considered illegal.³⁶

Like in the La Candelaria case, claimants in El Volante y La Pila also found themselves divided into categories based on their labor relationship to the *finquero*. Though the records here do not indicate direct conflict between *mozos colonos* and other *campesinos*, clearly the counterrevolutionary government sought to return to the pre-1944 status quo by legally requiring landowners to permit *mozos colonos* to live and work as they had before the revolution. This system of debt peonage and essentially indentured labor did not threaten to remake social hierarchies, and it ensured an exploitable labor source for *finqueros*. It did not aim to restructure Guatemalan society but rather kept exploitative labor systems of dependence in place. Clearly, these different social categories mattered, as *campesino* identity was not singular but was more complex and integrated into a dense and localized network of relations.

Conclusion

In many regards, the agrarian reform in Sacatepéquez, as a whole, was rather ordinary. Unlike departments where large agricultural workers formed active unions or residents challenged the monopoly on land that foreign elite had enjoyed for decades, or where episodes of violence punctuated the social fabric and made national news, Sacatepéquez’s experience with Decreto 900 was more subdued in comparison. It was a department where *ladinos* and indigenous people interacted regularly and where small landholdings were the norm, not the exception. Many individuals owned small plots of land or secured work on a nearby *finca*. Yet it is precisely its typicality that makes Sacatepéquez worthy of careful analysis, as it provides a lens onto more regular cases of denunciation and from there, insight into the ways that individuals utilized the terms and categories both they and the state used to define their position within society.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Mario Pérez Rosales letter, 27 July 1956.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, communication from Ministerio de Gobernación, 31 August 1956; Inspection report dated 26 Sept. 1956.

These case studies of the history of agrarian reform in Sacatepéquez complicate broad and somewhat homogenized categories by underscoring the deployment of these concepts and their overlapping and multivalent meanings. People used these categories to assert power and privilege over others and to justify their own claims and prioritize their needs above others. Categories shaped the nature of political organizing and allegiances at the local level, as during the revolution, some campesinos decided to organize in unions and collectively denounce land, a process that often met with success. Their usage also highlights one of the flaws with the agrarian reform, namely that the state did not anticipate that older forms of social organizing and existing hierarchies and divisions would supersede efforts to create a unified campesino political identity. Even though the agrarian reform ended up benefitting 87,589 people across the nation (Chassé, 72), it also exacerbated existing social divisions and caused new conflicts at the local level, which prevented consensus building across and within ethnic identities and socioeconomic classes. The deployment of these sociopolitical categories did not end with the 1954 coup but continued into the counterrevolution, as the government and finqueros used these same categories to often prioritize groups it believed had not supported the revolution, such as *mozos colonos* who had not unionized. Through the categories that it prioritized, the state revealed the different societies and power hierarchies that these two regimes sought to build.

The local histories of agrarian reform discussed in this article matter for the history of Guatemala specifically and for the analysis of agrarian history more broadly. They reveal the complexities of rural identities and the overlapping nature of social and economic relations and politics, debunking any romanticized notion of a unified campesino population and replacing it with a much more complex and inspiring account of the ways that individuals carefully exercised their agency and strategically made use of categories of governance in order to improve their lives. Their histories mandate that historians carefully analyze and reflect upon the complicated and contingent relationships between land, labor and community and remember that ordinary rural people were central actors in their stories.

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