Part II - The countryside

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PART II – THE COUNTRYSIDE

Background

Every third Chilean works on the land. Traditionally this has been dominated by large landowners (latifundistas). Their properties were characterized by servile labour relations, low productivity and poor conservation. Most campesinos were either landless or smallholders (minifundistas), without enough land to support a family: this obliged them to work for the large estates. A well-known study in the 1960s found the following: 80 per cent of the land was concentrated into 7 per cent of all holdings, with many of the largest estates belonging to members of the same families; 70 per cent of all rural families earned less than $100 per year. The great majority suffered from malnutrition, illiteracy, inadequate housing and under-employment. Most campesinos knew little of the world beyond the local estate.

This situation obstructed economic growth. It restricted the market for manufactures and the countryside’s capacity for meeting the cities’ food requirements. It was also a source of mounting protest, backed by the Communist and Socialist parties, through the campesino confederation ‘Ranquil’, established in the 1930s. Hence in the sixties agrarian change became central to the bourgeois reforms which the Christian Democrats proposed, supported by the Alliance for Progress.

The policy of the Frei government was to foster rural capitalism by gradually expropriating the bigger, underproductive estates and encouraging commercial, medium sized farms. Market pressures were tacitly expected to convert the smallholders into the rural proletariat which this policy also required. One large state agency (CORA, the Agrarian Reform Corporation) was responsible for the expropriations. Another (INDAP, the Agrarian Development Institute) dealt with socio-economic issues. All properties of over eighty ‘basic’ hectares (two hundred acres, measured in terms of productivity) would be expropriated. Owners would receive compensation and retain a medium sized section. The rest would be transferred to the resident workers (inquilinos), initially as a cooperative (asentamiento). Later they could opt to divide it into private holdings. Meanwhile rural unions were officially recognized for the first time. These measures had different implications for the various categories of campesinos. They offered little to the great majority – the smallholders and temporary workers (afuerinos). Their political aim was to build a Christian Democratic base among the former resident workers, as the main beneficiaries of both land reform and unionization.

The Christian Democrats only partly fulfilled this programme. A hundred thousand families were due to receive expropriated land, but only twenty thousand did so. Unionization was limited mainly to regions controlled by the Christian Democrats’ main campesino confederation, the Triunfo Campesino. Food production increased very little. By 1970 rural strikes were increasingly frequent and politically motivated. The campesinos also began to occupy properties whose expropriation was overdue. This sometimes ended in violent repression. As Pepe (ch. 5) describes it, all this convinced sectors of the left, particularly the MIR and MAPU, of the need to organize campesinos to press from below for greater changes.

The PU undertook to complete the land redistribution programme and to consider extending it to holdings of forty to eighty hectares. Campesino councils (consejos) would be established at the local and provincial levels for mass consultation over the programme. It was also eventually agreed that instead of cooperatives, the PU would introduce Agrarian Reform Centres (CERAs). These would be larger and better planned, combining a number of former properties. Also they would be more collective. All participants would have equal rights, including women, former smallholders and temporary workers. The bulk of profits would be reinvested, not divided.

The first proposal presented few problems. Expropriation of holdings over eighty hectares went even more rapidly than planned, due partly to the continuation of protest strikes and occupations. Within six months the PU redistributed more land than the Christian Democrats had in six years. By mid 1972 this part of the programme was completed. Remarkably, this was
achieved without a fall in food production, despite sabotage by the departing landowners.

This raised the question of further developments in the PU’s programme and also of its political purpose. Opinions within the PU differed on two central issues: whether to move rapidly toward socializing agriculture, and how much power to devolve to campesino organizations. As the right retrenched in the countryside, these issues became bound up with the problem of how the PU should confront it.

This debate was virtually the same as that on the industrial sector. The Communist Party, leading Socialists and the MOC were concerned above all with the battle for agricultural production, and the danger of driving the medium landowners into non-cooperation. A limited programme should be followed. The enemy should be clearly defined as the ‘semi-feudal’ big estate-holders, in order to retain the neutrality of the rural ‘middle sectors’. This meant that the campesino councils should be subject to the central control of the PU leadership and the CUT, mainly through the rural unions. The socialization of agriculture was not crucial or feasible at this juncture, and should therefore be left till later.

However, sections of the Socialist Party, the MAPU and the Christian Left Party emphasized mass mobilization, the transfer of power to the councils, the collective organization of CERAs and the need to lower expropriation to a forty-hectare minimum, despite congressional opposition. In their view gradualism was more dangerous. It would alienate those campesinos demanding much more radical changes and fail to convince the less defined sectors, smallholders particularly, of anything but the PU’s weakness. This would incline them to the right. The petty bourgeois tendency fostered by Christian Democrat reforms must be decisively confronted. The MIR was in broad agreement with this, and especially emphasized occupations by the poorest campesinos, such as the Mapuche Indians.

The outcome varied from province to province, depending on the local balance of power between the various PU parties within CORA and INDAP. As the speakers in this section indicate, CORA tended to be ‘gradualist’, whilst the notion of ‘campesino power’ was more influential in INDAP. Both of them also convey the extent to which these positions were forged by events as well as theories – events which split the MOC from the MAPU, to which it originally belonged. For Enrique (MOC), who worked for CORA in the Central Valley, the campesino councils were secondary and the socialization of agriculture was at this stage a premature question. For Pepe, however, both have been central since his pre-1970 experiences with the Mapuche in southern Chile. Campesino power relates to the question of popular power generally, in the form of links between the councils and workers in the industrial cordons. The campesinos are vital to the resulting communal commands, and these are a crucial part of the answer to mobilization by the right – though others would argue that they aggravated and were unable to contain it.

There are, of course, some pragmatic grounds for each of these two speakers’ positions, deriving from their respective contexts. In the last analysis, however, they rest on the different strategies between which they were obliged to choose, for the achievement of socialism and the campesinos’ role in this.