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Source: *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Apr., 1984, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Apr., 1984), pp. 149-158

Published by: American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3486723>

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Development and Agrarian Land Reform in Venezuela's Pioneer Zone:

Social Progress Along the Llano-Andes Border in a Half Century of Political Advance

By RAYMOND E. CRIST*

ABSTRACT. Opportunities in the oil fields and on the large and small *farms* and *ranches* in the pioneer zone of *Venezuela* along the *Llanos-Andes border* attract tens of thousands of "undocumented" *Colombian migrants*. Many replace Venezuelans fleeing from the *country* to the *urban* areas. Residents of the higher "cold country" elevations move into the lower ones, whose residents move into the now healthier "hot" lowlands. The affluent are moving from the lowlands to the "cold country," the reverse direction. Sites for *hydroelectric dams*, noted in 1932, are being exploited, and significant progress is marked by erection of *schools* and *universities*, *libraries* and other *cultural institutions*. *Political reform* made possible *agrarian land reform*, but new *latifundistas* are appearing as lawyers, physicians and businessmen use wealth acquired in their professions to become large *landowners* seeking to profit from their holdings.

I

"Undocumented" Colombians in the Frontier Zone

ALTHOUGH THE COLOMBO-VENEZUELAN FRONTIER is officially well delimited for a number of miles to the north and to the south of the international bridge near Cúcuta, the pull of Venezuela across that well-defined frontier is very great and border patrols are few and far between. Tens of thousands of Colombians have infiltrated into the mountain state of Táchira, Venezuela. The Andean sectors in the geologically-fractured Hinge Zone along the Colombo-Venezuelan frontier in the States of Norte de Santander and Táchira are both relatively densely populated. However, what might be called the higher demographic pressure in Colombia pushes its nationals across

* [Raymond E. Crist, Sc.D., is research professor of geography, emeritus, at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.] This paper concludes my report on my investigation of changes in the area, begun in "Westward Thrusts the Pioneer Zone in Venezuela: A Half Century of Development Along the Llano-Andes Border," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (October, 1983). The field and library research on which these papers are based was funded in part by the Amazon Research and Training Program of the Center for Latin American Studies of the University of Florida.

the frontier into Táchira. Once there, it is easy for them, on the excellent Venezuelan highways, to go north to the oil fields or to the new lands being opened up south and west of Lake Maracaibo, or to the east, to the frontier zone, the Promised Land or the modern El Dorado, along the Llanos-Andes border.

More than a million people have fled the countryside for the cities in Venezuela during the last decade. During the same period another wave of "undocumented" migrants has entered the country, mainly from Colombia. They work for low wages and make a living even on poor land, as did the French Canadians in New England when the Yankees moved westward.

As their designation implies, there are no official records of the number of "undocumented" Colombians actually in Venezuela. A Colombian newspaper article estimated them at a million to a million and a half. A conservative guess as to the number of these who have settled in the Llanos-Andes border zone might be somewhere between 40 and 50,000.

II

The Venezuelan Andes: A Source of Migrants

DURING THE MOUNTAIN BUILDING PROCESS which saw the upheaval of the Venezuelan Andes much faulting and shattering took place. In the key hinge zone between the northeast trending Venezuelan Andes and the Cordillera de la Costa, have grown up the towns of Barquisimeto and Acarigua, through which people and goods were funneled either to the north or to the south of the Andes. The Santo Domingo River, following an old line of weakness traced by fault line and zone of fracture, has cut headward to the relatively low pass of Apartaderos, facilitating from remote times trade between the Llanos and the Mérida region.

There is another hinge zone between the Venezuelan Andes and the Colombian Cordillera Oriental, which has also been a trade corridor since early times. Here has grown up, across the border in Colombia, the town of Cúcuta in a small, low lying rain shadow desert, and in Venezuela, the regional center of San Cristóbal. In both of these border towns, trade is brisk, with special emphasis on smuggling since the role of coca and marijuana has assumed international importance.

For a century, people left the lower-lying hot country for the relatively disease-free mountain towns. This trend was changed, as noted 25 years ago, with the sustained national health campaigns which provided pure water and freedom from malaria. This step migration was sometimes carried out in two stages, residents at 8,000 or more feet moving into unoccupied farm land at 4,000 to

6,000 feet, with those living at lower elevations moving into the hot country.¹ For the well-to-do there is now a reverse trend. Some of the cold country land around Las Piedras and Apartaderos is being bought up cheap by lawyers, doctors, and business men, some of them foreigners or their first generation children.

This cold country land is on the market because of deteriorating socioeconomic and ecological conditions, themselves the result of historical evolution. At the time of the Conquest in the mid-16th century, the small holdings of the Andean Indians were usurped by the Spaniards and a manorial calm ensued. By the end of the 19th century, the nuclear, closely knit, landholding family, under the undisputed leadership of the father, proved to be the ideal unit for the production of the cash crop, coffee. Enough wheat, maize, lentils, beans, and potatoes were grown to sustain the family and, in case there was a surplus, to earn a little cash in the local market. Coffee was king till after World War I. For a half century coffee production was buffeted by the winds of the world market, and by the 70s the industry was practically dead. Soils gave out and even the weather was temperamental. In the picturesque but tragic words of an informant:

The fields did not change, they are the same, but the weather is not, now there is a lot of dry weather, it rains when the crops don't need it, and when they do there is a long dry spell. . . . Because of the long dry seasons the ground has baked hard and on the steep mountain slopes it is washed out and what remains is rock.²

This depressing stream of consciousness style litany of personal misfortunes and natural disasters make up half the text of this outstanding, poignant study of the push factors involved in the Andean rural exodus. Such sub-marginal peasants are forced off the land which can no longer support them. If their land is near a highway, they may be able to sell it to a city buyer. If it is far from a road, they may be forced simply to abandon it and move into the nearest village or town, or even go to boom town Barinas looking for work, part of the uprooted rural proletariat. Land on which peasants can no longer make a living becomes real estate to those who have made their wealth in nonfarming activities. These new owners proceed to build Swiss or Tyrolean looking villas, which they use as weekend cool-to-cold vacation homes, or as rental property for those wishing to escape for a few weeks the searing heat of the Llanos or the Maracaibo Basin.

III

Hydroelectric Energy

"THERE ARE EXCELLENT SITES at narrow parts of the great rivers—this is particularly true of the Santo Domingo near Altamira—where dams could be con-

structed to furnish power."³ The Santo Domingo dam has now been built and the huge power station is sited on a small terrace where the highway crosses the river and continues to zigzag up the steep mountain side to a high terrace on which is located Altamira. One of the triangulation points used in mapping the topography and geology of the mountain front was the southwest corner of the wall around the cemetery of Altamira, which is visible for miles.

As the population and demand for energy increase in western Barinas, it is quite possible that other equally good dam sites will be found and utilized, on the Uribante, the Caparo, or the Bumbúm Rivers. For instance, a dam on the Bumbúm River, the headwaters of which are fed by the melting glaciers of Pico Bolívar, could generate large quantities of hydroelectric power. The thriving hamlet of Capitanejo, in the midst of what was once the Tico-poro Forest, will most certainly continue to flourish and assume the role of regional center between Ciudad Bolivia and San Antonio de Caparo. (Incidentally, Bumbúm is probably a native onomatopoeic word that aptly describes the sound made by the huge granite boulders being knocked together as they are carried along by that mighty stream in its upper reaches when in flood.)

IV

Modern Barinas: Social and Cultural Advance

SIGNIFICANT AND HIGHLY VISIBLE SIGNS of progress in the modern landscape are the public grade schools of the University of Education and the water tanks of the Health Department. Endemic illiteracy is being vigorously overcome. Endemic malaria and waterborne diseases have been practically eradicated. Since the fall of Pérez Jiménez in 1958, the democratic government has supported education at all levels. In 1960, there were 23 graduates of the Liceo O'Leary in the city of Barinas. In 1982, there were some 3,000 high school graduates in the state of Barinas, a large percentage of whom hoped to matriculate in the Barinas branch of the university system of the western Llanos, which also includes branches in Guanare, San Carlos, and San Fernando de Apure.

The university in Los Altos de Barinas⁴ represents a kind of cultural outreach center. Much emphasis is placed on agricultural engineering, agronomy, rural sociology and agricultural economics, civil engineering, and so on. It is felt that if the human resources of the region are well trained, they will be able to become part of a sustained, ongoing development process, and that they will not wish to emigrate. Instead, they will identify themselves

with the region, be proud of the illustrious historical role Barinas has played in the past, and further the noble goal of conserving their cultural patrimony.

Meanwhile, there is much to do, such as get increased allotments from the government, hire new professors, build new buildings, equip new laboratories, keep students contented and at work, and so on. Reminiscent of university campuses in the U.S. during the 60s, there were signs around the Barinas University, signed by the leaders of a student group, asking for an interview with the Rector during which grievances could be aired, and a dialogue begun. There had been no violence.

Farther west, the municipal council of Ciudad Bolivia has ceded 700 hectares of its best ejido land near the town, on which will be built the Escuela Internacional Simon Bolívar, a modern school of agricultural sciences to cost 60 million bolivars.

The Andres Eloy Blanco Public Library, a great addition to the cultural life of the exploding town of Barinas, is well supplied with reference works and books of general interest, as well as with national newspapers and magazines. It is efficiently operated, its employees are courteous and helpful—no long forms to fill out—and its hours are convenient for the serious student as well as for the browser. This facility is consulted by many readers, old and young.

Cátedra, an illustrated magazine now in its third year, carries articles on regional and national literary, historical, and ecological matters, of such interest and quality as to show a high degree of cultural sophistication.⁵ Music and sports events are not neglected.

The State Government has assumed the financial support of a Botanical Garden, on the 300 hectares of land assigned for that purpose by the City Council. There will be two major divisions of the facility. The ecological section will be dedicated to plants native to the Llanos. There will also be sizeable plots where examples of tropical rainforest, medicinal and poisonous plants, oil palms and succulents, and so on, will be grown. The Garden, as part of the University, will be equipped with classrooms in which college level courses in botany will be taught. Laboratories, museums, and herbaria are on the drawing boards, to be used by visiting and resident scientists. The general public and sightseers will be welcome during visiting hours. Deer, capybaras, agoutis, tapirs, and monkeys are already to be seen in the small zoo on the grounds for animals native to the Llanos.

This Botanical Garden could in future be a kind of central recreational park where it would be possible to get away for awhile from the hubbub of a rapidly expanding city.

The population of the State of Barinas increased from 80,503 in 1950 to 139,271 in 1961; and 231,046 in 1971.⁶ In 1980, the State of Barinas had a population of 318,401. The town of Barinas had a population of 8,631 in 1950; 25,748 in 1961; 56,329 in 1971; and 130,578 in 1980;⁷ according to a note in *El Universal* of February 2, 1982 quoting from figures made public by the Oficina Central de Estadística from the 11th Population Census.

v

Agrarian Reform and Modern Latifundism

UNTIL ABOUT THE MID-CENTURY, most of the food crops of the country were produced by the patch agriculturalist. But in the 1930s and 40s there was a gradual transition from the centuries-old concept of land as a prestige or status symbol, ownership of which per se meant power, to land as an investment to bring profit to the owner.

As land-owning and agriculture have become more profitable, wealthy professionals and agricultural corporations are more and more investing in farmland. These new latifundistas, lawyers, doctors, business men, and so on, use the wealth accumulated in other activities to become large landowners. They compete with peasants and poor farmers for the land, which they work with modern, capital-intensive methods.

Land has become something to be bought and sold for profit rather than the basis for sustaining a rural way of life. Commercial farmers, individual and corporate, produce crops that are profitable, such as sugar cane, cotton, and sesame, for industrial processing. They have little trouble acquiring credit, technical assistance, equipment, roads and other necessary services.⁸ In other words, they are coddled, not abandoned.

The small farmers, many helped by the Agrarian Reform, produce the rice, corn, and beans that people eat, but the plots they cleared in the forest or those they received from the government were often too small, and the soil was not of the best. The small farmers had no technical assistance, little credit, and in many cases no way to market their crop. Many abandoned their plots and left. Those who did not, saw their children leave for the urban centers. The process of pioneering along the Llanos-Andes border, and indeed everywhere in Venezuela, differs markedly from frontier colonization in many other countries, where the movement was step by step, often spontaneous, and where the areas opened up by settlers were gradually incorporated into the economic mainstream of the nation. In Venezuela, the central government in its endeavor, some might say haste, to "sow petroleum," pumps vast amounts of money into frontier areas. It can be pumped faster if it goes to support large landholders—as in the U.S.—who produce commercial crops. A relatively small amount of

cash goes to the small landholders who produce food crops for local consumption.

There is much good farm land available near Barinas city and millions of dollars have been spent in colonization endeavors in the state, yet most of the vegetables, and many of the fruits, in the Barinas market, instead of being produced nearby, come from Barquisimeto, Mérida, and other parts of the country, as shown by checking the license plates of the trucks around the market.

It is hoped that when the farmer's risks are reduced and he receives a just price for his crop, the industrial-agricultural imbalance will be corrected and agricultural production of primary foodstuffs for the local, domestic market will catch up with demand.

The changes that have been effected in the entire country since the death of the savage tyrant Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935 are hard for one who "knew it then" to believe, even when seen. Rómulo Betancourt, the first popularly elected president to complete his term and hand over the presidential sash to a popularly elected successor, was also able to achieve a middle-of-the-road agrarian reform. There have been many mistakes, perhaps some corruption, as so often happens anywhere when great quantities of money are involved in effecting wide ranging projects. It is hardly fair to dwell on a few failures in sponsored colonization, such as those along the Apure River or in the Selva de Turén, when the national Agrarian Reform Program has in reality radically transformed the centuries-old settlement pattern of the entire nation.

Relatively few of the half million people settled in the new rural settlements by 1974—certainly not over 5 to 8 per cent—have been settled in the Llanos-Andes Border Zone, and those largely in the states of Portuguesa and Cojedes. For the entire country, Professor Eidt, after an extensive study of the small scale Agrarian Reform Settlements, optimistically concludes "that Venezuelan group settlement concepts with the aid of Israeli field practices have transformed a centuries-old Latin American settlement pattern in only 25 years. . . ."⁹

The work of the Agrarian Reform continues. During his election campaign, President Herrera Campins promised that if elected he would grant 80,000 land titles to the landless during his five years in office. By the end of the first three years (March, 1982) of his administration, 81,738 families had received a total of 2,735,287 hectares.¹⁰

This is a good record. However, it is not enough to carry out settlement programs *por realazos* (by throwing in the cash), as the Venezuelans say.

To be sure, efforts should be made to incorporate all landowners, large and small, into the Green Revolution. A great need exists to expand the array of Green Revolution products so that some can be compatible with the site-specific

needs of the peasant farmer rather than hoping that the farmer will be able to change his life-style to fit the constraints of present Green Revolution technologies.

Consistent with this objective, future research should focus on increasing the yields of the large number of local varieties of subsistence crops rather than on reducing the genetic plant base of the region through over-dependence on hybrid seed which also erodes the independence of the small farmer. Research is also needed on the development of low-fossil fuel, labor-intensive technologies, both in the highlands and in the pioneer lowland zones.

Beyond the strengthening of peasant agriculture, domestic food supplies would increase through a program of incentives aimed at converting to intensive production of food crops much of the land currently given to extensive cattle grazing. Finally, inventories of forest, soil, and water resources need to be completed in preparation for resource-specific development programmes.¹¹

VI

Overview

IT HAS BEEN SEEN that far from forming a wall, the Venezuelan Andes have been rather an area where people and goods could, with relative ease, move into the mountains or out depending on the changing economic situation nationally and the health conditions in the hot country. This two-way movement has been greatly facilitated by the extension of the system of highways used by cars and trucks burning fuels kept by government decree at artificially low prices.

The billions of dollars spent on Agrarian Reform have neither kept the peasant in the countryside nor provided a constant supply of cheap food for the cities. This vast sum has not yet created a body of skilled farmers in control of their own lives and benefiting from their own work, which is the key to agricultural progress in Venezuela, or anywhere else. Agricultural production should be oriented more toward the producer than the crop.

Venezuela, particularly and precisely where indicated by the boundary problem and national security along the western frontier and the Llanos-Andes border, still has the opportunity to create a mixed farming system that would accommodate small and large, collective and private land holdings. The small farmer on his own land has in many instances shown himself to be the most efficient producer of food, and the least wasteful of soil, water, energy, and other resources. Technical assistance and machinery could be tailored to fit the needs of all farmers, instead of creating an agricultural pattern to fit the capabilities of the technology.

VII

Epilogue

IN ORDER TO REACH Barinas from Valencia in July, 1928, at the height of the rainy season, I went by car over the gravel road, the trans-Andean, via Barquisimeto, Valera, Timotes, to Apartaderos, a two and one-half-day trip. From there, I went by trail on a saddle mule for another two and one-half days along the Santo Domingo River, overnighing in Las Piedras and Barinitas, before reaching my goal. At that time, the *effective* incorporation of the Llanos-Andes border zone into the Venezuelan nation seemed centuries away. In July, 1982, the bus trip from Caracas to Barinas was made in nine hours.

Venezuela was in the very early stages of nation-building 55 years ago. The central government was strong, but industrialization was limited and the economy was heavily agrarian. Oil was the only important export. Many large areas within the official boundaries of the country, one of which was the Llanos-Andes border zone, were sparsely populated and economically unproductive in terms of national development. It was inconceivable then that the country was on the eve of an abrupt break with the past.

Several coactive factors are in large measure responsible for the rapid thrust westward of the pioneer zone along the Llanos-Andes border: highway construction has proceeded apace, public education and health services have been introduced, and large government credits and subsidies have been made available to farmers and ranchers with large holdings. Many colonists have been provided with titles to small land holdings of their own. There is daily, relatively cheap, two-way air service between Barinas and Caracas.

In half a century, this border zone has evolved from the stage in which man is practically helpless against natural forces to the stage where he has these forces largely under his control and is the ecological dominant.

A quotation from the writings of the late Professor Sauer is relevant:

Every human population, at all times, has needed to evaluate the economic potential of its inhabited area, to organize its life about its natural environment in terms of the skills available to it and the values which it accepted. In the cultural *mise en valeur* of the environment, a deformation of the pristine, or prehuman, landscape has been initiated that has increased with length of occupation, growth in population, and addition of skills. Wherever men live, they have operated to alter the aspect of the earth, both animate and inanimate, be it to their boon or bane.¹²

Venezuela has shown a great resilience and capacity to adapt, in achieving, in the two generations since the death of Gómez in 1935, a political system of populist democracy and an economic and social system based on cash income and merit rather than on land and family. National cohesion is further fostered by the growing feeling of nationalism and the hispanism (*bispanidad*) con-

tinuously nurtured by the public school system, the national newspapers, radio and television programs, and the teaching and investigations carried out by the universities and research institutes.

Whatever regime was in control, the bureaucracy and the power of Caracas were strengthened. Present day elected presidents speak from a position of increasing strength. The future of Barinas looks bright. My first impressions have had to be revised. The nation is at peace. It is in an extremely favorable economic position, with continued high prices for the oil coming from its vast reserves. Nationwide health measures have dramatically reduced the incidence of death from the so-called tropical diseases.

There remains the problem of producing the foodstuffs for a generally healthy population with a high rate of growth. There is land for frontier settlement. New technologies are being introduced in agriculture and animal husbandry as well as in mining and industry. Barinas is now an integral part of the "national upsurge in the development of arts and crafts, of science, and of higher education generally," that was a consummation fervently hoped for in the concluding sentence of my 1956 paper.

Notes

1. R. E. Crist, "Along the Llanos-Andes Border in Venezuela: Then and Now," *Geographical Review*. Vol. 46, No. 2, 1956, p. 200.
2. Maria Matilde Suarez, "Fincas Familiares en los Andes," *Cuadernos Lagoven*, Caracas, 1982, pp. 33–34. See also R. E. Crist, "Timotes, Venezuela," *Bulletin*, Pan American Union, Vol. 76, No. 6, 1942, pp. 301–10, for a description of the precarious existence of the small farmer at the upper limits of cultivation.
3. R. E. Crist, "Along the Llanos Andes Border in Zamora Venezuela," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July, 1932), p. 422.
4. Universidad Nacional Experimental de los Llanos Occidentales Ezequiel Zamora.
5. *Cátedra*, Barinas, Año III, No. 9 (April, 1982), p. 16.
6. 10th Population Census, *Censo de Población*, Republica de Venezuela Ministerio de Fomento, Dirección General de Estadística, Caracas, 1982, p. 5.
7. *El Universal*, February 2, 1982.
8. George W. Schuyler, "Hunger in a Land of Plenty," (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., Inc.); cf especially, "Land, Peasant, Agrarian Reform: 1980," pp. 151–92, for a perceptive analysis.
9. Robert C. Eidt, "Agrarian Reform and the Growth of New Rural Settlements in Venezuela," *Erkundé*, Band 29, Lfg. 2, Bonn, 1975, pp. 132–33.
10. *Cátedra*, Año 3, No. 9, Barinas, April, 1982.
11. D. L. Clawson and R. E. Crist, "Evolution of Land-Use Patterns and Agricultural Systems," *Mountain Research and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1982, p. 271.
12. From "The Agency of Man on the Earth," in "Selected Essays 1963–1975, Carl O. Sauer." (Berkeley, Calif.: Turtle Island Foundation, 1981), pp. 330–31.