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Chapter 1

The Right Hand of the Party

The Role of Peasants in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution

Aaron Kappeler

El cielo encapotado anuncia tempestad,	The overcast sky announces a tempest,
y el sol tras las nubes pierde su claridad	and the sun behind the clouds loses its clarity
¡Oligarcas, temblad! Viva la Libertad!	Tremble, Oligarchs! Long Live Freedom!
Marchemos, liberales en recia multitude	March, we liberals, in robust multitude
a romper las cadenas de vil esclavitud	to break the chains of vile slavery
¡Oligarcas, temblad! Viva la Libertad!	Tremble, Oligarchs! Long Live Freedom!
La espada redentora del general Falcón	The redemptive sword of General Falcón
confunde al enemigo de la revolución	confounds the enemies of the revolution
¡Oligarcas, temblad! Viva la Libertad!	Tremble, Oligarchs! Long Live Freedom!
Las tropas de Zamora al toque del clarín	The troops of Zamora at the sound of the bugle
derrotan las brigadas del godo malandrín	defeat the brigades of the wicked conservatives
¡Oligarcas, temblad! Viva la Libertad!	Tremble, Oligarchs! Long Live Freedom!
Aviva las candelas el viento barines	Stoke the candles, wind of Barinas
el sol de la victoria alumbra en Santa Inés	The sun of victory shines in Santa Inés

——“El Himno de la Federación,” song of peasant rebels in nineteenth-century Venezuela

Over the past two decades, the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela has garnered the attention of a variety of scholars for its challenge to the neoliberal Washington Consensus and its inspiration of popular movements across Latin America. Studies of the Bolivarian Revolution have focused on the social missions of the current government and its use of the revenue of the state oil company to support mass urban constituencies (Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Fernandes 2010; Schiller 2018; Valencia 2015; Velasco 2015). Yet, far less attention has been paid to agriculture and rural areas. In this chapter, I contribute to a growing body of literature that recognizes the centrality of agrarian reform to the Bolivarian Revolution and its patterns of mass mobilization (e.g., Enriquez 2013; Enriquez and Newman 2015; Lavelle 2013; McKay et al. 2015; Page 2012).

Drawing on the writings of Eric Wolf and his contention that peasants are "transmitters of urban unrest" (1969: 292), I argue that although peasants represent a tiny portion of the total population in Venezuela, they nevertheless exercise disproportionate political influence and that the support of campesino organizations has been crucial to the hegemony of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in many areas. Largely conceived in urban terms, the ranchos or slums of the major cities have been celebrated as the mass base of the Bolivarian Revolution. However, in electoral terms, the rural areas have been the strongest bases of support for the ruling party, and popular mobilization has straddled the urban-rural divide. Thus, I argue mass politics in Venezuela is better understood in terms of an urban-rural continuum in which struggles at one pole can ignite or galvanize struggles at the opposite pole.

Based on fieldwork in the state of Barinas, an epicenter of agrarian reform and the campesino movement, I present a case of agrarian rebellion in which members of the Frente Nacional Campesino Ezequiel Zamora (Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front) invaded a state-run, agro-industrial farm in 2014 and laid claim to portions of its uncultivated lands. Showing how this struggle was embedded in the wider fields of urban capitalist and state power, I provide an analysis based on what Wolf calls a "micro-sociology" to illustrate how a particular stratum of the peasantry was instrumental in facilitating the invasion and in turn, how this stratum enlisted the support of key urban allies. Exposing critical tensions in the Bolivarian Revolution, I argue that although "the transcendental ideological issues only appear in very prosaic guise" in this context (Wolf 1969: xi), the invasion and its subsequent resolution still reflect divergent visions of social justice and contradictions in the multiclass alliance on which the revolution is based. In the analysis, I show how the leaders of campesino organizations and state agencies pressed their respective claims and how the two sides eventually arrived at a negotiated settlement that preserved a shared field of force. Ultimately, I conclude the invasion and its resolution reflect not only divergences between the ruling party and the peasantry but also cracks in the state system, which can afford insights into the future trajectory of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The Roots of Rebellion

Commenting on the case of Mexico in the early twentieth century, Eric Wolf (1969) argued the tensions that led to the largely agrarian revolution had their origins in the colonial period and conflicts that long preceded the rule of the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Suggesting the War of Independence had failed to resolve the question of land inequality and that tenure patterns had not changed radically from Spanish to home rule, Wolf argued the seeds of the conflict were sown with the introduction of new capitalist imperatives accompanying the growth of commercial agriculture. Simultaneously dependent on the labor and desiring the land of neighboring peasant communities, large-scale commercial enterprises introduced a set of irreconcilable tensions that would eventually erupt in armed violence when elite struggles at the political center opened up a vacuum of sovereignty (see also Joseph and Nugent 1995). Likewise, the origins of rural unrest in Venezuela in the late twentieth century can be traced back to the War of Independence and the failure of the liberal revolution to erase deeply entrenched inequalities.

Led by a class of merchants and landowners whose trade with other Latin American colonies was more lucrative than the trade with Spain, the principal aim of the revolution was to create a political system based on limited suffrage that would allow for unfettered commercial relations and give creole elites a free hand to run society. A prerequisite for this type of polity was the conversion of land encumbered by social obligations and aristocratic privileges into a commodity that could be traded on the market. Along with the erasure of the power of colonial officials, the bulk of whom were drawn from peninsular elites, this process was the basis for a transition to a sovereign national state that treated property in land as the basis of citizenship. Yet the eradication of the encomienda system[1] and the transfer of power to creole elites did not mean a radical redistribution of land for the average person. Except in the case of indigenous communities, which enjoyed collective tenure rights under the Spanish crown and saw these rights abolished after the war, the introduction of private property did little to alter the extreme concentration of land or the territory's highly exploitative labor relations.

During the War of Independence, Simón Bolivar promised to abolish slavery and the debts of peons as a way to build support. But the social character of the revolution he led was highly restricted, and his successors largely replaced their Spanish enemies in the existing structural positions in society (see Wolf and Hansen 1967). The classic *latifundio-minifundio* pattern, which has typified landholding in Venezuela for most of its modern history, has its origins in the efforts of Bolivar's lieutenants to enrich themselves and confine other claimants to small plots at the edges of great estates. In some cases, the new ruling elites in Venezuela were the literal descendants of the old mercantile families of Caracas and Maracaibo, while others were military chieftains who had risen to power as a result of the war, most famously in the case of President José Antonio Páez. Irrespective of whether their status was inherited or acquired, the virtual monopoly of land held by these actors was a major source of rural discontent.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the situation in the Venezuelan countryside could be described as one of extreme social disparity in which a tiny European-descended elite—derogatorily referred to as *godos*[2]—lived off the rent and labor of the mestizo majority who survived as tenants or laborers on *latifundia* or freeholders scraping a bare existence from low quality soils. Yet, with the rise of new markets, the size and character of the Venezuelan middle classes began to change, and as they changed, so did their attitudes toward property and the postcolonial state. Before, the major source of income for mercantile elites had been the export of agricultural goods, for which reason they had little problem with an open trade policy.

However, by the mid-nineteenth century, sectors of the middle class had become involved in petty crafts and domestic manufactures that increasingly brought them into conflict with the monopolistic pattern of ownership and free trade. Seeking to meet growing demand in internal markets, and in some cases employing wage labor, these actors sought to limit commercial competition from foreign sources and to protect nascent industry. Politically, the new middle classes supported a federal system that would give greater autonomy to individual states and reduce the power of the central government in the hands of older bourgeois and aristocratic elements—a contradiction that eventually crystallized in the Liberal and Conservative parties.

Closely paralleling the US Civil War, both in terms of its period and proximate causes, the Federal War in Venezuela (1859–1863) was an internecine conflict that saw the destruction of much of the nation's agriculture and the deaths of more than 150,000 people. Following a struggle for succession in the wake of the disputed election of 1858, the Liberal Party took up arms against the ruling conservatives and fought to establish itself as the legitimate government. Flocking to the ranks of the Liberal Party in the belief that they would challenge entrenched political power and carry out popular reforms, peasants and rural subalterns formed the backbone of the insurgent armies, radicalizing the conflict.

During the war, Liberal Party forces abolished slavery and tenant debts in areas under their control and redistributed land captured from conservative elites. The war ended in a stalemate, however, and the radical measures enacted during the course of the conflict were reversed in the compromise reached at the Treaty of Coche in 1863 (Figueroa 1975). This reversal and the destruction of haciendas in the plains states of Barinas, Apure, Portuguesa, Guárico, and Cojedes, meant former slaves and tenants often had no alternative but to seek new livelihoods on the western frontier (see Roseberry 1985; Yarrington 1997). But the history of this proto-agrarian reform and the slogans of its leaders would play a central role in twentieth-century agrarian politics, and this stillborn revolution would inspire other activists to try to settle the issue of citizenship through land reform.

"Free Land and Men"

From a family of petty merchants and traders, the liberal leader Ezequiel Zamora is likely the most celebrated figure of the Federal War, and his legacy remains a touchstone for radical politics in Venezuela in the twenty-first century. Embodying the burgeoning middle classes and their hostility to the conservative oligarchy, Zamora's family was part of the European-descended yeomanry that derived the bulk of its income from agriculture and small-scale commerce. Chiefly remembered for his brilliance as a military strategist, Zamora was also known as an opponent of slavery and an advocate of agrarian reform.[3]

Referred to as *catire* because of his light hair and skin color, Zamora was a figure who might otherwise have fit-in well with the former supporters of the colonial regime who returned to Venezuela after the War of Independence to reclaim their land and assets. However, Zamora chose instead to rally disenfranchised Venezuelans and organized a diverse coalition of Afro-descended slaves and mestizo peasants, who stood to benefit from the breakup of large estates, as well as urban craftspeople and traders in competition with larger commercial monopolies. Advancing a Lockean ideology that declared, “All property that is not the product of work is theft,” Zamora exemplified a native radicalism, which combined belief in natural equality with redistribution of social wealth and popular election of all officials.[4] Campaigning under the slogans “Tierra y Hombres Libres” and “Horror a la Oligarquía,” Zamora held that the civic virtue of the nation could be justly promoted only with the labor of its majority and that average Venezuelans were systematically denied the means of self-improvement.

Raising a popular army and marching across the country, sacking haciendas and redistributing land to Liberal Party supporters along the way, Zamora and his followers sought to break the back of the conservatives and to reorganize the territory. In addition to reorganizing the governments of several states, Zamora was the architect of the military victory at the Battle of Santa Inés, in which liberal forces defeated a larger conservative army in the state of Barinas. Despite his skills as a tactician and having earned the titles “Valiant Citizen” and “General of the Sovereign People,” liberal armies could not ultimately overcome the conservatives, and Zamora was killed—allegedly by a stray bullet—at the Battle of San Carlos in 1860. To this day, speculation suggests Zamora had become an obstacle to the agenda of other liberal leaders and that members of his own party were responsible for his murder. Evidence for this theory is scant, but what is certain is that following his death, Zamora's brother-in-law Juan Crisóstomo Falcón became the president of Venezuela, and the Liberal Party gradually adopted a political-economic program that was virtually indistinguishable from that of the conservatives.

With their faith in positivism and science, the liberal elites of late nineteenth-century Venezuela treated the peasantry as the target, rather than the beneficiary, of their civilizing mission. Embracing an economic model predicated on export of agricultural products, liberal elites sought to transform Venezuela into a modern nation-state through trade and adoption of European cultural norms. Under the rule of Antonio Guzmán Blanco—the true victor of the Federal War, and Zamora's reputed assassin—Venezuela's economy shifted to coffee exports and a policy based on the idea that exchange on global markets would transform backward peasants into modern farmers. Yet downturns in global coffee prices and the ensuing instability eventually led to his overthrow and a period of violence that ended in the rule of another liberal dictator, Juan Vicente Gómez.

<Insert Figure 1.1>
Figure 1.1 – Statue of 'The General of the Sovereign People' in Plaza Zamora, Barinas, Venezuela

Peasants, Petroleum, and Populism

For much of the twentieth century, discourses of modernization predicted the inevitable decline of the Venezuelan peasantry with the rise of the petrostate and rapid urbanization. The exploitation of petroleum would set the stage for an epochal transition that would free the nation from its dependency on agriculture and pave the way for the disappearance of its "backward" rural subjects (Coronil 1997; Ewell 1984). Yet the exploitation of oil did not lessen the dependence of the nation on its lands or ensure the decline of the peasantry. In the early twentieth century, Venezuela was a society starkly divided between the urban coastal centers and the rural interior. Some parts of the interior were effectively linked to global markets through commodity trade, while other parts of the territory existed largely as they had in previous generations, that is, governed by patrimonial relations in which monopoly in access to land created social power and an ability to exploit labor (Wolf 1957). However, linkages to foreign markets could suddenly be severed by price fluctuations and peasant relations with the state were similarly sporadic.

Instead of a system of sovereign institutions exercising control over territory, as in the Weberian ideal, in Venezuela rule was based on regional strongmen linked through patronage networks. This system, balancing the interests of competing power blocs, held the demands of rural subalterns and rival claimants in check and prevented serious change. The death of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935 and the growth of the petroleum sector, however, destabilized this delicate balance of power, leading to a political transition. In 1944, the nominally socialist party Acción Democrática (AD) came to power, beginning a three-year period of reform known as El Trienio Adeco. This government under the leadership of Romulo Gallegos sought to break up *latifundia* and transfer land to the peasantry to create agrarian cooperatives. Raising the ire of conservative elites, the AD government was overthrown in a military coup and a dictatorship that lasted more than a decade was installed.

Perhaps wary of the previous experience with military intervention, AD, when it returned to power in 1958, pursued an agrarian policy that was considerably more conservative, and "colonization" was offered as the solution to the agrarian question. As the owner of the petroleum industry, the Venezuelan state was the largest landowner in the country and therefore able to distribute land resources to marginalized segments of the population. By adopting this strategy, Venezuelan leaders could avoid conflict with *latifundistas* and improve conditions for the average peasant. In step with the strictures of the Alliance for Progress and Cold War anti-communism, colonization was a way to exploit underutilized land resources (Erasmus 1967; Powell 1971). Still, land settlements were often far from social services, and their remote locations combined with a lack of basic infrastructure made it difficult for new landowners to access urban and regional markets.

In his analysis of twentieth-century agrarian rebellions, Wolf (1969) provides several examples or cases where the imposition of the colonial order displaced the traditional tenure rights of peasants and patron-client relations with landlords, who, although they may have exacted rent or tribute from peasants, nevertheless served a key social insurance function in times of bad weather and poor harvests. The landed gentry or aristocracy could be relied on to lend money to the peasant or cultivator in difficult periods and thereby guarantee survival (cf. Scott 1976). In Venezuela, however, it was not the imposition of the colonial order but rather its displacement that led to agrarian rebellions. In Venezuela, there were few places where the dissolution of patron-client relations could suffice to explain a pattern of agrarian upheaval or rebelliousness, and in those locations where such relations existed, there appears to have been less resistance. As William Roseberry (1989) notes of the Andean region, the history of the peasantry there was shallow, with most of the population arriving in the late nineteenth century. Surplus takers in the region (most of whom were merchants) never provided subsistence guarantees, and access to land was not based on social obligations (Roseberry 1985). Despite the absence of key features of “the moral economy,” the Andes were still a center of agrarian upheaval (Kappeler 2019). However, in the llanos, or plains, the situation was somewhat different.

Peasants had previously been given usufruct rights in exchange for labor on haciendas. Even the slave had been afforded access to a *conuco*, or subsistence plot. But the expansion of commercial agriculture under the impetus of domestic and foreign markets, combined with the requirement to pay taxes in cash as a condition of citizenship, meant the postcolonial regime actually increased pressure on peasants, who were no longer guaranteed access to land. Even peasants that managed to acquire private property and had little access to markets often saw those lands taken over by rapacious speculators and *latifundistas*. The response to this dislocation, manifest in the Federal War, was predictably violent. Yet it was not the colonial order that brought the forces of capitalism into the rural scene in Venezuela, but rather its dissolution, and it would be the subsequent introduction of a specific form of capitalism in the twentieth century that spurred further rebelliousness among peasants.

Whereas the primary threat to dictators in the early twentieth century had been unrest among the peasantry, these actors were to a certain extent displaced with the growing power of organized labor in the petroleum sector—actors with whom peasants actively collaborated under the leadership of AD. The peasant leagues' relationship with the ruling party generally served to lessen the militancy of these organizations and integrate leaders into the existing power structure (Powell 1971). Most of the land redistribution, not surprisingly, was to key leaders of the campesino movement, forcing less influential members to turn to non-state organizations to address their grievances.

In the aftermath of the transition from the military dictatorship to democracy, deep conflicts within the ranks of AD over the future of "the Revolution" spurred leaders of the party youth league to join in armed struggle with members of the now proscribed Communist Party. Echoing an earlier generation of agrarian rebels with their call for "land to tiller," the guerillas of the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional or FALN sought to mimic the Cuban Revolution and take state power by encircling the cities. The critical flaw in this strategy was the changing status of the imagined agent of social change—the land-poor peasant—and a superficial analogy between the Venezuelan and Cuban situations. Unlike in Cuba, with its mass of proletarian cane cutters and land-hungry campesinos, in Venezuela it was chiefly market prices for commodities, rather than the failure to obtain subsistence from land, that was the basis of the woes of the middle peasant.

The segment of the peasantry that best corresponded to Wolf's typology of peasant militancy and served as the backbone of the insurgency was the Andean peasantry, but the guerillas had difficulty spreading outside of their mountain redoubts. Internally divided and undermined by official agrarian reform efforts, the guerillas soon discovered they did not have a strong social base outside the Andes and that the Venezuelan military had them surrounded. During the course of the insurgency, guerillas succeeded in spreading to the lowland areas of Barinas, and these areas would become the last holdouts to a government-led "pacification process" in the 1970s, which promised amnesty in exchange for laying down arms (see Ellner 1988). The inability of the Left to capitalize on discontent, however, was rooted in changes that long preceded the armed struggle and likely ensured the insurgency was defeated before it even began.

As in other parts of Latin America, the expansion of commercial ranching and agriculture pushed peasants in the plains onto smaller and smaller parcels of land that were insufficient for subsistence needs and that could not support expanding households. But this pressure was concomitant with the rise of the petroleum industry and a petrostate whose revenue could support a surplus labor population. In the mid-twentieth century, Venezuela experienced a mass exodus from the countryside under the twin pressures of declining prices for agricultural exports and a rising petroleum economy that drew rural people away from their traditional livelihoods. Rural migrants living in the hills were integrated into the urban fabric, giving rise to the massive slums that now encircle the major cities, but they retained a great degree of social distance from the urbanites they served. Indeed, the name "ranchos" to describe these areas indexes the residents' rural origins. The reduction in the size of the *campesinado* with the rise of the petrostate and populist redistribution policies of the 1970s signaled the end of an era and a decisive break—at least demographically—with the past.

Emphasizing the distinction between peasants who are embedded in urban networks and those whose livelihoods remain largely subordinated to nonmarket, subsistence imperatives in the countryside, Wolf argued that threats to the reproduction of the peasant household were central to grasping cycles of protest and rebellion and that the disruptive features of commercial capitalism vis-à-vis such livelihoods were the key to understanding the dynamics of peasant revolt. Wolf argued the rural scene did not easily, of its own accord, generate the types of compulsive market relations and disruptive social forces that led to nationwide agrarian rebellions, and hence, it was capitalism, the state, and urban power that should be seen as the key forces encouraging peasant militancy. In Venezuela, a particular form of resource extraction-based capitalism led to social dislocation, unrest, and a long history of agrarian struggles that regularly call forth images of the past as their ideological fulcrum.

The nationalization of the oil industry in 1976 set the stage for a shift in Venezuela's terms of trade with other nations and an elevation of the status of the nation in the global system. Yet the nationalization of petroleum did not put an end to struggles over land or the distribution of wealth from it. In the 1980s, Venezuela underwent a severe social-economic crisis as declining oil prices and profligate spending on consumption contributed to an unsustainable debt structure. Chronic budgetary shortfalls and a lack of capital for reinvestment led successive Venezuelan governments to adopt neoliberal policies that included the abolition of credits and subsidies for small producers, as well as a halt to land redistribution. In the wake of the petro-boom and reregulation of global markets, the end of official state support for peasant agriculture resulted in a decline in political influence and the rise of new radical agrarian movements (for a general history, see Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010).

The Right Hand of the Party

In 1998, the Movement for a Fifth Republic came to power in Venezuela after a long period of political and economic instability. Arguably starting with the Caracazo riots in 1989 sparked by austerity measures and a severe decline in oil prices, the populist movement was initiated by a young military officer named Hugo Chávez. The Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200, as it was known,[5] sought to take power in a civilian-military coup in 1992. The coup was defeated, and its leaders were imprisoned. But Chávez claimed he was able to use his time in prison to study the history of Venezuela and develop his “Bolivarian ideology,” known as “the tree of three roots.” Seeking to return to the original founding principles of the nation, the ideology drew on the writings and biographies of three Venezuelan leaders: the liberator Simón Bolivar, his teacher Simón Rodríguez, and the lesser-known Ezequiel Zamora. Having studied the life of Zamora and been entranced as a boy by the stories of Zamora’s military campaigns in his local environs in Barinas, Chávez effectively translated the philosophy of Zamora—already a touchstone for Venezuelan radicalism—into the language of “socialism.” One of the major constituencies he sought to court with this ideology was the rural poor and the campesino movement.

In 2000, a group of activists in the western plains founded the Frente Nacional Campesino Ezequiel Zamora. Like many other social movements in Venezuela, the organization sought to take advantage of the political space opened up by the populist leadership to press its claims for land rights. The Front had a special relationship with the ruling party based on cautious, conditional support in exchange for efforts to redress longstanding social grievances. The slogans of the organization harkened back to the agrarian rebels of the nineteenth century and used the image of Zamora, implicitly linking the government's official reform agenda with their own demands.

As Wolf argues, "Peasants may join a national movement in order to settle scores which are age old in their village or region" (1969: xi). Few such scores can be settled, however, without the support of other social groups. The persistence of stark agrarian inequality in Venezuela suggests that unless something fundamental in the balance of power shifted, peasants would be unable to mount a direct challenge to rural elites. As Wolf argues further, "A rebellion cannot start from a situation of complete impotence . . . the decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relation of the peasantry to the field of power which surrounds it" (290). Peasants in Barinas lacked the leverage to challenge the authority of landed property. For this challenge to take place, their organizations had to be embedded in fields of power that threatened the legitimacy of these elites. The peasant organization found precisely this leverage in the PSUV.

For its part, the ruling party cultivated ties with agrarian social movements based on its need to win an electoral majority and to demonstrate the strength of its popular appeal. In some cases, these organizations have provided much-needed muscle and even institutional capacity in rural areas where the state bureaucracy is often weak. Mobilizing its followers for the ruling party in elections, the Front has provided much of the bureaucratic support on the ground and for the party. In some areas, the memberships of the PSUV and the Front overlap almost entirely. Using forms of direct action and popular mobilization, including occupation of government offices and legal channels to press claims, the Front has served to radicalize the political process "from below," on occasion, pushing it beyond the limits set by "the revolutionary leadership."

When I arrived in Barinas in 2007, the Bolivarian government of Venezuela was busy building a national coalition for social transformation and a program referred to as "endogenous development." Although officially "socialist," the ruling party was drawing support from diverse quarters and using a populist language that divided the Venezuelan population into those who were concerned with "the greater national interest" and those who supported the interests of narrow cliques. "The revolution," as they called it, was enfranchising groups that had long been ignored and received little attention from the state, including the peasantry and landless people.

Driving outside the state capital along the José Antonio Páez Highway, which ran from east to west, one could see numerous squatter settlements and land occupations in the peri-urban region. These settlements of poorly constructed houses—referred to as ranchos like their semi-regularized, urban counterparts—displayed the red flags of the PSUV and the yellow flags of the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front emblazoned with the slogan "Tierras y Hombres Libres."[6] The two organizations were recruiting in the same areas, and indeed, there seemed to be no immediate contradiction in membership in both organizations.

One such settlement also held a banner calling on the governor of the state, the brother of President Hugo Chávez, to recognize the legitimacy of their occupation and give them land titles.[7] Of course, the practice of invading and occupying land to obtain title was not confined to the peri-urban region but extended well into the countryside. A subdivision of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Instituto Nacional de Tierras (National Institute of Lands—INTI), was tasked with regularizing land tenancy and adjudicating disputes in the state in accordance with the Land and Agrarian Development Law of 2001. According to that law, any land unit that did not produce at least 80 percent of the national average for the crop(s) under cultivation was subject to seizure. One of the largest land allotments in the state of Barinas fell under the provisions of the law and was the subject of considerable contestation as a result.

A few miles from the hometown of Chávez, the estate known as La Marqueseña had been fought over during the War for Independence, and the armies of Zamora had marched through the estate during the Federal War. In the twenty-first century, the farm was the prize in a contest fought between peasants, *latifundistas*, and the Venezuelan state. Expropriated in 2005 as part of a wave of nationalizations in the interior, the farm was transformed into a state-run, agro-industrial enterprise known as the Centro Técnico Productivo Socialista Florentino. The enterprise was designed to bolster domestic food production and use technical and industrial means to increase yields. It had a large stable workforce of several hundred who were also tasked with providing aid and support to small cultivators in the region. In fact, a portion of the acreage expropriated from the original estate was allocated to a *fondo zamorano*—one of the official agrarian cooperatives started as part of a Ministry of Agriculture program to provide land to the rural poor. But the arrangement between the enterprise and its neighbors was not as efficient and friction-free as the official rhetoric suggested.

<Insert Figure 1.2>

Figure 1.2 –Infrastructure for the Fondo Zamorano near the Florentino enterprise

State enterprises were portrayed in government media as highly efficient and productive units that were a major advance over small-scale peasant agriculture, and employees tended to carry themselves with a degree of superiority. Nevertheless, when oil prices started dropping in 2012, it became clear these enterprises were dependent on the petrodollars of the state and that their sophisticated production systems could not operate in conditions of sudden austerity. Venezuela did not fabricate parts for the tractors and mechanical harvesters that the enterprise relied on to cultivate its extensive acreage, and those parts could not be imported without foreign currency reserves. Likewise, the salaries of technical experts were paid with revenue from the state oil company and at a certain point—with my informants spending most of their days in the office reading, watching television, or, in the case of manual laborers, gambling—it became clear the continued operation of such units was as much an exercise in buying consent and staving off instability as anything having to do with production. Indeed, the straggly rows of corn planted by hand by enterprise employees in fallow fields showed that peasant-style agriculture still remained viable in some senses, despite the high modern pretensions of enterprise leaders.

In 2014, one of my key informants, José, a sociologist working in Florentino, told me campesinos had invaded the enterprise and laid claim to five hundred hectares of its uncultivated land. The invaders were receiving the support of the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front, and José explained this was a particularly tense situation, since the Front was "the right hand of the United Socialist Party in Barinas" and elected leaders relied on the Zamora Front for popular support. Moreover, the struggle also effectively set sectors of the state against one another and forced them into conflict with longstanding allies. The lawyer for the Front had previously worked for the INTI, which many employees of Florentino regarded as a betrayal. From the standpoint of these employees, the lawyer seemed to have conflicting agendas and was now using his insider knowledge of the land reform process to subvert official policy. José and a few other employees were more circumspect about the situation, defending the lawyer by saying he "wanted to help campesinos who deserved land" and that while they could not agree with the invasion, they ultimately believed an alternative solution should be sought. In fact, the invasion was hardly surprising, as the actors and their motivations were already well known.

During the course of my fieldwork from 2007 to 2016, a variety of campesino groups had tested the enterprise, and in many ways, this invasion was simply the culmination of a long period of tension. Members of the neighboring *fondo zamorano* were long criticized by Florentino employees for their lack of productivity and alleged misconduct vis-à-vis the enterprise. Alleged infractions included ignoring the boundaries between the enterprise and the cooperative, theft of enterprise crops at night, grazing cattle on Florentino lands, and mixing herds in an effort to steal animals. Residents of the nearby *poblados* created during the first agrarian reform in the 1960s were also involved in the friction and they joined with the *zamoranos* and the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front in making claims on Florentino lands. The invasion was staged from neighboring *poblados* with the plots of land and houses owned by members of the organization serving as bases of operation. In a pattern familiar throughout Latin America, the invaders entered the farm and constructed temporary ranchos on the land to substantiate their claims to the acreage. Yet, crucially, the invaders did not begin to sow crops or prepare the lands for cultivation, suggesting to some that their true objectives lay elsewhere.

Although describing themselves as campesinos "fighting for land" (*peleando por la tierra*), the composition of the group was heterogeneous and included several recently returned urbanites. The ranks of the invaders also included family members of Florentino workers, such as the brother of a close friend of mine, and it was suggested in a highly contentious enterprise meeting that some Florentino workers had actively helped the invaders. But the ironies of the occupation extended far beyond the biographies of the individuals involved. Perhaps the greatest irony of the invasion was that the very provision of the Land and Agrarian Development Law that had allowed the Bolivarian government to take over La Marqueseña and build the enterprise was now being used to classify Florentino as "underproductive" and hence eligible for redistribution.

The invasion led to a drawn-out legal process that strained the alliance between the Ezequiel Zamora Front and the PSUV. The Florentino enterprise had been created in part to benefit small and medium-sized producers by way of the technical inputs and assistance it provided, as well as commercialization contracts that could serve as an outlet for peasant harvests. In exchange for electoral support and recognition of the legitimacy of the ruling party, Zamora's members received aid and support. But with the invasion, the implicit terms of this contract had been violated. Yet, whereas peasant activists involved in land invasion in other parts of the state and country were the victims of kidnapping and paid assassination (*sicariato*) and thus forced to live in conditions of semi-clandestinity, the response of the National Guard under the direction of the ruling party in Barinas was measured and the invaders were evicted without serious incident.

Ultimately, in early 2016, the INTI concluded Florentino lands were not eligible for transfer under the terms of the Land and Agrarian Development law and that the occupiers would not be granted property or use titles. But the invasion of the lands and the potential threat of a repetition of the incident were sufficient for the INTI to seek an alternative solution, and lands in another location were awarded to the invaders instead. Although some writers argue the Bolivarian government has had success in reestablishing smallholder agriculture (e.g., Enriquez and Newman 2015; Page 2012), the peasantry remains an ever-declining portion of the

Venezuelan population whose independent influence is largely subsumed by urban social groups. The peasantry appears most effective when it is organized to take advantage of ties with urban actors and the state bureaucracy. The *campesinado* in Venezuela lacks sufficient strength to make itself sovereign over the land, as in the case of the twentieth-century's actual "peasant wars." Instead, peasant organizations have fought "a war of position" in which the political-bureaucratic apparatus, media, and lawyers have proved most effective in gaining recognition of their claims.[8]

The condition of possibility for this type of politics was a populist government that needed the peasantry as an ally in its fight with rentier elites invested in a dependent model of development based on resource extraction and the recycling of surpluses from an import/export complex. For this reason, despite the reversal of several land occupations in the state of Barinas, José's remark that the Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front was "the right hand of the party" was deeply true. The PSUV continued to have to negotiate with the Front, and state bureaucrats preferred to settle the conflict with a transfer of other lands to the occupiers, rather than simply evict them and risk the loss of support and a perception that they were as "anti-peasant" as *latifundistas*.

Engrams of the Past

It is difficult to know how to better describe the influence of the nineteenth-century agrarian rebel Ezequiel Zamora on twenty-first-century Venezuelan politics than Wolf (1969: 276) does when he argues the origins of the twentieth century's peasant wars lay in "a concrete historical experience which lives on in the present and continues to determine its shape and meaning." Both the Venezuelan government and campesino movement mobilized the image of Zamora, a symbol that was “only latent in the cultural memory” and able to trigger “the engrams of events not easily erased.” With the Caracazo riots of 1989 and a series of coups in the wake of neoliberal austerity in the 1990s, the Venezuelan people were witness to a “greater event” that allowed popular memory of the Federal War to be resurrected.

In a classic example of anamnesis, this image of past struggles called forth in the present to make claims on the future was based on an historical gaze that was *both* forward and backward looking. Yet, whereas Wolf argued the peasant wars of the twentieth century were the result of “the diffusion of a particular cultural system, North Atlantic capitalism,” to areas where its distinctive logics had not yet fully penetrated, this revolt was no longer driven by a system that was “alien to the areas . . . engulfed in its spread” (1969: 276). Instead, this “revolt” was the product of the historical development of that system and dynamics internal to it.

The “backwardness” of the Venezuelan countryside in relation to its hyper-urban coastal regions was not a product of “lost time” but rather a result of the uneven expansion of capital. The pattern of landholding in Barinas was as much a product of the logic of rentier accumulation in the oil sector as local agriculture (Gómez 2000). This unbalanced regional growth linked to the petrostate was tied to a pattern of capital circulation and recycling of surpluses that led to a loss of competitiveness and the withering of agriculture in the face of a price structure that supported foreign imports (Purchell 2017). Although the mass of poor people living in the slums carried “the stigmata of trauma and strife” from the transition to urban life and capitalism (Wolf 1969: 276), it was neither the dislocation nor alienation associated with the sale of labor power that was the basis of agrarian militancy in Barinas, but rather the weakness of the commodity fiction, or the idea that labor was a good for sale on a market (cf. Polanyi 1944).

The invasion of the Florentino enterprise was driven not by the fact that labor was a commodity or that it might be transformed into one but rather by the fact that it was a commodity that could not be fully absorbed by the market or purchased at a reasonable rate. The rebels that invaded Florentino were a mix of urban semi-proletarians and peasant smallholders from nearby communities bound together by ties of kinship and neighborhood, and it was these enduring ties, as well as the ability of precarious urbanites to retreat to rural areas in times of high unemployment, that transferred urban social pressures back to the rural community and made the Florentino enterprise a target for the reconciliation of these contradictions.

Unlike the peasant wars of the twentieth century, the invasion was not a defensive rebellion against the encroachment of commercial plantations onto the lands of local communities (e.g., Smith 1989; Striffler 2002) (unless one wanted to think of the state enterprise as a "red hacienda" and its construction as the perpetuation of an age-old pattern of usurpation—a narrative I never heard from activists in Barinas). Instead, it was an offensive action designed to seize hold of a resource—land—that held a special value for the rural poor, who could use it not only for subsistence but also to attract state credit, tapping flows of oil wealth controlled by political elites. Urged on by an organization with the legal expertise and wherewithal for a prolonged struggle, the activists in Barinas were able to take advantage of a unique historical conjuncture that made such an invasion and its resolution possible. The invaders sought forms of protection that would grant them shelter from the untrammeled operation of the market principle—and the shelter happened to be the protection of the state and the ruling party. In the colonial contexts Wolf studied, access to land was based on social obligation. In twenty-first-century Venezuela, land was already largely unencumbered from such ties, and ironically, it was liberal revolutionaries like Bolivar and Zamora who had set this process in motion.

In the *llanos*, land did not belong to a closed corporate community (cf. Wolf 1957).

Indeed, efforts to form such agrarian collectives were just as likely to be the work of the Venezuelan state as the work of peasants (see Enriquez and Newman 2015; Larrabure 2010; Page 2012). The local *patrón*, or "big man," continued to exercise his traditional authority in some areas—as in the case of employees who helped Carlos Azpúrua, the owner of La Marqueseña, defend his estate from the Guardia Nacional when the Ministry of Agriculture sought to expropriate it. However, the social insurance function provided by landed elites in other contexts was more easily provided by the Venezuelan petrostate, and rural subalterns found it more useful to forge alliances with a populist government that was at least partially receptive to their demands. Yet the instincts of this modernizing government also ran counter to the aims of the occupiers, and thus, a sector of the state came into conflict with "the right hand of the party."

Given their lack of credit, technical inputs, and adequate labor power, the occupiers had no serious chance of producing meaningful surpluses with the land once they held it, but they were willing to risk invasion and to barter political support for aid, which they eventually received.[9] The productivist aims of the Bolivarian government were not likely to be met by either the invaders or the capital it had invested in Florentino in its defunct state; all the same, officials wanted to evict the occupiers and, if possible, encourage them to join cultivation schemes directed by the Ministry of Agriculture (Kappeler 2015). In a time of low oil prices, however, these productive objectives seemed as remote for the Florentino enterprise as the idea that peasants would ever be allowed to possess its lands. In spite of the tensions, the leaders of the ruling party responded in a fashion that was designed to secure political consent from a key ally and to prevent a wholesale break with the campesino movement—deferring the underlying contradiction for a later date.

Conclusion

Shifting from a mostly rural to a mostly urban continent, the demographics of Latin America have changed dramatically since the mid-twentieth century, when Wolf was writing. The social weight of the peasantry, as he termed it, has fallen equally dramatically, and with it, the leverage exercised over the wider social formation. In the 1960s and 1970s, radical agrarian movements convulsed the region, and guerilla insurgents succeeded in threatening the stability of states and capitalist elites, even in majority-urban societies like Venezuela. Yet today the peasantry is overshadowed by the sheer size and scale of the urban social forces and their disruptive power—a power openly displayed in the Caracazo riots in Venezuela in 1989 and the defeat of the coup against the Chávez government in 2002. But this set of facts does not mean peasants have lost all influence. Apart from their role in assembling an electoral majority—a key part of the strategy of the legal Left in post–Cold War Latin America—peasants in Venezuela were now part of a larger urban-rural continuum in which the stark divide between countryside and city in terms of standards of living endured, but in which the reality of labor mobility and exchange between the spheres, meant the two were more politically connected than ever.

Peasants in Venezuela could no longer be said to inhabit "parochial worlds," and while most peasants did not "send their sons and daughters to the factory" (Wolf 1969: xi), they often did send them to the street vendors, taxi stands, restaurants, and homes of the urban rich to earn a wage that was remitted to their home communities. When such sources of extra-rural, non-farm income became destabilized, however (and in cases where this situation was exacerbated by a reduction of state income grants and subsidies), itinerant laborers often returned home to join their family members and neighbors in making claims on land—claims that were as much about tapping flows of resource rent and state largesse whose ultimate source was oil as cultivating the land. The sturdy "middle peasant" who survives by mobilizing the labor of kin and neighbors and negotiating the market is no longer a key part of the Venezuelan population after the demographic shifts of the mid-twentieth century. But the political-economic dynamics that enforced the decline of the middle peasantry are still capable of arousing social protest from this stratum and its allies. The fact that the land-sea change from country to city occurred earlier in Venezuela than in the rest of Latin America did not prevent the Left from adopting the guerilla strategy, but it did make it difficult for armed organizations to capture state power by encircling the cities from the countryside.

Unlike the mostly rural societies that experienced peasant wars after the Mexican and Cuban Revolutions, including Nicaragua, Guatemala, Peru, and El Salvador, "the sea of peasants" in which guerillas were supposed to "swim" was already drying up in Venezuela. The fact that Venezuela was also a two-party democracy—one rightly criticized for its violent excesses but which nevertheless enjoyed a degree of popular support and was relatively effective at building coalitions (Kappeler 2017)—meant radical mobilization had to take place in new ways. The pattern of rising militancy and resurgent peasant activism in Latin America associated with "the lost decade" of the 1980s (see Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010) also aligned with a serious destabilization of the petroleum economy in Venezuela and a reduction of the power associated with access to land. This shift in social weight has mirrored the shift in the dialectic of urban power and peasant struggles witnessed over the past two decades.

Describing the backlash against neoliberalization in Latin America, James Petras has argued, "coalitions of landless farm workers, small family farmers, and peasants have been central to national struggles against neoliberal regimes and free trade policies. In some cases, rural movements have detonated larger struggles, activating urban classes, trade unions, civic groups, and human rights organizations" (2005: 41; see also Petras and Veltmeyer 2001). While this is an accurate description of the backlash in many parts of Latin America, the recent experience of agrarian reform in Venezuela suggests this is not a universal story for the region. In many parts of an increasingly urbanized Latin America, peasants lack the leverage over the social formation they held in the twentieth century, and the conditions of possibility are radically different as a result.

In Venezuela, the most hyper-urban society in the region, urban unrest and splits in the social fabric succeeded in igniting popular struggles in the wake of the violent imposition of austerity. That mass urban unrest ignited in the 1980s and 1990s was also the catalyst for the delegitimation of multiple neoliberal governments and the eventual installation of a populist leadership that gave peasants space to press their claims. In this sense, peasants were effectively "transmitters of urban unrest" able to take advantage of changes at the political center to challenge the power of traditional landed elites and to capitalize on years of previous organizing. The latest decline in oil prices and the effective end of the petro-boom of the early 2000s, however, has seen an attendant conservatization of the revolutionary process and a growing divergence between peasant organizations and the ruling party.

As Eric Wolf (1969) argued, peasants were the social base of national liberation movements in the Third World in the twentieth century. But at a certain point, peasants came into conflict with the urban-based leaderships and political parties that had succeeded in mobilizing them for the seizure of power. These leaderships had objectives that went far beyond peasant aspirations for land and freedom from tax collectors, merchants, and other surplus takers, and these states eventually became antagonists of peasants. As Latin America leaves a political conjuncture that many regarded hopefully—and perhaps prematurely—as "post-neoliberal,"[10] an analysis of the role of populist governments in forging links between peasants and urban allies can serve as a bridge to new scholarly and political projects—an agenda that speaks to the enduring value of Wolf's analysis and of *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* as an indispensable point of reference for the future.

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Aaron Kappeler is Lecturer in the Anthropology of Development at the University of Edinburgh. His research focuses on the politics of land and natural resource extraction in Latin America. His most recent work deals with infrastructure and populist politics in Venezuela. He is also currently studying labor migration in the wake of Venezuela's ongoing economic crisis. Before joining the University of Edinburgh, he was Visiting Assistant Professor in Anthropology at Union College, Postdoctoral Fellow in the Institute for Advanced Study at Central European University, and Adjunct Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Toronto.

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Notes

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1. The encomienda was a system of landholding in which colonial settlers were granted the right access to land and exploit indigenous labor, but not private property. See Wolf and Hansen (1967) for discussion of its impact on Latin American politics.

2. *Godo* literally means "Goth" but refers to peninsular Spaniards who settled in Latin America and sided with royalist forces during the war for independence. Over time, the term became synonymous with the caste of elites tied to the Conservative Party. It also has racialized connotations, referring to individuals of European descent, rather than individuals from the mestizo majority. In recent years, the term has been redeployed to describe members of the

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political opposition to *Chavismo*.

3. There is still some controversy today as to whether Zamora sought an indemnity for the loss of his family "property" when the Liberal Party sought to free the slaves, but in all likelihood his relationship with slavery can be described analogically as "Jeffersonian" (i.e., one of deep and sincere philosophical opposition combined with practical complicity).

4. Although Zamora is known to have associated with two French revolutionaries (Murtón de Veratro and Napoleon Abril) said to have participated in the events of 1848, the influence of socialism on his ideology is still uncertain (cf. Figueroa 1975). That agrarian rebels in Venezuela would find allies among actors who would today likely be classified as "anarchists," however, is not entirely surprising.

5. The organization was named after the two-hundred-year anniversary of the struggle for Venezuelan national independence. Its leaders also consciously imitated an oath sworn by Bolivar, in which the officers pledged under a tree in Caracas to redeem the nation and restore its sovereignty.

6. The editors of the official organ of the National Institute of Lands, *Tiempo de Zamora,* recognized the implicit masculine bias in the slogan and modified it to "Tierras y hombres y mujeres libres," or "Free land and free women and men."

7. At various times, the late President Chávez invoked the concept of "right to the city" and quoted the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre to substantiate the legitimacy of peri-urban land struggles. But in practice, these struggles have been difficult to resolve and the position of the ruling party with regard to squatter settlements has been ambiguous. It has not carried out evictions of squatter settlements on the scale of earlier governments (see Castillo d'Imperio 1990), but it has also not recognized every popular land occupation, as the case presented here

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shows.

8. The Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front has called for the Bolivarian government to arm them, but the government has refrained from creating states within a state, a charge that was one of the chief reasons listed for the coup against Acción Democrática in the 1940s.

9. Indeed, INTI workers in Barinas told me they had seen poor urbanites use land in precisely this fashion in the early years of the agrarian reform and the Vuelta al Campo campaign. After obtaining their *carta agraria*, or title, newly relocated urbanites sold the land on the private market to individuals already engaged in agriculture and returned to their homes in the city with money to invest in improved housing. It was essentially a way to obtain an interest free loan from the state without having to pay it back.

10. For discussion, see Burdick et al. (2009); Hershberg and Rosen (2006); Macdonald and Ruckert (2009); Radcliffe (2012); Rovira Kaltwasser (2011).