The Revolution and the Land: Peruvian documentary about agrarian reform in the 1960s and ’70s attracts great interest

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The Peruvian documentary *La revolución y la tierra* (*The Revolution and the Land*), directed by Gonzalo Benavente, examines the agrarian reform implemented under the military dictatorship of Gen. Juan Velasco that took power in Peru in 1969. The reform and Velasco’s nationalist regime, supported by the Stalinists of the Communist Party and the bourgeois left of that time, marked a major turning point in the country’s modern history.

Peruvian cinema has grown in recent years, with more movies being made by a burgeoning private film industry, in addition to those produced with subsidies from the Ministry of Culture. Some independent filmmakers have turned their eyes toward recent history and dealt with the legacy of the so-called Internal Conflict of the 1980s: a nationwide campaign of repression aimed at quelling the insurgency of the Maoist guerrilla Sendero Luminoso (SL—Shining Path) that left thousands dead. These works express an understandable desire to come to grips with the brutality of the repression and the *senderistas’* motives for launching their uprising.

Benavente, born in 1983, has chosen to address historical events little known to the younger generation. They have proven, however, to be of intense interest. *The Revolution and the Land* has become the most-viewed documentary ever screened in Peru. In an interview, the director explained that he wanted to bring to the screen a historical episode that had been made invisible for many years, which prevented it from being “discussed or debated.”

His documentary is composed of interviews with historians, anthropologists, peasant leaders, former activists and members of left-wing parties, as well as eyewitnesses to the events of the time. These interviews are juxtaposed in a striking manner with fascinating material gathered from old television footage and especially from films produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Velasco supporters that denounced the landowning *hacienda* (estate) system, while at the same time promoting the Andean indigenous culture and the social status of the indigenous peasants.

The use of these films, some of them restored specifically for Benavente’s documentary, is remarkable because the general public in Peru has for the most part been unaware of the existence of the militant cinema of that time.

After briefly summarizing the Spanish conquest of Peru in 1532 and the wars of independence in 1821, the film explains the legacy of the latifundia system, the disproportionate possession of land by an oligarchical minority, with some 40 families controlling virtually all of rural Peru from the coastline to the highlands, possessing *haciendas* that were the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of hectares.

The Revolution and the Land proceeds to explore the decades leading up to Velasco’s seizure of power during which the quasi-feudal treatment of the indigenous peasants on the *haciendas* was an accepted fact of life, defended by the state. The humiliation of the peasants by the landowners was seemingly limitless. A US television news report from the 1950s shows peasants kneeling before their employers and only standing up when the latter pat them on the shoulder. Peasants were forbidden to look into the eyes of the *hacendados*, the owners of the estates, who were free to violate any peasant woman without fear of reprisal. The US narrator says: “This is Peru in the 20th century but could easily be Spain in the 18th.”

In order to keep the peasants in line, the landowners and their minions resorted to terror. A scene from one of the movies featured in the documentary shows a landowner calmly riding his horse through sand dunes only for the horrified audience to discover that behind him is a peasant with a rope tied around his neck, trying not to fall over. Indigenous author José María Arguedas recalls an anecdote about a landowner who ordered a woman’s arm cut off because she refused to kiss his hand.

The Cuban revolution of 1959 and Fidel Castro’s nationalization of lands previously monopolized by US corporations and a native oligarchy sounded an alarm bell for the Peruvian ruling class. The oligarchic government of Manuel Pardo in 1962 made the first attempt to implement agrarian reform, but the project was shelved after the army staged a coup aimed at blocking the democratically elected Victor Haya de la Torre—the founder of the bourgeois nationalist APRA party—from coming to power. Over the following years, the military junta tried to implement its own agrarian reform, specifically in the Cusco region, but it never achieved anything substantial.

The next civilian government, led by right-wing President Fernando Belaunde Terry, also attempted to pass an agrarian reform act, but it was obstructed by opposition within the Peruvian Congress. On October 3, 1968, the military under Gen. Velasco kidnapped Belaunde from the government’s headquarters and sent him into exile in Argentina. Velasco and his fellow officers staffed the ministries and public offices. The general pompously announced to the people the formation of a “Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces.”

Within days of seizing power, Velasco sent troops to take over an oil refinery controlled by the American International Petroleum Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil, which had avoided paying taxes for decades. He nationalized other industries, forming a series of state-owned enterprises: Sideperú, Petroperú, Mineroperú, etc.

The regime also established SINAMOS (National Social Mobilization Support System), a state entity whose aim was to promote the government’s supposed “left” nationalist ideology throughout the country. SINAMOS members made many of the films shown in the documentary dealing with peasant uprisings.

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Meanwhile, Velasco established the Workers' Central for the Peruvian Revolution, a union confederation designed to subordinate the working class to the ruling military junta and to compete with the Stalinist-led General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP).

The segment dealing with the motives driving the agrarian reform is revealing. Those interviewed recall the fear that existed of a revolutionary uprising by the oppressed peasants that would plunge Peru into civil war. They acknowledge that Velasco's agrarian reform was aimed at containing such a movement and saving the country from a mass revolt.

Peruvian oligarch Fernando Graña expresses ruling class fears at the time when he explains to an American reporter that, while he is himself a progressive and modern *hacendado*, given the gross injustices inflicted by others like him over the years against the peasants, it is better to have a reform "from above than from below."

Velasco incurred Washington's ire with his regime's nationalizations, its purchase of arms from the Soviet bloc and normalization of relations with Cuba. Yet, the principal mission of his military "revolutionary government" was no different than that of the US "Alliance for Progress": the derailing of any revolution from below in Peru. It sought to appeal to nationalism and ethnic identity. Velasco's personal origin as someone born into poverty and, unlike most of Peru's previous presidents, to a family not part of the oligarchy of descendants of the Spanish colonizers, helped him to posture as a representative of the common people. Decades later, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez would claim Velasco as a major inspiration for his own personalist rule.

However, the biggest factor facilitating the rule of Velasco and the military was the support he enjoyed from the "left" of the time, ranging from the Stalinists in the Peruvian Communist Party to various pseudo-Marxists and Pabloite forces. After initially denouncing Velasco and his fellow officers as "fascists," these unprincipled "left" forces closed ranks behind the regime once it announced its nationalist-reformist measures.

Among the most prominent representatives of these social forces interviewed in the film is the Pabloite and former peasant guerrilla leader Hugo Blanco (described as a well-known Peruvian "Trotskyist"). Blanco came from a middle-class peasant family. During a trip to Argentina as a student, he came under the influence of the Nahuel Moreno variety of Pabloite opportunism. After returning to Peru, he joined several peasants' unions and eventually founded a guerrilla *foco* in the 1960s, participating in a major uprising in the La Convencion Valley in the province of Cusco in southeastern Peru. He was captured and sentenced to 25 years in prison, but was pardoned by Velasco and sent into exile.

In a revealing interview in 1973, not shown in the documentary, the supposed "Trotskyist" Blanco acknowledged that Velasco's dictatorship repressed peasants and workers and exiled leftist leaders, but added that he and others like him gave the military regime "critical support" because it was the most "developmentalist and modernizing bourgeois regime" in the country's history.

After expropriating the *hacendados*, the regime created the *cooperativas*, managing associations formed by peasants to administer the estates. One of the peasant leaders interviewed in the film remembers tearfully how Velasco personally received him in Lima and intervened for his cooperative during a dispute with the former owners.

The Revolution and the Land has remarkably restored and edited old footage. However, the serious weaknesses of the filmmakers arise in their efforts to make political sense of the events and the epoch in question. The producer and director isolate the agrarian reform in Peru, never making the link between the oppressed peasants fighting for land in Peru and the eruption of the class struggle on a world scale.

The period between 1968, when Velasco seized power, and 1975, when he was brought down, was characterized by a systemic crisis of global capitalism that saw upheavals across Latin America, including the near-revolution in Chile that was drowned in blood by Pinochet's CIA-backed coup following the Stalinist Communist Party's betrayal of the working class. Internationally, there were the May-June general strike of millions in France, the uprising in Czechoslovakia, the 1974 revolution in Portugal and the mass antiwar protests and urban rebellions in the US.

This period also saw the rise of other "left" posturing military rulers, including Gen. J.J. Torres in Bolivia and Gen. Guillermo Rodríguez Lara in Ecuador.

The film all but ignores the struggles of the Peruvian working class, which played the main role in bringing about the military regime's downfall.

The Velasco regime sought to ruthlessly suppress a series of general strikes in 1973, led by the newly formed Central Union of Peruvian Teaching Workers, SUTEP. This ended up galvanizing support from other independent and CGTP-affiliated unions and student movements, weakening the control Velasco exercised over the labor movement with the support of the Stalinist leadership of the CGTP.

Velasco suppressed democratic rights, militarily occupied Arequipa and declared a state of emergency when workers and students took over Peru's second largest city in October 1973, triggering a strike wave that engulfed the entire mining area of the southern Peruvian Andes. During this period, the military regime persecuted, jailed, tortured and exiled hundreds of its left-wing opponents, particularly those who sought to organize workers independently of the regime.

By the mid-1970s Velasco's health had deteriorated. The film suggests that Velasco's removal from power came about because he was ill and "graciously" asked Gen. Francisco Morales-Bermudez to replace him.

The truth is that the Peruvian bourgeoisie and international finance capital came to view Velasco as too susceptible to pressure from below and decided to replace him with a military leader more closely aligned with Washington, while a conspiracy grew within the armed forces leading to his ouster.

Morales-Bermúdez seized power in a bloodless coup supported by Washington on August 29, 1975. Some historians claim he launched the coup in order to stave off a plan developed by Velasco's government to invade and seize the Chilean province of Arica that Peru ceded to Chile after it lost the Pacific War in the 19th century.

Gen. Velasco died in December 1977. The documentary shows images of his massive funeral attended, according to some eyewitnesses, by nearly one million people.

Morales-Bermudez set about dismantling many of the limited reforms instituted by his predecessor. The military clique around Morales-Bermudez aligned itself with the CIA and the Pentagon, collaborating with the murderous, counter-revolutionary Operation Condor of the 1970s. In early 2017, an Italian judge sentenced Morales-Bermudez and the already imprisoned former dictator of Bolivia, Gen. Luis Garcia Meza, to life in prison for their part in the deaths of 23 Italian citizens.

Bowing to International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands, Morales-Bermudez implemented savage cuts to social welfare amid a spike in the cost of living. On July 19, 1977 a national strike led by the CGTP effectively shut down the entire country. The military caste, fearing a revolutionary offensive by the working class, opted for a transition to civilian rule. A Constituent Assembly was summoned in 1979, and the following year Fernando Belaunde was elected, the same right-wing president who had been overthrown by Velasco more than a decade earlier.

The documentary touches on the insurgency of the Maoist Sendero Luminoso in the 1980s. Historian Hugo Neira asserts that if Velasco's agrarian reform had not taken place "the SL would have won the war because [the SL's rhetoric] could have easily convinced the hundreds of thousands of exploited peasants to their cause."

This analysis is false on two counts. First, Sendero Luminoso's perspective, based on the Maoist conception of organizing peasant

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guerrilla *focos* in the rural areas and encircling the cities, leaving the working class the role of a powerless bystander, was doomed to failure, particularly under conditions in which Peru's population had become increasingly urbanized. As this perspective failed to win mass support, the SL turned to terrorist methods, conducting summary executions and in some cases massacring entire villages based on suspicion of their collaboration with the Peruvian armed forces.

Secondly, Velasco's agrarian reform failed to end the poverty and oppression of the majority of Peru's rural population, including those without any access to land and those working small plots. Where it succeeded was in ending an unproductive system of *haciendas* and turning the old landed oligarchy into a capitalist bourgeoisie, while also fostering the growth of a rural petty bourgeoisie.

In the end, the experience with Velasco's military regime, as with the role played by various strains of bourgeois nationalism throughout Latin America, provided a confirmation, in the negative, of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. In the oppressed and former colonial countries with a belated capitalist development, the democratic tasks of the bourgeois revolution, including the land question, can be completed only by the working class, leading the peasant masses behind it, taking power and embarking upon a socialist transformation that can be achieved only on the basis of the extension of the revolution internationally.

Benavente's movie ends with shots of a protest that took place earlier this year, with poor peasants from Cusco demanding help from the state for the damage that climate change has inflicted on their crops, demonstrating how little has changed since the time of Velasco's reform.

The Revolution and the Land deserves to be seen worldwide because of its portrayal of a little-known period of history brought forward through a remarkable job of rescuing priceless film footage that brings to life the centuries-long exploitation of Peru's indigenous peasantry.

Benavente's film fails, however, to provide a coherent analysis of the events of the Velasco period, much less of the entire experience with political tendencies, chief among them Pabloite anti-Marxism, that promoted the conception that policies introduced from above by one or another charismatic "comandante"—from Castro to Velasco to Chávez—could substitute for the independent and conscious struggle of the working class to put an end to capitalism and take power into its own hands.

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