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## THE WELFARE CRISIS OF CENTRAL AMERICA

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### ABSTRACT

The crisis of Central America, fundamentally due to social injustice, is exacerbated as the Reagan administration seeks a "military solution" to political problems of the region. A humane approach to alleviating the devastating poverty of Central America necessitates reconciling two strategies of national development: a techno-economic strategy and a socio-political strategy. Both strategies leave important issues unresolved. The prospect of improving conditions for the people of Central America diminishes as the region is increasingly militarized.

### INTRODUCTION

With the ascendance of a leftist junta in Nicaragua, the protraction of a relentless civil war in El Salvador, and the progressive destabilization of other Central American governments (Neirer, 1983: 35-45), the United States faces a crisis in Latin foreign relations not seen since the Cuban Revolution. The conservative interpretation of these events is that they represent a threat to the security of the United States. As former Secretary of State,

Alexander Haig has characterized these developments,

What is at stake is the radicalization of the Western Hemisphere by foreign powers and by interests that are being manipulated from Moscow through Cuba. Now we face the prospect of having the first Central American totalitarian Marxist regime in Nicaragua and the threat of its expansion into El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Colombia (1981: 34).

Before becoming chief United States delegate to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick suggested that the United States offer "money, arms, logistical supplies, and the services of counter-insurgency experts" to frail governments threatened by "the unfamiliar guerrilla violence of revolutionaries linked to Cuba by ideology, training and the need for support, and through Cuba to the Soviet Union: (1981: 34). In search of a "military solution" to the Central American conundrum, the Reagan administration has proposed increasing "security aid" to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala from \$216.8 million for FY 1983 to \$335 million for FY 1984 (Knickerbocker, 1983: 1).

Efforts to forge a military solution have eclipsed those to negotiate a "political solution," a strategy most clearly articulated by the Carter administration. That administration's human rights policy focused on the poor socio-economic conditions of the indigenous populations and government oppression of intellectuals that would speak on their behalf. According to this analysis, Latin difficulties

stem from decades of repression in a social structure in which a small

number of families, protected by a succession of military governments, have controlled the vast bulk of the nation's land and wealth, paying a pittance to peasant workers who have little or no voice in determining their own fates (Meislin, 1983: 54).

Such conditions contribute to violence by excluding the disadvantaged from the political and economic process. Accordingly, liberals argue for reforms, commonly through elections and land reform, to ameliorate social and economic injustice. During the Carter administration, Latin governments unwilling to cooperate by introducing reforms were reprimanded, an important component of the human rights policy.

This transition in the position of the United States position toward Central America has dramatically worsened the already marginal condition of the indigenuous populations there. Foreign policy preoccupied with the security of the United States has effectively contributed to an escalation in the number of refugees leaving their native countries. By late 1982, the State Department estimated that between 100,000 and 135,000 refugees had sought haven in another Central American nation, and that between 250,000 and 500,000 Central Americans had entered the United States illegally. These figures do not include the hundreds of thousands who have been forced to resettle within their native country (Riding, 1983: 12). "Over 100,000 have lost their lives in three small and ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala," wrote Nobel prize author Gabriel Garcia Marquez. "If this had happened in the United States, the corresponding figures would be that of

1,600,000 violent deaths in four years" (1983: 17). Most profoundly, United States foreign policy has been detrimental to the social welfare of millions of Central Americans. By interpreting the instability of Central America as a security issue, rather than a welfare issue, the Reagan administration has pushed the entire region close to the abyss.

The problem of Central America is fundamentally one of national development. As a problem in nation-building the region presents issues that are more complex than simplistic saber-rattling. The purpose of this work is to elaborate some of these issues in the hope that a more informed, and humane, foreign policy may be developed.

#### THE SOLITUDE OF CENTRAL AMERICA (1)

A basic education in the social reality of Central America is provided by descriptive statistics on nations of the region. Typically, the per capita GNP is less than \$1,000; as it is for El Salvador (\$660), Colombia (\$850), and Guatemala (\$910). Yet, economic indicators only tell part of the story. Of these three countries, only Colombia provides enough nutrition for its people. The per capita daily calorie supply as a percent of requirements is 102 for Colombia, 98 for Guatemala, and only 90 for El Salvador (Nossiter, 1980:E3). Yet, even Colombia, well-fed by Central American standards, loses 30,000 children each year to malnutrition (Zeitlin, 1972:13-14).

The great majority of Colombians, whether in rural or urban areas suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and the

pain of infectious diseases. Dysentery is endemic throughout the country, as is anemia, scurvy, pellagra, intestinal parasitism, and other sickness . . . The poor suffer from nearly universal protein deficiency . . . The average life expectancy at birth for the population as a whole is only forty-six years, and is therefore, even less among the most exploited (Blutstein, 1977:105).

In an important analysis of infant mortality, the Pan American Health Organization concluded that malnutrition contributed to 34 percent of infant deaths in Latin America. When deaths related to malnutrition of the mother was included, "well over half" of infant deaths were associated with malnutrition (Newland, 1981:20). When lack of education is introduced into the analysis, Kathy Newland of the Worldwatch Institute, has shown that the infant mortality rate skyrockets.

Child's Probability of Dying Before Age Two According to Education, Selected Central American Countries, 1966-70 (2)

<u>Country</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>None</u>	<u>1-3</u>	<u>4-6</u>	<u>7-9</u>	<u>10+</u>
(deaths per thousand live births)						
Colombia	88	126	95	63	42	32
El Salvador	145	158	142	111	58	30
Guatemala	149	169	135	85	58	44

It is the interaction of variables -- poverty, sickness, and ignorance -- and their affect on the vitality of a people over generations that has led Garcia Marquez to write of the solitude of Latin

America, a region whose people traditionally have had but one choice -- resignation to their squallor.

### TECHNO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT 3

The initial approach to problems that were beyond the capacity of any one country to solve was to provide foreign aid for the purpose of industrialization. Once an industrial foundation was established, this sector could be taxed in order to provide for the social needs of at-risk populations. Since this strategy was based on infusions of technology and capital into developing nations, it could be called "techno-economic development".

The techno-economic developmental approach suggests that social welfare expands commensurate with industrialization. As Robert Heilbroner has stated, "the economics of development is essentially the economics of capital accumulation" (1963:118). Ideally, capital is formed by exporting raw materials in exchange for technologies allowing the development of a sound industrial sector, which, in turn, provide an adequate tax base for supporting social welfare programs. Necessarily, social welfare programs begin in metropolitan areas containing modern industries. It is assumed that social welfare programs will not reach rural populations until agriculture is modernized, or until the peasants migrate to the cities. The scarcity of resources justifies the restriction of social welfare programs to industrial rather than rural settings. Once industrialization occurs and social welfare programs serve most of the population, the welfare state would be altered through the democratic political process. Proponents of this approach caution that the prolonged transition from

agricultural society to industrial nation-state requires a centralized government authority for planning and national security. The latter is particularly important because of the need to create a stable economy which appeals to investors, at the same time controlling dissident populations who seek immediate benefits. At times political instability so jeopardizes economic development that civilian government succumbs to military rule. Yet, the subordination of the democratic political process to the imperatives of economic development is defended on the grounds that it is a temporary measure.

An example of techno-economic development can be found in Colombia, which modeled its welfare state after the United States. In 1946 the Colombian Social Security Institute was created to provide Health insurance, maternity benefits, family assistance, and disability and old-age pensions to private sector workers in five major metropolitan areas. A separate Office of Social Security provides similar benefits to public employees. In both cases, contributions of the worker, the employer, and the government finance the benefits. These social insurance programs are targeted for industrialized areas where participation is compulsory (Acosta, 1976:228-229). However, agriculture, domestic and temporary workers receive few benefits (Blutstein:195). Even for those entitled, benefits are meager. In 1973, the typical social security payment per child was \$1.61 per month.

In 1968, an Institute for Family Welfare was created to protect children and preserve family stability. By the mid-1970s, this institute administered day care services for 13,500 children of the 5 million children needing day care. The



Institute could provide family planning services to only 20,000 families. Protective services could care for only one out of every seven abandoned children (Acosta:232-234). Like social security benefits, most family services cover metropolitan populations. Many of these programs were financed by the Alliance for Progress, 1960-1974, during which Colombia received \$1.5 billion from the United States. Alliance for Progress programs attempted to reform the agrarian sector, increase the tax base, assist small farmers, reduce illiteracy, and improve health care. By the mid 1970s, aid from the United States was curtailed when few of the Alliance for Progress objectives had been met (Blutstein:207,320-322).

The most recent illustration of the techno-economic development strategy is the Caribbean Basin Initiative, proposed by President Reagan early in 1982. As initially conceived the policy consisted of six elements: (1) exports from the Basin would receive duty-free treatment for twelve years, (2) significant tax incentives would be provided for businesses willing to invest in the area, (3) a \$350 million appropriation for Basins economically hard-hit, (4) provision of "technical assistance and training to assist the private sector" in the Basin countries, (5) coordination of efforts involving Mexico, Canada and Venezuela, and (6) special measures to aid Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (1982:A12). By 1983, the administration sought an appropriation of \$461 million for the Caribbean Basin Initiative for FY 1984 (Weinraub, 1983:D1).

Techno-economic developmental theory assumes moderated social change through political pluralism under conditions of economic stability and security maintained

by the central government. If benefits and services are inadequate, it is assumed that more resources and technology are necessary, but not that the social structure is at fault. Writing of social welfare in the Third World, S. K. Khinduka has called this developmental approach "a philosophy of gradualism, of modernization without tears. The plea to go slow and to eschew violence to tradition is in essence a plea to uphold the status quo," he observed prophetically. "What the Third World needs most is rapid and radical change in its social structure" (1971:65).

### SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The inability of nations to provide for the basic needs of the majority of their population, despite funds from the Alliance for Progress, prompted a critique of the dependence on industrialized capitalist nations, particularly the United States. Dissatisfaction with the primacy of techno-economic considerations in accelerating development emerged gradually. The generosity of the United States' Alliance for Progress became suspect in light of the fact that almost all of the monies consisted of loans (Blutstein:321), the debt service for which soon began to consume, in the case of Colombia, a fifth or more of the nation's total foreign exchange earnings (Zeitlin:p.31). The teachings of the Brazilian, Paulo Freire, raised profound questions about the influence of development on the masses in Latin America.

It is essential not confuse modernization with development. The former, although it may affect certain groups in the "satellite society," is almost always induced; and it is the

metropolitan society which derives the true benefits therefrom. A society which is merely modernized without developing will continue--even if it takes over some minimal delegated powers of decision--to depend on the outside country (1970:160).

By the 1970s this critique had grown into an intellectual movement in Latin America, leading an analyst from the conservative Hoover Institution to despair that

dependency explanations, which place most of the blame for Latin America's backwardness on U. S. economic interests are no longer confined to academic sanctuaries; they are now the common currency of a growing body of generals, bishops, editors, chiefs of state, even Latin American businessmen (Falcoff, 1980:797).

A bench mark in the evolution of dependency theory is the life of Camilo Torres. A Colombian, Torres received his clerical education in Belgium where he learned that the church can be a socially relevant institution. After his return to Colombia in 1958, he co-founded the sociology Department of the National University of Bogota. In 1965, Torres left the University and the priesthood to join the guerrilla movement, explaining that armed insurrection was a valid method of social change.

The Revolution is the means of obtaining a government that will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the uneducated, perform works of charity, love their neighbors not only in a transitory and occasional way, not just a few but the majority of

their neighbors. For this reason the Revolution is not only permissible but obligatory for Christians who see in it the one effective and complete way to create love for all (Zeitlin: p. 31).

Torres' death in a skirmish with an army patrol galvanized Latin religious leaders to press for structural change (Levine, 1980:26-27).

In 1968, the second General conference of Latin American Bishops was held in Medellin, Colombia, where radicalized clergy argued that overt political activity is legitimate religious activity. They called for a Theology of Liberation to rectify the abuses of an increasingly unjust society. Liberation theology combined Christian morality with Marxism by redefining sin as not a result of personal failure but of "entire social systems whose injustice, oppression, and institutionalized violence . . . imposed social conditions which made a fully moral and decent life impossible" (Levine:24).

Following the lead established by proponents of Liberation Theology, social scientists (Fals-Borda, 1980) and social workers have begun to formulate a normative theory of social change from the critique of techno-economic development provided by dependency theory. The focus of this emerging socio-political developmental strategy is on organizing indigenous populations around self-help programs promoting literacy, health, and productivity, while politically challenging the social structure. Josefina Acosta, Director of Social Work at the National University in Bogota, has applied the tenets of social development theory to social welfare; the result is an emphasis on structural social

change. "For centuries Latin America has been exploited," Acosta contends. "The rich do not have the will to improve the condition of the poor, so the poor have to fight. The only way is to change the social order -- the social structure" (Acosta:1980).

Acosta and here associates assert that techno-economic development functions to keep Central American and other Third World nations in a permanent state of backwardness. According to them, techno-economic developmental theory functions as an ideology that justifies the exploitive practices of oligarchical elites which are dependent on foreign corporations. With the aid of the oligarchy, foreign corporations can take advantage of low wages so that profits usually go to the United States. According to Theotonio dos Santos, "the dominant countries have a technological, commercial, capital resource, and social-political predominance over the dependent countries . . . This permits them to impose conditions of exploitation and to extract part of the domestically produced surplus" (1972:31). This collusion between profiteering corporations and the national oligarchies, claim critics of techno-economic development, make Central American nations "de facto colonies" of industrialized capitalist nations (Johnson:73).

The solution to the problem of dependency, as a consequence of techno-economic development, has been to recaste the concept of development entirely, emphasizing socio-political development. Social welfare experts in Latin America reconceptualized social change and anchored it to the social reality of the oppressed masses (Alonso, 1971:31). Notable contributions were made by Rosa Perla Resnick who, following Freire's concept of

"conscientization," suggested that social welfare be "indigenized" so that, "social work would serve as a tool for liberation, for Social development and for social change." (4) Idealism notwithstanding, social workers who accept social development face a quandry because the theory requires action outside of, or against, the social structure. Subversive activity has gained currency as a viable strategy, with some social workers becoming involved in "guerrilla welfare," the provision of necessary goods and services to neglected populations by political insurgents. Explains Acosta, "some social workers have joined the guerrillas, as have some doctors and lawyers. We, as social workers, have to take more radical positions than the traditional political parties. Reality dictates that" (1980).

Proponents of socio-political development characterize life in the Third World as a caldron of violence -- the everyday suffering of the masses interrupted only by incidents of police repression when the poor become politically active. As Bodenheimer observes, the socio-political developmental model "is inherently a conflict model on both the international and domestic levels" (Bodenheimer, p. 39). This theory derives its premise from marxian economics which states the necessity of mature capitalist economies to obtain inexpensive labor and raw materials through a variety of imperialistic tactics (Magdoff:1969). The pervasive social problems of Third World nations, then are correctly attributed to the influence of foreign capital and the intermediary function of a small oligarchical class. A culture of dependence is deliberately maintained because it allows these wealthy "clientele social classes" (Bodenheimer, 34-39) to amass sizeable fortunes while

convincing the impoverished masses of the gradual nature of progress. Government is seen as a legitimizing device at the disposal of the oligarchical elite. Governmental social welfare programs are symbolic gestures to appease the masses; of necessity social welfare benefits are meager and cover only that part of the population which is economically most important. The conspicuous display of military force in all aspects of daily life is a constant reminder of governmental domination. Socio-political developmental theorists use overtly political strategies in their practices, encouraging peasants to inherit not the earth, but the government. Their ultimate objective is the creation of a society where economic democracy and political democracy are joined to make social welfare institutions characteristic of the capitalistic welfare state unnecessary.

#### UNRESOLVED ISSUES

The debate over which of these strategies of national development is best has generated several issues. It is probably the willingness of a party to consider these seriously that is the best antidote for jingoistic policies.

(1) A primary question is whether or not economic loans to Central American nations can be expected to stimulate development. In an empirical analysis of economic assistance to less-developed countries (LDCs), Ehsan Hikbakht concluded that, "capital in the form of external loans has not played its expected role as the 'engine of growth' in the case of borrowing LDCs in the period of 1963 to 1979" (1982:194). The recent Mexican economic crisis suggests that borrowing of

capital can be disruptive to a developing economy.

(2) A related question is whether or not economic assistance from non-capitalistic nations is less dependency inducing than has been alleged about the United States. In 1980, for example, the largest recipient of Soviet foreign aid was Cuba, in an amount "equivalent to about 25 percent of the country's gross domestic product" (N.Y. Times:1983,7). Economic assistance of this magnitude suggest dependency.

(3) If the conventional understanding of development presupposes external aid, raising the risk of dependency, is an alternative paradigm conceivable? The alternative of forgoing industrialization in favor of a less technologically sophisticated, materialistic, and consumption-oriented economy could be a solution to the problem (Stokes:1981). However, advocates of more modest development have difficulty identifying a nation in which a.) the imperialistic tendencies of international capitalism and communism have not distorted the political process, or b.) materialism and technological dependence that accompany industrialism have not deformed the popular culture. "modernization," Peter Berger observes, "operates like a gigantic steel hammer, smashing both traditional institutions and traditional structures of meaning" (Berger:23).

(4) Should LDCs, including Central American nations, agree on a more relevant agenda for development, could the industrialized nations engage in a meaningful dialogue with them? The movement by non-aligned, less industrialized nations, is such an initiative, often referred to as the "North-South dialogue." The Cancun



Summit, however, revealed an unwillingness by industrialized nations, most particularly the United States, to consider significant alterations in the present concentrations of capital and technology (Gardner, 1981:E21). As yet this movement has not produced a replicable model of national development which suits the conditions of the Third World.

(5) Regardless of developmental strategy, is massive violence an expectable consequence of social change efforts? In various Third World nations advocates of structural reform have been decimated. Examples such as the recent nullification of democratic elections by the Bolivian military (Hoge, 1980:E5), the thousands of people who have "disappeared" under the military dictatorship ruling Argentina (Hoeffel:1979), emergence of right-wing murder squads in Guatemala (Riding, 1981:E3), and the murders of four missionaries and two land reform consultants from the United States in El Salvador, suggest that social agitation is extremely hazardous during the struggle to create a just society. One study of Latin Clerics documented the cases of "36 priests killed, 46 tortured, 245 exiled or expelled, and 485 arrested or imprisoned during 1968-1978 (DeYoung, 1981:26-36, 45-48). Casualties among the indigenous population are often under-reported, if they are reported at all.

Answers to these questions in relation to the major orientations for national development -- techno-economic and socio-political -- are apt to result in a more informed and sophisticated appreciation of problems present in Central America.

## CONCLUSION

The problems of Central America are fundamentally problems of social welfare. The intransigence of the current administration in describing the issue as one of national security increases the likelihood of escalating already intolerable levels of violence. As justification for seeking a \$110 million increase in military aid for El Salvador, President Reagan offered this explanation:

The problem is that an aggressive minority has thrown in its lot with the communists, looking to the Soviets and their Cuban henchmen to help them pursue political change through violence. Nicaragua has become their base. These extremists make no secret of their goal. They preach the doctrine of "revolution without frontiers" (1983:A13).

Such statements reflect an inability to grapple with discrete problems of the nations of Central America. In so doing the administration is effectively regionalizing the conflict. Further, the already limited capacity for civilian authorities to solve domestic problems is being sabotaged. These developments increase the likelihood of repeating the mass executions that have periodically ravaged Central America. During a three day period in January 1932, for example, the army of El Salvador murdered 15,000 to 20,000 campesinos, after some of them advocated agrarian reform (White, 1973:100-101). More recently, between 100,000 and 300,000 deaths resulted during rural strife, La violencia, in Colombia during the late 1940s and 1950s (Blutstein:3).

An alternative to this is to develop a foreign policy vis-a-vis the social welfare

needs of Central America in order to fashion a social reality for its people founded on principles of social justice. This necessity has been stated elegantly by Carlos Fuentes, a Mexican novelist and diplomat.

The basic dilemma of our nations, far beyond ideological nit-picking and strategic posturing, is this demand that we choose: between, the respect due to a man's hands, a woman's sex or a child's eyes; or barbarism and the brutality that humiliates, tortures and then murders us all (1981:C.).

#### NOTES

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(1) For an impressionistic account of the social reality of Latin America, see Marquez' classic, One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York: Avon, 1971).

(2) Kathleen Newland, Infant Mortality and the Health of Societies (1981:28). By contrast, the infant mortality rate for the U.S. is 13 deaths per thousand live births.

(3) The terms techno-economic development socio-political development are equivalent to Peter Berger's dichotomy of modernization theory and revolutionary theory, respectively (see esp. Peter Berger, Pyramids of Sacrifice (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1974,) Ch. I.). In an earlier article Susanne Bodenheimer dis-

tinguishes between a developmental model and a dependency model (Susanne Bodenheimer, The Ideology of Developmentalism (Beverly Hills, Calif.: SAGE, 1971). Bodenheimer's thesis that the developmental model induces dependency is followed in this paper. However, what she labels as a dependency model, I have elected to call a socio-political developmental theory to be consistent with conventional usage in the social welfare literature. Socio-political developmental theory is a logical consequence of applying the dependency model to techno-economic developmental theory.

(4) Rosa Perla Resnick, "The Indigenization of Social Work Around the World: The Reconceptualization Movement in Latin America," a paper presented at the 22nd Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 1976, p. 8. See also, Rosa Perla Resnick, "Conscientization: An Indigenous Approach to International Social Work," International Social Work 19 (1976): 21-29; and Rosa Perla Resnick, "Social Work Education in Latin American and the United States: A Look at the Future," Journal of Education for Social Work 16 (1980).

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