
COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

DISTILLED CONCLUSIONS:

The Disappearance of the Agrarian Question in El Salvador*

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A recurring theme in the study of social stability is the relation of rural conditions to political violence and revolution as well as to subtler and less violent forms of opposition and resistance.¹ El Salvador has served as an example for study because of its recent twelve-year civil war and the participation of its rural population. Given the depth and richness of data concerning rural conditions leading up to the civil war,² it is somewhat baffling to find that rural social tensions are explained away in

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1. Wickham-Crowley (1992) discussed four perspectives: the structural one represented by Jeffery Paige (1975); a processual "moral economy" position most strongly associated with James Scott (1976, 1985); a rational-actor, self-interest point of view proposed by Samuel Popkin (1979); and a macrostructural position taken most prominently by Theda Skocpol (1979). In a more methodological and quantitative vein, compare Muller and Seligson (1987), Midlarsky (1989, 1988), Brockett (1992), Prosterman and Riedinger (1987), Prosterman (1982), and Diskin (1989).

2. Various interpretations of the Salvadoran agrarian crisis have been based on the impact of agro-export production, domination of the labor supply, oligarchic rule, and exclusionist politics. Compare Brockett (1988), Booth and Walker (1989), Cabarrus (1983), Dunkerley (1988), Durham (1979), Handy (1994), McClintock (1985), Montgomery (1982), North (1981), Pearce (1986), and Williams (1986).

the terms used by Mitchell Seligson in "Thirty Years of Agrarian Transformation in El Salvador."³

For this article, Seligson has constructed a way of looking at the data that, rather than explaining the current agrarian structure, explains away the persistent and grave social problems that continue to face El Salvador following a dozen years of bloody civil war. Seligson based this article almost entirely on one national database, the Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples (EHPM) conducted by the Ministerio de Planificación in El Salvador (MIPLAN) in 1991–1992, which was included as part of an AID report in Seligson (1993). His conclusion that rural conditions "no longer pose a threat to national stability" arises from his quantitative judgment that "the landless and land-poor thus are a smaller problem today than they were on the eve of the civil war" (1995, 65). This judgment in turn relies on several definitions of empirical categories that diverge notably from the main body of scholarship on agrarian structure.

Seligson argues for the empirical breadth and accuracy of the EHPM survey, although he points to several difficulties with it, such as the exclusion of roughly 15 percent of all municipalities and no definition of nonrespondents. He dismisses other sources of data rather harshly, calling them inaccurate and "highly contradictory" and doubting their scholarly worth (1995, 45). Seligson considers periodic population and agrarian censuses unreliable as well as the various compilations derived from them, although he draws on them to describe the changes over thirty years (Seligson 1995, tables 4, 5).

CURRENT SALVADORAN AGRARIAN STRUCTURE ACCORDING TO THE EHPM

To evaluate the agrarian question, Seligson relies on the work of Roy Prosterman (1976) and his index of rural instability, that is, the proportion of landless persons to the national population. For Seligson, if this index exceeds 25 percent, then revolution or other upheavals become highly likely (Seligson 1995, 66).⁴ Seligson shows that the landless amount to only 10.4 percent and tenants only 6.5 percent of the national Sal-

3. See Seligson, "Thirty Years of Transformation in the Agrarian Structure of El Salvador, 1961–1991," *LARR* 30, no. 3 (1995):43–74. This is the fourth publication of this article. The first is the report to USAID published by Abt Associates (Seligson 1993). The second and third (Seligson 1994a and 1994b), both published in El Salvador, are virtually identical to the first, except that one of them (Seligson 1994a) is in Spanish. The 1995 article acknowledges the USAID contract, although Seligson says that it differs from the 1993 study in that the 1993 study "focused exclusively on the EHPM and made no comparisons with earlier census data" (Seligson 1995, 43, note of acknowledgment). While the 1995 article discusses prior land-tenure estimates in some detail, so does the 1993 report (Seligson 1993, 3–6). The 1994 incarnations fail to mention USAID support, an omission that is highly significant given the great significance of USAID in shaping agrarian policy in El Salvador.

4. This reliance is somewhat strange in that Seligson's prior work regarded agrarian inequality as a very weak predictor of social unrest in comparison with general unequal distribution of resources throughout society (see Muller and Seligson 1987).

vadoran population. Because they add up to less than the 25 percent of national population postulated by Prosterman, Seligson concludes that “El Salvador’s probability of experiencing an agrarian-based revolution has markedly diminished” (1995, 66).

Although guided by Prosterman’s work, Seligson does not actually follow his method. Prosterman defines landlessness as the difference between the number of farms and the number of rural families (see Prosterman 1982; Prosterman and Riedinger 1987, 143–44). But Seligson rejects this method of calculating landlessness because it would “overestimate” the number of landless. Instead, he arbitrarily defines only temporary agricultural laborers as landless, despite this observation made by Prosterman and Riedinger: “the problem of inadequate tenure of agricultural land—of those who are tenants, sharecroppers, peons, *colonos*, permanent and temporary hired laborers, or in other classifications of those who cultivate land without having ownership or ownership-like rights in that land—has been at the root of a high proportion of the most violent conflicts, and is one of the most fundamental political and economic problems of our age” (Prosterman and Reidinger 1987, 10). Seligson thus has created a special methodology for reaching his conclusions that adopts a restrictive notion of landlessness and employs an extremely low limit for defining the category of land-poor.

National Population

Seligson’s sample of the national population totals 1,633,993 (Seligson 1995, p. 52, t. 1). This number constitutes the economically active employed population sixteen and older. Seligson chose as his agrarian sample the economically active and agriculturally employed portion of the population older than sixteen years of age, leading to his total of 581,661 (Seligson 1995, t. 2).

By looking at individuals instead of families and excluding the population younger than sixteen, Seligson underweights the rural sector with respect to the national population. Although the Salvadoran population is still mainly rural, the economically active urban population began to outpace its rural counterpart around 1984. Reflecting the higher unemployment rates in the countryside, this trend has continued into the present (ECLAC 1993, 47, t. 13). By further reducing the economically active population by excluding those under sixteen and the unemployed, the imbalance grows (see my table 1).

In his zeal to avoid “overestimating” the landless population, Seligson obscures the trade-offs involved in such a formulation. As the weight of the rural sector is diminished relative to national population, what is lost is an appreciation of the high rate of underemployment and unemployment and the high dependency ratio (ratio of the economically

TABLE 1 Salvadoran Populations in 1992

<i>Population</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Rural as a % of Urban</i>	<i>Rural as a % of National</i>
Total National	5,508,000 ^a		
Urban	2,628,000		
Rural	2,880,000	109.6	52.3
National economically active population	2,418,000		
Urban	1,329,000		
Rural	1,089,000	89.9	45.0
Seligson's EAEP	1,634,000 ^b		
Urban	1,052,000		
Agricultural	582,000 ^c	55.3	35.6

Source: ECLAC (1993, p. 47, t. 13).

^a The total population figure is a projection made by CELADE (1991, cited in ECLA 1993, p. 47, t. 14), as are the figures for the economically active population.

^b His economically active employed population age 16 and older (see Seligson 1995, 52).

^c Taken from Seligson (1995, p. 53, t. 2).

active population to the inactive) in the countryside. Seligson is right in stating that including young persons ten to fifteen years old would swell the numbers of landless, given that most teenagers would not own land even though they might inherit it someday. But he could have used two different measures, one including the population under sixteen (the economically active population as presently defined by the EHPM) for the general rural-sector measures and another measure for landlessness that would exclude this age group. Such an approach would have made clear the magnitude of rural poverty without inflating the landless category. Shrinking the rural component of the population according to Seligson's formulation will produce lower landless and tenant percentages by disguising the truly desperate rural situation.

Because unemployment is higher among the rural population, determining a proxy for national population by including only the employed affects the denominator and further reduces its rural impact.⁵ Seligson's subsequent definitions of sections of the rural population have the effect of further reducing the rural component of society. The next section will review his category definitions, present alternatives, and show alternate quantitative outcomes.

5. The World Bank (1994) report found that unemployment increased between 1985 and 1988 to the point that by 1988, underemployment stood at 50 percent and unemployment at 9 percent. These rates are much higher in the countryside, with 54 percent underemployed and 16 percent unemployed, and in the first income quintile, with 59 percent underemployed and 35 percent unemployed (World Bank 1994, annex A, p. 3).

Defining the Landless

Seligson finds the characterization of “all those who own no land as landless” to be an exaggeration (1995, 52). This interpretation reveals some of the intent behind Seligson’s definition of terms. He explains that the “landless farm population should be divided into subcategories: wage laborers with steady jobs, family laborers, and those who have neither land nor steady wage-labor jobs and are therefore truly landless laborers” (1995, 47). He considers it an overestimate to include among the landless population the categories of permanent day laborers, unpaid family laborers, and the unemployed because “[s]uch an overestimate makes the situation appear as if all these so-called landless peasants would be eligible for and interested in land provided by a reform program. In fact, many of those with steady jobs on plantations would not be willing to assume the risks inherent in starting a farm of their own. . . . Furthermore, if all these so-called landless were suddenly granted land, many agricultural enterprises would have to close down for lack of a labor supply, while small farmers deprived of family labor would be unable to operate their own farms” (1995, 46–47). This is a curious statement indeed.⁶ Although Seligson appears opposed to conventional tenurial agrarian reform, the solution to land scarcity does not lie in distorted description (Brockett 1992, 169).

The occupational categories of permanent day laborer and unpaid family laborer cannot be dismissed from the category of landless as Seligson does, particularly because the EHPM definitions of these categories appear to be based solely on survey respondents and not on the number of days worked per year. Permanent wage laborers might differ from temporary wage laborers in the sense of security they feel. But comparing the incomes of these categories (in Seligson 1995, t. 6) shows that all of them are at the bottom of the income scale (see my table 2). Seligson’s interpretation makes it difficult to perceive the sense in which their “permanent jobs” remove them from the landless population. Given the high rate of underutilization of labor noted in the late 1970s (Daines and Steen 1977, 30, t. 43), the high rate of rural underemployment in the 1980s (World Bank 1994, Annex A, p. 3, t. A-2), and the steady erosion of real rural wages (World Bank 1994, p. 20, graph 10), both the permanent and temporary wage-labor categories are insecure by Prosterman’s definition and should be reckoned as landless.

The crucial aspect of the day laborer form of livelihood is that it is based on wages, subject to periods of unemployment, and as insecure as the labor laws and landowners’ practices permit (compare Williams 1994,

6. In Seligson’s discussion of the Costa Rican peasantry in the nineteenth century, permanent day laborers facing the possibility of acquiring land of their own generally stayed on as hacienda laborers, but the expected labor shortage drove wages up more than threefold in twenty years (Seligson 1980, 21–22).

TABLE 2 Mean Monthly Per Capita Income in El Salvador, 1991, as Compared with the Poverty Line

Poverty Category ^a	% of Agri-cultural Sector (%)	Per Capita Income ^b (colones)	Poverty Line ^c (colones)	% of Poverty Line (%)
Structural poor^d				
Temporary day laborers	29	166	239	69
Permanent day laborers	13	205	239	86
Unemployed	10	53	239	22
Unpaid family laborers	11	28	239	12
Total	63		239	
Descendent and ascendent poor^d				
Land-poor	15	237	239	99
Small farms ^e		333	239	139
Cooperatives ^e	13	416	239	174
Total	28		239	
Nonpoor^f				
Farmers (Employers)	10	747 ^g	239	320
Total	101		239	

Note: According to Seligson, steady wage-work in the rural industrial sector would yield an average of 819 colones per month (1995, 70), whereas the rural industrial wage actually averages 219 colones (based on 5.23 persons per family) or 252 (with 6.0 persons per family).

^a All categories and percentages for the agricultural sector are taken from Seligson (1995, t. 2); per capita incomes come from Seligson (1995, t. 6).

^b In colones (at about 8 colones per 1 U.S. dollar).

^c Defined as the ability to buy 2 basic market baskets per month at a current cost of 239 colones (World Bank 1994, tech. app. 2, p. 1). The World Bank used the same database as Seligson, the EHPM, 1991–1992.

^d Mean family size of 6, with 1.61 workers (compare World Bank 1994, p. 15, t. 6).

^e Small farms as a percentage are included in that for cooperatives.

^f Mean family size of 5.23, with 1.61 workers (cf. World Bank 1994, p. 15, t. 6).

^g This figure comes from Seligson (1995, t. 6). Mean monthly per capita income for nonpoor is 526 colones (World Bank 1994, p. 12, graph 6).

123–26; Durham 1979). In El Salvador, the legal structure offers no security or right of association to create pressure for higher wages, and hiring labor for harvest or other tasks is unregulated.⁷ Wage work defines a rural sector that is highly volatile under certain conditions (Paige 1975). It therefore seems reasonable to add permanent day laborers (75,649) to the landless category along with the unemployed. Seligson even appears to have concurred in commenting earlier that the unemployed “need to be

7. The Foro de Concertación Socio-Económica created by the 1992 peace accords was supposed to reach agreement on a new labor code and a new agrarian code, as stipulated in the accords (chap. 5, no. 8). So far, no agreement has been reached.

taken into consideration in any effort to estimate the landless and land-poor population of El Salvador" (Seligson 1993, 14).

Although some unpaid family laborers might eventually inherit land, at the time of the EHPM survey, they were landless. Classification of them is analogous to census enumeration in which a person who migrates is not counted as part of the local population even though he or she is still part of a family or household. When the unpaid family member's situation resolves itself, a subsequent EHPM survey will locate the person in either the category of landowner, small farmer, or the landless. For present purposes, however, they must be considered landless.

Including unpaid family laborers (62,008) and permanent wage laborers (75,649) in the landless category raises the landless total from 169,432 to 303,374, or 18.8 percent of Seligson's national population figure. Further, including the rural unemployed (58,293), who are by definition landless, enlarges the landless to 22.4 percent of the national population and 52.2 percent of the rural population.

It should be noted here that the absolute number of temporary day laborers has hardly changed since the 1971 census. Thus given the shrinkage of the agricultural sector relative to national population, this finding suggests that a corresponding increase has taken place in the poorest of the poor relative to other rural categories, despite the agrarian reform in 1980.

Lacking any further data, the notion that only temporary day laborers may be considered landless does not appear obvious or consistent with other agrarian studies. The fact that this definition is required in order to argue against land reform is not a reason to exclude laborers from the landless category. Rather, a fair estimate of landlessness should provoke creative policy options.

Defining Tenancy

Among the 217,289 rural Salvadorans with land (see Seligson's table 3), half (108,608) are tenants, meaning that they do not have secure legal access to land but must acquire the right to use it via cash rental, sharecropping, or *colonato*. Seligson excludes the categories of cooperative, free use, and promise of sale from the tenancy category even though they are not categories of fee-simple ownership.

Defining the Land-Poor

To gain added insight into the agrarian sector, one might compare the category of tenant—renter, sharecropper and *colono*—with that of farm size in order to estimate to what extent tenants are also land-poor. At least 4 *manzanas* of rented land are necessary to earn as much as a job

in the industrial sector would pay (Vidales 1993, 2-11). Ninety-eight percent of the renters, 99.1 percent of the sharecroppers, and 100 percent of the colonos have access to less than 5 manzanas of land (Vidales 1993, p. 2-12, t. 2.3). Thus by definition, virtually all the renters (that is, 50 percent of the landed category) are land-poor.

Seligson's table 3 indicates that 37 percent of the agricultural sector (the economically active employed population), or 217,289, have access to land. Half of that number (108,681) are owners or near owners (for the categories of free use, cooperatives and promise of sale). Among the owners, 45,000 have less than 1 manzana and are therefore land-poor. If the threshold is raised to 2 manzanas, 73,721 (67.8 percent of owners) are land-poor. The land-poor among owners represent 2.6 percent of the national Salvadoran population and land-poor among tenants another 4.5 percent (Vidales 1993, t. 2-3).

In his table 2, Seligson shows that of the landed population, 15 percent of the agricultural sector (85,361) are land-poor, meaning they have access to less than 1 manzana (.7 hectare) of land.⁸ Seligson justifies the extraordinarily low threshold for defining the land-poor category as a "reasonable criterion" in two ways.⁹ First, "if the cut-off were raised any higher, most farmers in El Salvador would be classified as land-poor," which "would not allow for making relevant distinctions within the Salvadoran context" (1995, 53-54).

His second reason is that "analysis of the EHPM income data revealed that farmers who own 1 manzana or more of land earn incomes that match or exceed those who have steady jobs in the industrial sector.

8. The 1993 USAID report (Vidales 1993, p. 2-12, t. 2.3) categorizes farm size as 0 manzanas, less than .5 manzana, .5 to .99 manzana, and 1 to 4.99 manzanas. To determine the number of land-poor in the category of 1 to 2 manzanas, I used Vidales's statement that the mean farm size in the category from 1 to 4.99 manzanas is 2 manzanas (Vidales 1993, 2-11). That yielded 95,465 for the category of more than 1 manzana and 57,707 for 1 to 2 manzanas. This figure is also an underestimate because the same study points out that renters (and therefore sharecroppers) need 4 manzanas or more to earn income competitive with wages paid by jobs in the industrial sector.

9. The functional definitions long accepted for farm size relate farm size to capacity for labor absorption as a way of indicating rural welfare. Thus if a farm size can absorb all available family labor, it will be called a "family farm," if not, then a "subfamily farm" or a "microfarm." Most formulations seem to follow this logic, as evidenced in a study by CEPAL, FAO, and OIT in which a *microfinca* (of less than 1 hectare) is said to be little more than a garden, a *subfamiliar* (from 1 to 10 hectares) is "less than sufficient to satisfy the minimum needs of a family," and a *familiar* is "sufficient to sustain a family according to the predominant technology" (1980, 47). Although these definitions originated in the 1960s and technology has progressed (but not much for the poorest), they have not changed so as to include family farms above the level of .7 hectare proposed by Seligson. For example, a recent ECLAC study showed farm size categories called microfarms (1 to 3.5 hectares), subfamily farms (from 3.5 to less than 14 hectares), and family farms (from 14 to less than 35 hectares) (ECLAC 1993, p. 48, table 14, El Salvador: Land Tenure Structure by Size of Holding). In the 1977 USAID study of the land-poor, the limit for land-poor was set at less than 2 hectares, almost three times Seligson's limit (Daines and Steen 1977).

As a result, it is inappropriate to apply the term *poor* to those who earn more than many other gainfully employed Salvadorans" (1995, 54).

The limits of the land-poor category should reflect reasonable circumstances of Salvadoran rural welfare, which is to say that the land-poor have incomes below the rural poverty line. If the great majority of Salvadoran farmers would have to be considered land-poor, that sad finding should be faced squarely. While it might confound the need for making "relevant distinctions," such an acknowledgement would be more faithful to Salvadoran reality and a better guide for shaping public policy.

Poverty, Income, and Employment

Seligson correctly links rural categories to income possibilities. But he thinks it "inappropriate" to apply the term *poor* to individuals "who earn more than many other gainfully employed Salvadorans," referring to "those who have steady jobs in the industrial sector" (1995, 54). In his 1993 analysis, Seligson mentioned and discarded certain poverty calculations, citing a study that found that "99 percent of farmers were categorized as living in 'extreme poverty' and that 40 percent of all people in El Salvador were living in extreme poverty" (Seligson 1993, 1:44, citing an AID report prepared by Sigma One Corporation in 1989).

Another estimate of poverty in ECLAC (1993) showed 74 percent of the total population living in poverty, with a rural level of 85 percent, 12 percent of which live in extreme poverty (ECLAC 1993, 6, t. 1). One careful study by Samuel Daines and Dwight Steen (1977) examining the rural poor in El Salvador set the poverty limit at 2 hectares or less. For that study, the income level defining poverty was calculated at 225 dollars per capita in 1976 dollars (Daines and Steen 1977, 35). By their reckoning, "83 percent of all farms and 84 percent of the rural landless population is poor by AID's income standard" (Daines and Steen 1977, 35). Given the steady erosion of real wages and incomes since that time, 2 hectares might be a reasonable limit today as well.

A more recent study has enabled researchers to examine this issue more closely and to incorporate Seligson's comparison with the industrial sector. The World Bank study of poverty in El Salvador, using the same MIPLAN database (EHPM 1992) calculated the levels of poverty, using both the poverty line and the basic needs methodologies (World Bank 1994).¹⁰ According to either method as well as a combined method, the

10. The poverty line method defines simple poverty as an individual's capacity to buy two basic market baskets (BMBs) per month and extreme poverty as the ability to buy only one. For rural areas, one BMB is valued at 119 colones per month, and two at 239 per month (8 colones equal about a dollar). In urban areas, one BMB is worth 204 colones per month and two, 408 colones per month (World Bank 1994, p. 11, n. 13). The basic needs method identifies three household indicators of basic need: overcrowding (more than three people per bedroom), children between seven and ten years old who are not attending school, and

extent of poverty in El Salvador is considerable. Using the poverty line method based on income, at least 55.7 percent of the rural households fall below the poverty line (World Bank 1994, t. 3). By the basic needs method, 81 percent of rural households live in poverty, which means that they are lacking in at least one of the three areas of basic needs (World Bank 1994, 13).

Using a combined method, the World Bank defined four socio-economic strata: the nonpoor, the ascendent poor, the descendent poor, and the structurally poor. This formulation makes it clear that "poverty in general, and extreme poverty in particular, are predominantly rural" (World Bank 1994, 13). Indeed, only 12 percent of the rural population was found to be nonpoor. By comparing that percentage with the level of rural poverty established by the AID 1977 report (83 percent), it would appear that poverty remains very high in the countryside.

Using World Bank values for the basic market basket, the per capita incomes of temporary day laborers, permanent day laborers, the unemployed, and unpaid family laborers all fall well below the poverty line (World Bank 1994, tech. app. 2, p. 1).

Yet this depth of poverty is difficult to perceive in the way in which Seligson displays the data. He cites monthly per capita income at a national average income of 367 colones per month. His per capita figures result from dividing the total monthly average incomes of farmers by 3.25 (Seligson 1995, t. 6). This result is obtained by dividing the household size of 5.23 persons by the average number of 1.61 employed persons per household (Seligson 1993, 1-45). But a household size of 5.23 persons is characteristic only of rural nonpoor households (12.2 percent of rural households). In reality, household size varies according to socioeconomic category, ranging from 7.0 members for the rural structural poor, to 6.0 for the descendent poor, to 6.1 for the ascendent poor (World Bank 1994, p. 15, t. 6). If a household is defined as having 6 members (much closer to the present Salvadoran rural reality), the income figures in his table 6 would indicate that about 80 percent of Salvadoran rural society are poor.

Translating the rural average industrial wage of 819 colones per month (Seligson 1995, 68) to per capita income yields either 252 colones for a family of 5.23 persons or 219 colones for a family of 6 persons. Either way, these "gainfully employed Salvadorans" live right at the poverty line set at 239 colones per month. Thus rather than considering some agricultural incomes to be adequate, researchers must consider many Salvadorans employed in rural industrial occupations to be poor as well.

lack of access to water and sanitation services. Any household with one or more of these basic needs unmet is classified as poor.

TABLE 3 *Estimates of Landless and Tenant Populations in El Salvador circa 1992*

Categories	Number	As a Percentage of the EAEP Age 16 and Older ^a
Seligson's categories ^b		
Landless		
Temporary day laborers	169,432 ^b	10.4
Tenants		
Renters	96,005 ^c	5.9
Sharecroppers	10,564 ^c	0.6
Colonato	2,039 ^c	0.1
Seligson's total	278,040	17.0
Additional categories		
Landless		
Permanent day laborers	75,649 ^b	3.6
Unemployed	58,293 ^b	4.6
Unpaid family laborers	62,008 ^b	3.8
Land-poor	73,721 ^b	4.5
Additional total	296,671	16.5
Grand total	547,711	33.5

^a The economically active employed population, according to Seligson's definition, adds up to 1,633,993 Salvadorans (Seligson 1995, t. 1).

^b Figures from Seligson (1995, t. 2).

^c Figures from Seligson (1995, t. 3).

DISCUSSION

Arraying the different possible values for the crucial categories of landless, land-poor, and tenants and projecting their national impact make it clear that a spectrum of outcomes is possible (see my table 3). From Seligson's figure of 17 percent for landless and tenants (Seligson 1995, 66), reasonable alternate assumptions raise the number to as much as 33.5 percent. In any event, landownership or landlessness and tenancy are significant not because of the percentage thresholds they might cross but because they express social categories that represent different levels of satisfaction or disaffection with current conditions. These categories must be related to actions taken by rural individuals as well as to attitudes held by these actors.

The 1993 USAID report sheds some light on rural attitudes. In terms of satisfaction with their lives, of the respondents in the five domains studied (cooperatives, smallholding beneficiaries of agrarian reform, owners, renters, and *tenedores*), 53 to 74 percent were "very unsatisfied" or "some what unsatisfied."¹¹ High degrees of political alienation

11. See Vidales 1993, p. 2-24, t. 2.11, "Life Satisfaction," and p. 2-25, "Political Support-Alienation."

were registered in the categories of support for the system, respect for human rights, trust in the army, trust in the legislature, trust in the institutions of government, and fair trials. These measures of dissatisfaction and alienation show that the Salvadoran countryside is anything but stable.

The very high levels of rural poverty, land invasions, political militancy, and alienation all denote great potential for instability. But another question must also be asked.

Why the Conservative Estimates?

Some of Seligson's assumptions are counterintuitive (such as the conclusion that those without land are not necessarily landless), while others are driven by policy considerations rather than by the meaning of the categories (the argument about labor shortage). Seligson's (1993) USAID report, from which his (1995) article derived almost exclusively, is a considerably richer document, and some things that were not imported from that report are telling. Foremost among them is Seligson's fuller explanation of his criterion for landlessness: "I want the estimate of the number of landless to be conservative because the estimates developed here have explicit implications for public policy and the expenditure of public funds. Unless the procedure that I have followed—as described below—is used, the estimated size of the landless/land-poor population could be artificially large" (Seligson 1993, 1–9). This startling statement acknowledges that the assumptions that must be used for the analysis follow policy guidelines. His allusion to "implications of public policy and the expenditure of public funds" appears to be telling USAID that redistributive policies are a waste of money.

Seligson characterizes the 1980 Salvadoran agrarian reform as the "most extensive nonsocialist reform ever undertaken in Latin America except in Mexico" (1995, 64).¹² He acknowledges nevertheless the "irony" that "hundreds of thousands" of Salvadorans are doomed to poverty (1995, 71). To call this central fact of rural life an irony is simply a way of avoiding responsibility for dealing with the problem that his own data show to be real. Because Seligson seems opposed to agrarian reform, what solution does he propose to resolve those "ironies"?

In the 1993 report, Seligson recognized four restraining factors: little land to redistribute, environmental degradation, neoliberal policies, and capital constraints. He then suggested that rural or urban industrial-

12. Seligson cites Grindle (1986, 134–36), but nowhere in those pages does she state what he attributes to her. Instead, she says "Only in Nicaragua and El Salvador was concern for agrarian reform evident in this period [the late 1970s], and in the latter case, it was largely pursued as a means to scuttle social revolution in the countryside and was accompanied by extensive repression (Browning 1983; Deere 1982)" (Grindle 1986, 135).

ization is the only policy option (Seligson 1993, 1:55–59). These factors and constraints appear to preclude redistributive policy. This opinion is echoed in another USAID report by Donald Jackson, “[P]utting large public investment into land tenure reform may have enormous benefits from the perspective of socio-political stability, but it has done little at the aggregate level in terms of raising living standards or agricultural production above levels found in privately owned or rented lands” (Jackson 1993, 39).

Seligson’s research and his specific methodology were designed to show that destabilizing violence will not occur under present conditions. The policy implications are obvious: future investment by USAID should be at a lower level than at present and concentrated in the structural adjustment program to alter the macroeconomic structure. Although this approach will yield predictably harsh outcomes for the rural population, certainly in the short term, Seligson has reassured USAID that it will not lead to unpleasantness and violence. Yet the real unpleasantness and violence lie in the growing structural poverty and the miserable quality of life that will have to be borne by hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who have already suffered enormously. That violence is elided into the more palatable “irony”.

Could other policy alternatives been contemplated? Strategies based on agrarian reform have been successful where the state has intervened selectively with technical assistance, credit, and revised legal frameworks to help the reform sector, as in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Another approach to reform was proposed in the 1977 USAID report cited earlier:

An average target-group family on a less than 2 ha. farm would have enough on-farm income to be above the target group limit if they cultivated 1.1 ha. of a permanent or specialty crop. To achieve the same income in Basic Grains would require six cultivated hectares; 4.3 of those six hectares would have to be interplanted to two grains at the same time. Since the less than 2 ha. farm on the average has only .97 ha. of cropland, even the most intensive crops will not lift the family out of the target group, but it would accomplish 90 percent of the task and increase incomes by more than 300 percent. Only a small residual income would be required from off-farm sources to provide significantly over \$225 per capita incomes. (Daines and Steen 1977, 41)

This sensible recommendation could have been accomplished by simply permitting smallholders to cultivate coffee, something many of them already do for wages.¹³ In assessing the obstacles to implementation of that policy, Daines and Steen observed, “[T]here are no obvious reasons in the technology or marketing structure of the high value permanent crops like coffee which prevent small farmers from being very competitive. Their

13. Seligson comments on this point in noting that fewer than 15 percent of fee-simple farmers plant permanent crops (1993, 52). That 15 percent, however, accounts for half of all farmland or more.

abundant labor is in most coffee countries a significant comparative advantage which allows them to be competitive with large producers. The lack of small farm (access) to coffee may in some respects be an institutional issue relating to the way production is managed, or it may be due to the severe lack of credit access for tree formation" (Daines and Steen 1977, 19).

The obstacles to this policy have to do with the domination of labor by a system that has not hesitated to use force to ensure a low rural wage. In this respect, little has changed in El Salvador since the mid-1970s. With the emphasis placed on high-technology and export-oriented agriculture, entry into the export market by small farmers will be more difficult except as laborers. What has changed, with the help of USAID consultants, is official appreciation of the difficulties facing rural families. Now new research-linked discourse clears that hurdle by ratifying a policy that acknowledges Salvadoran "ironies" but avoids real reform.

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