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AGRARIAN REFORM AND POLITICS

by

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AGRARIAN REFORM AND POLITICS

Elsa Chaney

Agrarian reform is never purely an economic and technical issue. It also involves political procedures and bargaining in getting reform legislation enacted or decreed, as well as in implementing and enforcing it. Moreover--and often apart from actual attempts at reform--campaign programs and promises of land to the landless have become standard issues in Latin American politics.

Several attempts at reform are here appraised to discover whether any set of conditions or tactics might explain why land reform has been politically successful in a few countries but has politically failed in most.

Until well into the 1930s few North or Latin Americans among the government elites questioned that industrialization would--as it had done earlier in Western Europe and the United States--bring automatic rises in the standard of living and the formation of middle classes dedicated to liberal democratic forms of government.

The belief that changes in social and political structures would occur as a result of economic development became a doctrine of the United States foreign aid program during the 1950s and the early Kennedy years.¹ Operation Panamerica, at the end of the Eisenhower administration, concentrated on economic inputs, technical assistance and private sector investment, as development planners tried to fit economic models based upon the Western experience to the radically different economic systems of Latin America.

In the early 1960s, when it became evident that economic growth rates had not met expectations, many government and academic development planners

went outside the economic system to seek the explanation in the deficient social arrangements of Latin American societies. Economic development would not occur, they asserted, unless the rigidly stratified class systems underwent structural changes to give marginal groups a stake in their own national economic and social life. The Alliance for Progress echoed and to some extent perhaps fostered concern with social factors as crucial inputs for economic development; it also emphasized improvements in human resources through heavy public investment in education, health and housing.

Now many observers identify the crucial factor as "the lag in the development of political institutions behind social and economic change."² For two decades after World War II, Huntington states, American foreign policy "concentrated sustained attention, analysis and action upon economic problems in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but devoted little if any effort to the problems of political organization and the building of political institutions."³ American policymakers, Huntington goes on, long believed that "political stability would be the natural and inevitable result of the achievement of, first, economic development and then of social reform."⁴

Planners and academicians oftentimes suggest that social and economic prescriptions for development have not entirely failed, but rather, that few governments have had the capacity and political determination to push development programs hard enough to effect genuine structural reform. Too many who ought to know better, Véliz comments, have placed "excessive trust in the application of technical solutions to problems which essentially are political ones."⁵ In the case of land reform, Flores

notes, the result is a gap between what governments say and what governments do. Land reforms, he says, are anything but safe, routine programs which governments can easily begin; instead, they are "revolutionary, last-resort measures, like deep surgery."⁶

Furthermore, if development and modernization depend upon a liberal, middle class state that will espouse the cause of the workers and campesinos, then development is extremely unlikely in the view of many Latin Americans. After being in power in some countries for three or four decades, "far from reforming anything," Véliz says, "the middle classes have

. . . been responsible for maintaining or even strengthening the traditional structure and for leading some of the major countries into a situation of institutional stability and economic stagnation."⁷

The late 1960s in Latin America witnessed a strong turn toward more authoritarian governments; perhaps these are the only political arrangements with the necessary power to bring about profound structural changes. Several political groups advocate variations of socialist development models with some form of state participation in their economics and a fostering of mass popular participation in political, social and cultural life.

So far as agrarian reform is concerned, even moderately progressive political groups and governments now offer programs which include measures for some type of land distribution and rural modernization. Political debate over systems of land tenure and ownership (as over economic development generally) no longer centers on whether state action is required, but rather on what kind of government intervention, how much, and how fast.

Agrarian Reform as a Political Issue

The Mexican Revolution marked the first time in Latin America that land reform was an effective issue--a factor in bringing enduring political and economic change. The cry "tierra y libertad" served to rally the Mexican peasants and to provide the major thrust for the revolutionary forces. For the most part, the initial changes were made by the peasants themselves who simply took back land they regarded as unlawfully wrested from them. Legal justification came afterwards.⁸

Only in the administration of Cárdenas (1934-1940) did expropriation of large estates become widespread, often accompanied by the violent opposition of the hacendado class and by organization of the more militant peasants into agrarista bands. To date 147 million acres of land have been given to 2.6 million peasants and only 0.5 percent of the value of expropriated land was ever paid for.⁹ The reform was a true confiscatory measure.

The Mexican revolution had deep repercussions throughout Latin America. In mid-1924, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, exiled from Peru, founded in Mexico the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria de América, which advocated the incorporation of the Indian campesino into national life and massive land reform.

The first Latin American leader in modern times to effectively and deliberately use the land reform issue in mobilizing peasants was Rómulo Betancourt. After the death of Venezuelan dictator Vicente Gómez, Betancourt in 1936 sent to the countryside professional political organizers to seek out potential community leaders and assist in forming peasant unions. Specific goals of these peasant organizations were

access to enough land to earn a decent living, improvements in wages and land tenure arrangements with landowners, and transformation of the rural environment through health programs, sewage and water supply systems, housing, schools, roads and other community services.¹⁰

In 1941, Betancourt's movement was legalized as Acción Democrática and it became the country's largest organized political group. By 1945, Betancourt had created a constituency estimated at over 100,000 campesinos organized in some 500 peasant unions, as well as a strong following among urban workers. By 1948, an agrarian reform law was passed by an AD congress.

The AD government fell to a conservative military coup less than a month later, but a de facto agrarian reform already had taken place in a "little known, but extremely important radical phase."¹¹ By the end of 1948, 73,000 peasants had settled on land with much political credit accruing both to the peasant leaders and to the AD party. The dictatorship of Pérez Jiménez halted the reform program of Acción Democrática until 1958, however, when AD returned to power. Venezuela's agrarian reform program has settled about 96,000 families at a cost over \$100 million;¹² the finding sets it apart from all other reforms.

In the Bolivian revolution of 1952 peasant unions or sindicatos rurales played the organizing role in agrarian reform. After invasions by peasants in several parts of the country the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) legalized the land seizures. Only in 1969-70, however, did the government formulate a plan for granting definitive titles to the peasant landowners on any large scale.

In Guatemala, land was an important issue in the overthrow of General Jorge Ubico and the election of Juan José Arévalo in 1945.

However, not much headway in land distribution was made until Jacobo Arbenz succeeded to the presidency in 1950. He inaugurated a massive agrarian reform program and some 100,000 peasant families reportedly had been settled by 1954.¹³ Many of these simply had taken land without waiting for a formal legal process; later, the government retained ownership of the expropriated lands, and no individual titles were issued.

After the fall of Arbenz, the peasants were driven off their claims and the lands reverted to previous owners. Since that time, reform efforts in Guatemala have been at a standstill.

Land reform had become a major political issue in Peru by the time of the elections of 1962. Only the outgoing President Manuel Prado's Movimiento Democrático Peruano did not allude to agrarian reform directly in its official platform, but promised "a solution to the Indian problem."¹⁴

Prado, however, had established a commission to study the question of agrarian reform. In 1960 it recommended limits on the amount of land that could be acquired and expropriation in provinces with high rural population density and in situations where land was exploited by tenants or where the land was not cultivated or cultivated badly.¹⁵ An Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization was set up at the end of Prado's administration, but few actions were ever taken.

Fernando Belaúnde Terry, whose Acción Popular party had made an impressive showing in the elections of 1956, campaigned on horseback in the most remote parts of the Peruvian Andes and Amazon, visiting villages that never before had seen a presidential candidate, and

promising land to those who worked it. However, Belaúnde, unlike Betancourt, did not attempt either to organize the peasants into permanent unions or to single out potential indigenous leaders for his political movement. Movements were organized in several parts of the sierra but without outside leadership.¹⁶

Soon after his inauguration, Belaúnde sent an agrarian reform bill to congress. By then a massive wave of land invasions already had spread over the sierra as Indian communities--some estimates place the number at 300,000 persons--took Belaúnde's campaign promises seriously and moved without waiting for a land reform law.¹⁷ Belaúnde decided to use the Guardia Civil--Peru's internal army--to dislodge the campesinos; only in Junín in the central sierra were the Indians allowed to stay on the lands they had occupied.¹⁸ During his term of office, Belaúnde never moved decisively to implement the land reform, especially in the matter of funding, and by the time of the military coup of 1968, only some 9,200 families had been resettled.

The agrarian reform was the first law to be decreed by the revolutionary government of Cuba. There was little resettlement involved in the Cuban program; all medium and large properties (over 456 hectares) were simply expropriated and came under the administration of the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria. What was eliminated was the rent some 100,000 small agriculturalists paid for the right to farm on these larger estates, many administered as business properties and owned by U. S. citizens. This reform paralleled the reduction of rents on urban property in the cities; at the same time, both rural and urban salaries were raised.¹⁹

In Chile, land reform was a major issue in the elections of 1964. The independent-right government of Jorge Alessandri had passed an agrarian reform law which had been implemented in a very limited way, and both the Christian Democratic and Leftist parties (the Socialists and Communists united behind a single candidate) promised a sweeping and vigorous agrarian reform.

Even before an agrarian reform law was passed in 1967, the victorious Frei government had accelerated expropriation and resettlement under legislation passed but not very energetically implemented by the Alessandri government. It was not until 1968, however, that legislation removed the barriers which had kept rural peasant unions from organizing on any broad basis and which prevented them from exerting enough pressure to be consulted on the framing of the agrarian reform law. By 1970, peasant unions had united into three large confederations and were growing phenomenally, counting an estimated 100,000 members among them.²⁰

Because impetus for the organization of the peasants first came from the government--McCoy documents that in 1964 there were only 1,647 union members among the 200,000 farm workers--the question of co-optation of the peasant movement by the government remains an open one.²¹ The Frei government on occasion has used armed force to repress land invasions in areas where such peasant action was considered premature. McCoy, however, does not believe that the peasant movement is being seriously emasculated. For one thing, the Marxist confederation and the independent Christian union league are growing rapidly, although their combined membership does not yet equal the government-sponsored confederation. For another, the Instituto de Desarrollo Agropecuario (INDAP), to which

organization of the peasants has been entrusted, has done battle for the peasant unions against other government agencies.²²

The Politics of Agrarian Reform

This inventory of land reforms actually carried out in Latin America is too brief to warrant any conclusions on the political conditions and tactics necessary for achieving successful reform. Indeed, so far the cases are too few to identify even major trends with certainty. Nevertheless, some similarities in the circumstances surrounding successful agrarian reform are worth pondering without suggesting that they are necessary conditions under which reform will always take place.

First, in political terms, what is a "successful" reform? Flores defines true agrarian reform as "a revolutionary measure which passes power, property and status from one group of the community to another."²³ All power and property and status need not be transferred; an interesting sidelight of the Mexican reform is the fact that the peasants did not demand, nor did they achieve, the complete abolition of the hacienda system. Chevalier remarks that the campesinos apparently did not want to destroy an institution as traditional as their own villages and which "formed an essential part of their cultural horizon."²⁴ Nevertheless, as Furtado points out, through a thoroughgoing reform, the Mexican state gained a stable political situation, was able to concentrate on industrialization and make great strides toward modernization of agriculture.²⁵

Other authors suggest that in order to be successful, a reform must be rapid, massive and irreversible. By these criteria, probably

only Mexico, Bolivia and Cuba can be regarded as having carried out land reform total enough and confiscatory enough to have effected widespread redistribution of political power and income.

Venezuela's land reform was massive and in its first stage (1945-48) had revolutionary overtones. However, in spite of the fact that nearly 100,000 peasants have been given land, the reform cannot be considered confiscatory in any sweeping sense; that is, the land reform did not result in the transference of power from an establishment group to the campesinos, but rather, the latter were taken into the political system and granted a share in decision-making. The landed oligarchy never were as important in Venezuela as in some other countries, so land reform did not bring an entirely new set of political actors upon the political scene. Venezuela had vast public lands and sufficient government resources to give land to significant numbers, yet not be forced to expropriate without compensation. Indeed, many landowners chose to sell voluntarily, and at several points the agrarian reform institute had more offers than it could handle.²⁶

In Peru under Belaúnde and Colombia under the National Front--the three presidents who have ruled alternately representing the Liberal and Conservative parties--only token reform has been carried out. Peru's new agrarian reform under Velasco and Chile's program are still in the process of developing and cannot yet be classified definitively.

Revolutionary Agrarian Reform

The conditions under which these land reforms have been carried out seem to confirm Huntington's thesis on the feasibility of land reform, at least in Latin America. Huntington suggests that those who debate

whether changes in land tenure depend upon "reform from above" or "reform from below" are engaged in a false argument, since successful reforms (those which alter the political and economic power structure in significant ways) have been carried out only when there is action from both directions. Power must be concentrated in a new elite group committed to reform, Huntington says; however, this first prerequisite must coincide with the mobilization and organization of the peasantry.²⁷

Huntington goes on to suggest that land reform by revolution is the most successful because it fulfills to the greatest degree the following conditions: there is rapid centralization of power in the hands of the revolutionary elite and there is, at the same time, rapid mobilization of the peasants.²⁸ If land reforms occurring so far in Latin America are scaled according to their relative thoroughness as massive, partial and token, it appears that massive reform has taken place so far only when both conditions have been fulfilled. On the contrary, in situations where land invasions are repressed (as in Colombia²⁹ since 1948 and in Peru under Belaúnde) or where peasants are weak and unorganized (as until recently in Chile), only partial or token land reforms have been carried out. In cases where the peasants are completely repressed (as in Guatemala in 1954 and in Venezuela in 1948), even an extensive de facto reform can be aborted.

Huntington does not take into account another aspect of successful land reform which appears in all cases of full-scale agrarian reform in Latin America. The most extensive and enduring reforms have taken place without prior detailed plans or strategies of the revolutionary group or government concerned. It is clear that little reform can take place

in the face of a political system hostile to the whole idea and with sufficient power to crush peasant initiative. Nevertheless, even if the political power elite is sympathetic, it seems essential that the initial impetus for deep reforms come from below. New revolutionary governments have many things to deal with, all at once, and they may not regard land reform as a first priority. In the four cases of successful reform in Latin America, there has been a preliminary phase of spontaneous peasant land invasions, later followed by government ratification of the new order in the countryside.

The classic case of peasants forcing adoption of an agrarian reform program by a revolutionary elite is that of Mexico. Both Chevalier and Furtado cite the fact that a spirit of solidarity among the peasants had been revived on the eve of the revolution, awakened by the encroaching plantations on their traditional communal lands and pressures for their labor. The latter says that without the spontaneous, communitarian surge of feeling against the landowners, there would have been no agrarian revolution. The peasants modified profoundly what the urban leaders had intended as the installation of a liberal democracy.³⁰

After Mexico's peasants drove out significant numbers of the land-owning class, they waited for the incoming revolutionary government to devise the political procedures and processes to make the change definitive in the countryside. The gradual formation of peasant leagues and the incorporation of the national peasant confederation into the revolutionary party institutionalized the representation of peasant interests and assured the campesinos a permanent voice at the highest level of government and a vantage point from which to fight for the fulfillment of the agrarian reform laws against the remaining landowners

and against neo-latifundism.

Formal representation of peasants in the national government party often is interpreted as a device to control the peasants and to assure their vote for official party candidates. However, there seems to be ample evidence that the arrangement is not mere co-optation, but does give the peasants a certain influence and voice in government. As Chevalier points out, more research is needed on exactly how peasant interests are represented in the Mexican system; however, he also observes that a major counter-revolution would be needed to dislodge the peasants from the advances they have won.³¹

The insistence on peasant initiative in successful reform does not mean that the task of government can be minimized. It is also a fact that not even partial agrarian reform has taken place without the active participation of some type of government. But it is notable that, up until now, the most extensive land reforms in Latin America have taken place at the initiative of the peasantry; they are made legal by the passage of appropriate legislation and consolidated through the creation of agrarian reform agencies and systematic organization of the peasantry --after the fact.

Reform from Above

If massive peasant initiative is a prerequisite to reform in the agrarian sector, can successful peasant mobilization be effected after a new revolutionary elite has taken power? Whether urban-based movements are capable of organizing peasants still remains to be seen. E. J. Hobsbawm reviews all the revolutionary parties and movements in Latin America which have tried to reach the campesino and concludes that they

almost always failed entirely--for reasons not yet clear. He suggests that the cultural gap may be too wide, or that the left has not yet learned how to formulate its program in terms peasants can understand.³² Possible exceptions may be pre-1948 Venezuela and Cuba.

It is true that so far in Latin America, significant agrarian reform has taken place only when the peasantry is revolutionary and takes land reform into its own hands in the initial phases. While this puts the future of orderly, incremental reform in some doubt, it would be a mistake to dismiss entirely the possibility of reform within a democratic framework. Venezuela's reform was a mixture of the two models--an earlier revolutionary phase followed ten years afterward by an orderly reform, duly ratified by the Venezuelan congress and carried out by legally constituted government agencies. Nor can the Chilean reform, although falling far short of its original target of settling 100,000 families by the end of the Frei administration in 1970, be dismissed as a failure. For one thing, the Chilean reform is too new to be evaluated in any definitive way. More importantly, there are many indications that the reform may have altered the Chilean rural power structure in irreversible ways.

The Chilean reform will be most instructive to observe because it is the only on-going experiment being carried out in a democratic system where peasant mobilization was put off until last, and where the formation of peasant consciousness and leadership, as well as the organization itself, has been directed from above. Chile's Christian Democratic government came into power with detailed plans for an agrarian reform already drawn up by politicians and agrarian experts; in the legislation

phase, peasants--their organizations at that time fragmented and weak-- were hardly consulted. Only in the operational phase has there been serious effort to organize the campesinos, but the organizational model is the rural trade union league working in harmony with the government. In several cases where peasant unions became strong enough to defy the government and stage land invasions in places where they considered reform was moving too slowly, there have been confrontations between CORA, the agrarian reform agency, and the campesinos.³³

The lack of peasant support in the initial phases of the Chilean agrarian reform may have been offset by several advantages in the Chilean situation which McCoy documents and which may yet weight the balance toward massive reform under a democratic regime. The pre-reform climate, he says, invited support for reform because even Chile's large landowners shared the idea that the backwardness of Chilean agriculture was an obstacle to development.³⁴ Moreover, unlike all the other Latin American nations where any type of reform has occurred--excluding Venezuela--agriculture was not all-important in the economy, contributing slightly more than 10 percent gross national product and engaging less than 30 percent of the population.

McCoy also attributes the relative success of the Chilean agrarian reform to the fact that the Christian Democrats are a highly motivated reform group, founded on a strong ideological basis which has contributed to the building of probably the best organized political party in Latin America. McCoy points out that many students of political parties imply that ideological motivation and centralized policy-making are not as "modern" as the bargaining style characteristic of U. S. political

parties. The Chilean case suggests, however, "the proposition that a relatively closed party with an inclusive world view is an effective reformer."³⁵ As he also observes, the Chilean reform was pushed forward because of constant support and pressure from the left.³⁶

The history of other land reform attempts on the democratic model in Latin America--in Belaúnde's Peru and under Valencia and Lleras Restrepo in Colombia--demonstrates that incremental reform, even when backed by government initiative, so far has not been nearly so successful as the revolutionary-anarchic model. Albert O. Hirschman, who has been the most vocal proponent of "revolution by stealth" or "reform-mongering," has suggested that such an approach can be successful in the area of land reform because landowners can be successfully lulled into a false sense of security by their belief that orderly reform will take a long time (to secure passage of the legislation, set up the agrarian reform agency, begin expropriation); that much can happen during this relatively long implementation period, and that the middle-sized and small farmer will not oppose land reform since it affects them very little.³⁷ The difficulty with Hirschman's analysis would seem to be that the middle-sized and small farmers are unimportant in Latin America in terms of their numbers and the political pressure they can exert and that landowners are absolutely correct in their predictions that much can happen between the promise of land reform and the actual expropriation of their own haciendas. In Peru during the Prado and Belaúnde administrations and in Colombia since the founding of INCORA in 1961 under Lleras Camargo, there has been broad, official agreement on the need for land reform. Indeed, the national associations of

landowners in both countries took an official part in framing agrarian reform legislation. And in both countries, effective reform was bogged down within the bureaucratic toils of the agrarian reform agency or in congresses which simply refused to vote sufficient funds to do much more than maintain the agencies as holding operations.

Footnotes

¹Edward C. Banfield, American Foreign Aid Doctrines (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1963) pp. 4-5.

²Samuel P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies (New York: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 5.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 6.

⁵Claudio Véliz, ed., The Politics of Conformity in Latin America (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 2.

⁶Edmundo Flores, "Latin American Land Reform: Meaning and Experience," in Charles T. Nisbet, ed., Latin America: Problems in Economic Development (New York: Free Press, 1969), p. 132.

⁷Claudio Véliz, Obstacles to Change in Latin America (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 2.

⁸Celso Furtado, La economía latinoamericana desde la conquista ibérica hasta la revolución cubana (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1969), p. 259.

⁹Flores, "Latin American Land Reform," p. 140; Terry L. McCoy, "The Politics of Structural Change in Latin America: The Case of Agrarian Reform in Chile," Land Tenure Center Research Paper No. 37 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969), p. 9, mimeographed.

¹⁰This account of the development of the Acción Democrática party and the program of Rómulo Betancourt is based on John D. Powell, "The Role of the Federación Campesina in the Venezuelan Agrarian Reform Process," Land Tenure Center Research Paper No. 26 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1967), pp. 5-13.

¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

¹²Furtado, p. 270.

¹³Solon Barraclough, "Strategies of Land Reform," in Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., Masses in Latin America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 105.

¹⁴S. Martínez G., Guía electoral, 1962 (Lima: 1962), p. 128.

¹⁵República del Perú, Comisión para la Reforma Agraria y la Vivienda, La reforma agraria en el Perú (Lima: 1960).

¹⁶Howard Handelman of the University of Wisconsin, Department of Political Science, found that in nearly every case of peasant unrest in the Peruvian sierra in the 1960's, the peasants had first moved to organize themselves without depending upon outside leadership; the students and intellectuals from Lima moved in after the initial land invasions had taken place.

¹⁷The figure 300,000 is given in John Strasma, "The United States and Agrarian Reform in Peru," a paper prepared for the Adlai Stevenson Institute of Public Affairs Seminar, May 1970. Hector Béjar Rivera gives the same number in Peru: 1965, Notes on a Guerrilla Experience, translated by William Rose (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 57.

¹⁸Data from the Handelman notes.

¹⁹Based on information in Furtado, Chapter XXIV.

²⁰Terry L. McCoy, "Agrarian Reform in Chile, 1962-1968: A Study of Politics and the Development Process," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1969, p. 47. Figure as of February 1969.

²¹Ibid., p. 46.

²²Ibid., p. 42.

²³Flores, "Latin American Land Reform," p. 135.

²⁴Chevalier in Véliz, Politics of Conformity, p. 166; see also Gerrit Huizer, "Peasant Organization in the Process of the Agrarian Reform in Mexico" (St. Louis: Washington University Social Science Institute, Studies in Comparative International Development, IV, No. 6, 1968-1969), p. 137.

²⁵Furtado, p. 264.

²⁶Harry E. Wing, Land Reform in Venezuela (Washington, D. C.: Agency for International Development, 1970), pp. 31-32.

²⁷Huntington, p. 384.

²⁸Eric R. Wolf, Peasant Wars in the Twentieth Century (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

²⁹Hobsbawm regards the Colombian as the "greatest of all Latin American agrarian movements outside the Mexican revolution" and believes that a mass social revolution was aborted and turned into civil war and anarchy only because of the lack of effective leadership and organization. E. J. Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Rural Migrants in Politics," in Véliz, ed., Politics of Conformity, p. 52.

³⁰Chevalier, p. 161; Furtado, p. 259.

³¹Chevalier, p. 169.

³²Hobsbawm, p. 50.

³³McCoy, pp. 241-245.

³⁴Ibid., p. 21.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 36-37.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 184-185.

³⁷Albert O. Hirschman, "Revolution by Stealth: The Case for Sequential Reform," in Economic Development: Evolution or Revolution, Laura Randall, Ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1964), p. 78.