“Guatemala Se Envenena”: Industrial Agriculture and the Creation of Environmental Consciousness during Guatemala’s Civil War

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Between 1960 and 1996, the state repressed labor activists and peasants who resisted the expansion of export agriculture. This paper argues that resistance to industrial agriculture was the cornerstone for a new language for social protest during Guatemala’s 36-year civil war. Opposition to the state coalesced around environmental issues, led by experts who spoke about the threat that deforestation, soil erosion and pesticide overuse posed to rural agriculture. These experts were able to openly criticize the dictatorship because they framed their critiques in the language of efficiency, productivity and conservation. For example, Guatemalan Marta Pilón—inspired by Rachel Carson—compiled a ghastly account of the pesticide contamination and deforestation caused by cotton production, which concluded that “Guatemala is poisoning herself.” These professionals—agronomists, journalists and politicians—were early leaders of Guatemala’s environmental movement and they tried to link social inequality to environmental risk. Their activism often marginalized Mayan peasants, who were portrayed as witless victims and rarely allowed to speak for themselves. Early expressions of environmental thought were constrained by race and class barriers that prevented progressives from building an effective coalition to check the power of industrial agriculture over politics.

This early environmental discourse was fractured after the election of the moderate President Julio César Méndez Montenegro in 1966. His election was a democratic opening that emboldened progressives, but conservatives quietly used targeted assassinations to eliminate the most outspoken progressives. As state violence increased, the environmental movement split into three competing discourses that reflected different ideas about the human place in the natural world. The ‘puristas’ believed that Guatemala’s fertility could be unleashed with judicious applications of capital and technology. They dismissed concerns about environmental harms by insisting that the tropical soils constantly regenerate their

fertility. The ‘puristas’ included most of Guatemala’s large landowners and agronomists, especially those who had trained in the United States. The ‘‘desarollistas” was a coalition of agronomists, politicians and journalists who wanted to create sustainable growth through regulation. According to these critics—including Marta Pilón—proper development depended on technicians who could strike the right balance between the well-being of humans and the environment. These development-focused moderates successfully raised the profile of the environmental issues in Guatemala and the state—pressured by international actors—implemented limited conservation measures. Finally, the radicals were a loose coalition of poets, writers, indigenous leaders and members of the guerilla forces who rejected the liberal-capitalist approach to agriculture. They believed that the state’s emphasis on crop rotations, soil remediation and forest protections was misguided because it did not address inequality. They argued that large landowners exploited workers and the land to produce wealth rapidly and urged Guatemalans to create a new model of governance that was inspired by indigenous knowledge. This paper demonstrates how schisms in Guatemala’s early environmental movement influenced progressive political discourse throughout Guatemala’s Civil War and into the present day.