Study questions

“Revolution or Reform” Lecture O’Toole 4a

OK! The nation of Peru underwent a revolution after a military government seized power from 1969–79. As Enrique Mayer explains: “The left-leaning military government (under General Velasco) implemented a drastic program of land redistribution from large landholders. Seized lands were turned into worker-managed cooperatives.” Sometimes the government took the land away from private landholders. Sometimes everyday people, Andeans, indigenous people, or those called “peasants” in the mid-20th century, invaded private land in land invasions, taking land for themselves. Then! The Peruvian government would take the land and redistribute the land to indigenous “peasants.” All of this – the land invasions, the government seizures of land, and the government redistribution of land was the Peruvian Agrarian Reform.

From the newly seized lands, the Peruvian government formed agricultural cooperatives, like a cooperative dairy farms or a cattle ranch or a sugar hacienda (a landed estate) that would be run by a bunch of people together. Instead of being privately owned, however, the cooperative was owned by the state. The problem was that these cooperatives began to falter and the country returned to civilian rule in the 1980s. So, the people who had been living on the state-run cooperatives then distributed the land among themselves. In other words, the agrarian reform began with high hopes, but was quickly did not work. This chapter is about how and why the Peruvian Agrarian Reform did not work.

Enrique Mayer is the scholar who wrote the chapter for today. He is an anthropologist and he “interviewed ex-landlords, land expropriators, politicians, government bureaucrats, intellectuals, peasant leaders, activists, ranchers, members of farming families, and others.” He intersperses their recollections with his own commentary. So, I read this chapter as a bunch of people recalling their memories about what happened to them during a very tumultuous time in the past. Together, their testimonies provide evidence that help scholars make arguments or make claims regarding what happened during Peru’s Agrarian Reform.

These discussion questions are organized by the following three themes (bolded below): 1) the purposes of Peru’s revolution, 2) the inequality created by this revolution, and 3) how indigenous people, “peasants” took on revolutionary structures.

1. What was happening at the Machu Asnu or Túpac Amaru II Cooperative? What was the purpose of a cooperative in Peru’s agrarian reform under General Velasco? What were cooperatives set up to do? How are these **purposes of the revolutionary government** communicated in the posters (primary sources)?
2. Why did the agrarian reform not work? Why would the agrarian reform be so unpopular – when it was supposed to redistribute land to people? Why did the Machu Asnu or Túpac Amaru II Cooperative, and other cooperatives, not work? How did the cooperatives become abusive? Why did people think that the cooperatives were worse than the (colonial) haciendas? What did people declare or describe as “abuse”? How did **cooperatives create inequality**?
3. Why did the peasant communities **dismantle the government’s cooperatives** in the 1970s? Why did workers, teachers, and peasant unions challenge the (Velasco) government? Why did peasants, such as those from Eqeqo Chacán, challenge the cooperative? How did people take over the cooperative? Why did the community of Circa Kajilla take over the cooperative? Would these communities recognize themselves in the government’s posters?

A note: A *comunero* was a member of a cooperative. After the Velasco revolution, indigenous people were renamed and named themselves peasants or *campesinos*. A man or a person from Cuzco would call themselves a *cusqueño*. A *mayordomo* is an overseer or a supervisor. Land occupations, or illegal seizures of land, are called *tomas de tierras.*