

SOWING THE SEEDS OF RESISTANCE: AGRARIAN REFORM, POLITICAL
VIOLENCE, AND POPULAR MOBILIZATION IN THE AGUÁN VALLEY OF
HONDURAS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Sowing the Seeds of Resistance: Agrarian Reform, Political Violence, and Popular Mobilization in the Aguán Valley of Honduras

The agrarian conflict in the Aguán Valley of Honduras is among the most violent and distressing in contemporary Latin America. It has roots in both local and global political economic processes, including structural adjustment and the proliferation of neoliberal economic policies in the region. In particular, the *Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola*, or Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector, drastically altered the landscape in rural Honduras, both literally and figuratively. An analysis of this policy reveals much about the nature of the current conflict, as well as that of the *campesino* (small farmer) movements that have organized to regain their land. This thesis seeks to shed light on the interconnectedness of economic policy, political violence, and popular resistance in the Aguán Valley and to examine the ways in which *campesino* movements frame their struggles and assert themselves as legitimate actors in the policy realm.

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This thesis is dedicated to the martyrs of the Aguán.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Palm trees as far as the eye can see. This description would often conjure up romantic images of dense jungle or rugged tropical beaches. These palms, however, have a different story to tell. Planted in neat rows that span tens of thousands of acres, they constitute the agro-industrial African palm plantations that cover the north coast of Honduras. While at first glance this landscape may seem innocuous enough, these palms stand on grounds that are at the center of a struggle for land that has become increasingly fierce in recent years. These palms have concealed acts of violence and clandestine graves. They have absorbed blood spilled from both sides of this conflict. These palms have also borne witness to the emergence of popular movements that have organized in defense of their rights to land and food sovereignty. They have seen new generations of men and women rise up in resistance to political repression, and to risk their lives to work for justice in their communities.

Statement of the Problem

The agrarian conflict in the Aguán Valley of Honduras is among the most violent and distressing in contemporary Latin America. At the time of this writing, more than one hundred and twenty five individuals, primarily members of *campesino* (peasant) organizations, have been assassinated in this region since the 2009 coup d'état. Many hundreds more have been attacked, threatened, or otherwise intimidated. Communities have been forcefully displaced and burnt to the ground, and countless families have lost

their homes and livelihoods. Although the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and several other national and international human rights organizations have denounced this violence, it continues unabated.

The rich agricultural land of the Aguán Valley is at the heart of this conflict. The points of contention center around questions of who in fact owns this land, how it should be distributed, and for what purposes it should be used. The conflict has emerged between several members of the agro-industrial elite, who currently hold or claim to hold title to a vast majority of the land in this region, and more than a hundred thousand local campesinos¹ who argue that this land is rightfully theirs. Citing the constitutional mandate for agrarian reform, the campesinos argue that they have been forcefully dispossessed of their land in illegal and violent ways, and over roughly the last decade they have organized into new popular movements in order to reclaim this land. These movements have employed a wide range of strategies and tactics in this struggle, and have been met with extreme levels of violence from both the private landowners and the state.

A number of factors have contributed to this conflict in some way. A history of problematic land tenure and titling policies in Honduras is relevant, as families and communities commonly lack legal title to lands they have occupied for generations. The government has made several attempts at agrarian reform since the 1960s, but ongoing political instability has precluded the possibility for comprehensive and lasting change. More recently, the dominance of neoliberal economic policies and influence of the World

¹ I use the term “campesino” in this thesis (as opposed to the English translation “peasant”), as the term holds particular significance in terms of ideology and identity in the Latin American context, and as “peasant” often carries negative and disempowering connotations associated with poverty and “backwardness” in Western society. For more on these theoretical distinctions, see Boyer (2003) and Loker (1996), among others.

Bank and other multinational lending institutions has shaped the nature of land reform in Honduras, shifting the emphasis from redistribution of public and idle lands to landless families to the establishment of land markets, individual property rights, and the promotion of industrial agriculture, ultimately resulting in a greater number of landless families after this period of reforms than before (Brockett 1998). Perhaps more than ever, the questions of whose right to land counts most – that of the campesinos or of the elite agriculturalists – is at the forefront of this struggle. The June 2009 ouster of President Manuel Zelaya, who was set to enact progressive land reforms when he was violently deposed from office, along with the subsequent regimes' militarization of the Aguán and inaction in response to violence directed toward campesinos at the hands of landowners' private security forces, point toward the favoring of the latter.

Significance of Study

To understand the contemporary conflict in the Aguán, we must consider several historical, political, and economic factors. As such, my research aims to shed light on the interconnectedness of land reform policies, state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence, and popular resistance in the Aguán Valley of Honduras. I argue that the current conflict in the Aguán is primarily rooted in the failure of neoliberal policies of agrarian reform in Honduras, which are embodied in the *Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola* (Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector, or LMDSA). These policies have been accompanied by widespread political violence on a level not seen in decades. In response, local activists and campesino organizations are engaged in active resistance, the nature of which is largely influenced by this context.

This thesis explores the dynamics of these phenomena, and seeks to understand the ways in which these social movement actors mobilize and leverage pressure to create social change. It also locates this conflict within broader historical and global political economic contexts, in order to understand the many forces at play in shaping the contemporary situation.

While this struggle is important in its own right, it also has significant implications for scholars and practitioners interested in land issues, popular movements, and social justice, both in Honduras and beyond. This is a story we have seen before, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few who employ violent means to protect their political and economic interests. It is a story all too common to the people of Latin America, where popular movements have been repeatedly suppressed by corrupt governments and powerful oligarchies. However, it is also a story of the power of resistance and the passion with which individuals, communities, and social movements fight for justice against all odds.

Key Questions and Arguments

Several questions guide this research. How has the history of agrarian reform in Honduras shaped this contemporary struggle? How does land reform policy differently impact campesinos and the elite in this context? What are the relationships between the militarization in this region and elite interests? Does this case support or challenge arguments favoring neoliberal or “market-led” agrarian reform? How are local campesinos and activists resisting the political violence in this region? In what ways does an examination of these particular movements help us understand the constraints that social movements face when working in the context of a highly repressive state, as

well as the political opportunities and resources available to movements in today's globalized world?

More specifically, this thesis seeks to respond to the following research questions:

- What are the effects of the *Ley de Modernización* in contemporary Honduras, and in what ways has this policy shaped the ongoing conflict in the Aguán?
- How do popular (campesino) movements in the Aguán frame and articulate their struggles, both on national and international scales?
- In what ways are these campesino movements asserting themselves in the policy realm?

In this thesis, I argue that the current conflict in the Aguán is rooted in both a specific policy (the LMDSA) and the general nature of contemporary global capitalism and development discourse. The latter's focus on commodification of land and natural resources, private ownership of the means of production, and market-based solutions to social problems such as poverty and landlessness have only served to exacerbate entrenched social inequality in this region and beyond. Further, the LMDSA failed to actually address the limitations of previous agrarian reform programs or the structural causes of landlessness, and was instead part of a thinly-veiled project to consolidate the political and economic power of elites in Honduras.

I also present an analysis of campesino movements in the Aguán. Here, I argue that understanding the nature of these movements, their contention, and the context in which they operate requires an approach that is both historically deep and conceptually broad. I further contend that we must consider culturalist, structuralist, and materialist concerns and conditions in order to fully appreciate the complexity of this struggle.

There is much to be learned from these sophisticated movements – both in terms of this particular conflict, and in our broader understandings of how social movements function within the context of a highly repressive state in today’s globalized world. As the context in which this conflict occurs is central to the analysis that follows, I turn now to a discussion of the political and social landscape of contemporary Honduras.

The Contemporary Context

The struggle in the Aguán is emblematic of many of the problems that communities in Honduras face today, and is just one of many conflicts that can be traced to the process of economic neoliberalization and the strains that the global capitalist system inflicts on local communities. As elsewhere, local desires to protect land, culture, and ways of life are often subjugated by the needs of capital accumulation and the encroachment of multinational corporations. Communities across Honduras are currently resisting capitalist and imperialist expansion, which manifests in such forms as resource extraction projects (particularly mines, hydroelectric dams, and logging), the establishment of expanded free trade zones (referred to as ZEDEs – Zones of Employment and Economic and Social Development, or *Zonas de Empleo y Desarrollo Económico y Social*), the grabbing of coastal lands by large-scale tourism developers (primarily in Afro-indigenous Garifuna territory and campesino lands around the Gulf of Fonseca), the further expansion of industrial monocrop agriculture, and the increased presence of the U.S. military in Honduras (under the guise of fighting the War on Drugs), among other things. These communities are often met with violence

perpetrated by those whose interests are being furthered by these projects – i.e. the state and the Honduran elite.

Violence permeates Honduran society in various forms, and is largely blamed on gangs and narcotraffickers, as well as the presence of hundreds of thousands of firearms that remain from the Central American wars of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Alarming, Honduras has held the highest murder rate in the world each year since 2010. That year, Honduras surpassed El Salvador to claim the dubious distinction, as Honduras's rate rose substantially from the 2009 figure of 70.7 homicides per 100,000 residents to 82.1, while El Salvador's rate fell from 70.9 to 66 in the same period (UNODC 2011). The rate then rose again to an astonishing 91.61 in 2011, and fell slightly to 83.83 in 2012 (OAS 2014). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports the 2012 rate at a significantly higher 90.4 (2014). For 2013, the figure was reported alternatively as 79.7 homicides per 100,000 by the National Autonomous University of Honduras's Observatory on Violence (La Prensa, February 14, 2014) and 75.1 by the National Police (El Herald, January 2, 2014). However, as Kaitlin Owens of the University of Toronto's International Human Rights Program notes, the apparent decrease in these rates in recent years does not actually represent a decrease in the number of homicides but rather an increase in population (2014, 12). While the exact figures vary slightly by source, what has remained constant is that Honduras's homicide rate has been significantly higher than that of every other country in the world.

While gang and drug related violence are certainly serious issues in Honduras, much of the violence plaguing the nation is instead attributable to the new wave of

political violence that has gripped the nation for the past five years. In this time, Honduras has become one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders, in addition to the local activists asserting themselves in the struggles mentioned above. Following several years of relative political calm and improvements in the lives of many Hondurans, a major turning point occurred in the early hours of a June morning in 2009.

The 2009 Coup and Its Aftermath

On June 28, 2009, democratically elected President Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales was removed from office in a military coup authorized by the Supreme Court of Honduras.² In the preceding years, Zelaya had angered his opponents by instituting a number of socially progressive reforms, including doubling the minimum wage, issuing a moratorium on concessions for resource extraction, and expanding social programs, among many others, and he had made real progress toward resolving land conflicts in the Aguán and elsewhere. In 2008, Honduras joined ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or *Alternativa Bolivariana para Nuestra América*), the alternative trade organization led by Venezuela, and Zelaya's increasingly close relationships with leftist leaders throughout the region no doubt worried the elite and conservative sectors of the government. A university student interviewed soon after the coup, citing Zelaya's many social programs, observed, "That's why the elite classes can't stand him and why we want him back" (Dangl 2009). Similarly, Tanya Kerssen argues that the coup "can be read as the expression of a class process set into motion by neoliberal restructuring" (2013, 5).

² The involvement of the U.S. government in this coup, as in Honduran politics in general, is a hugely important topic into which I do not delve deeply here due to limitations of space. Others have covered this extensively, including Frank (2011, 2012a, and 2012b) and Weisbrot (2009).

Those who carried out the coup justified it on the grounds of Zelaya's supposed transgression of presidential authority. Zelaya had proposed to include a non-binding referendum in the November 2009 elections that would gauge electoral support for a Constitutional Convention, despite the Court's opposition. Zelaya's opponents viewed this as an attempt to change the one term presidential limit dictated by the current Constitution, which was drafted in 1982 under a military dictatorship, and thus as a means to preserve his political power. The fact that Zelaya would have been out of office long before the proposed convention would have convened (his term was to end in January, 2010) was somehow omitted from this reasoning. As Mark Weisbrot so accurately describes, "The battle between Zelaya and his opponents pits a reform president who is supported by labour unions and social organisations against a mafia-like, drug-ridden, corrupt political elite who is accustomed to choosing not only the supreme court and the Congress, but also the president" (2009).

The consequences of the coup have been severe.³ As mentioned, the national homicide rate increased dramatically in the years following the coup. Many of Zelaya's progressive reforms have been dismantled and reversed by the subsequent regimes led by Roberto Micheletti, Porfirio Lobo, and Juan Orlando Hernandez. A November 2013 Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) report identifies Honduras as the most socially unequal nation in all of Latin America (Johnson and Lefebvre 2013, 9). As the authors observe, Honduras "is one of just three countries [in Latin America] that have

³ Others have documented the post-coup environment extensively. See, for example, Comisión de Verdad (2012), Johnston and Lefebvre (2013), IAHCRC (2009), and Kerksen (2013).

seen its Gini coefficient⁴ increase since 2009. Of those three, Honduras has seen the largest increase, amounting to 12.3 percent in just two years (9).” What is more, they note that, “Prior to 2009, Honduras had experienced four consecutive years of decreasing inequality” – four years that coincided with the Zelaya administration (10). Poverty rates reflect a similar trend. Between 2006 and 2009 (the years of Zelaya’s presidency), poverty rates fell 7.7%, and extreme poverty rates fell a whopping 20.9% (Johnson and Lefebvre 2013, 10). These rates then began to rise following the coup, and between 2010 and 2013 they increased 13.2% and 26.3% respectively, leaving them higher than before Zelaya took office (Johnson and Lefebvre 2013, 10).

There has also been a massive resurgence of political repression, militarization, and confirmed death squad activity⁵ in Honduras. Many national and international bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the United Nations have denounced the frightening levels of political violence in the country. In a February 2014 letter to the UN Human Rights Council, Amnesty International expressed that they are “increasingly concerned about the human rights situation in Honduras, in particular about human rights violations against human rights defenders, women and girls, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and *campesino* (peasant) communities, and LGBTI people” (Amnesty International 2014). These concerns have been echoed by many over the last five years.

At least 32 journalists have been assassinated since the coup, and as Owens notes, “many more continue to work in a climate of fear and self-censorship” (2014, 6). The

⁴ A measure to assess equality of income distribution in a given country.

⁵ See Bird (2013).

Reporters Without Borders *World 2014 Press Freedom Index* ranks Honduras number 129 out of 180 countries, demonstrating the highly repressive environment journalists face. In addition, at least 70 lawyers have been assassinated during this period (Front Line Defenders 2014), and a great deal of violence has been directed towards activists and community leaders across the country, including many high profile individuals and leaders of various organizations. Activists defending land and natural resources are at particular risk, as evidenced by Global Witness's 2014 report titled *Deadly Environment*. This report cites Honduras as the second most deadly country in the world for defenders of land and the environment, as they report 109 such killings between 2002 and 2013.⁶ The authors note that this figure is actually likely significantly higher, in part because a "lack of public information around these threats and security implications for those in danger make it very difficult to track and systematize this data," and thus their figures represent only the cases they could verify (Global Witness 2014, 4). It is important to note that only 9 of these deaths occurred between 2002 and 2009, and the remaining 100 in the post-coup years of 2010 to 2013.

The high levels of political repression and violence are complemented and exacerbated by widespread impunity. A 2014 Human Rights Watch report quotes the former Attorney General as admitting that fully 80% of homicides in the nation are not prosecuted because "investigative organs don't have the capacity to respond" (2). Since most crimes are not investigated, the more generalized social violence that plagues Honduras provides a convenient cover for many perpetrators of political violence, as

⁶ The country with the most killings reported is Brazil, with a staggering 448. However, when considering the differences in population between Honduras (roughly 8 million) and Brazil (nearly 200 million), the severity of the problem in Honduras becomes evident. The country with the third highest number of killings is the Philippines, with 67 (2014, 6). The population of the Philippines is roughly 100 million.

politically-motivated crimes are often never officially recognized as such. Even when the motivations of these crimes are obvious, the intellectual authors and perpetrators of these crimes are almost never punished.

One positive consequence of the coup is the emergence of the FNRP, the *Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular* or Popular Front of National Resistance. This broad-based coalition has united a wide range of social movements and sectors of Honduran society, including indigenous movements, campesinos, rural and urban labor unions, Garifuna communities, human rights organizations, LGBTI activists, teachers, students, and artists, among others. Hondurans often refer to the coup as an “awakening” that forced the people to reflect on their collective state and spurred them to rise up in collective struggle for a more just society.

Conditions in the Aguán

The contemporary situation in the Aguán is in many ways a microcosm of the political and social crisis facing Honduras as a whole. The same issues of social inequality, insecurity, and injustice plague the region, as do high levels of political violence. A 2011 International Fact Finding Mission comprised of several human rights and social justice organizations identifies the Aguán as “one of the regions most affected by tension and repression,” as “Peasant movements in this area, who fight for access to land in order to exercise their right to feed themselves, are faced with a situation of permanent harassment and abuse by public security forces, as well as members of private security companies” (FIDH et al. 2011, 6).

The levels of repression in the Aguán are indeed extreme, and the tension mentioned in the FIDH et al. report is palpable in the region. As Tanya Kerssen describes, “the Aguán has been pummeled by repeated waves of state-sponsored violence including constant surveillance, death threats, capture orders, kidnappings, sexual violence, torture, and assassinations” (2013, 43). The Aguán has been highly militarized since the coup, and military checkpoints, soldiers armed with high-caliber weapons, and members of special police forces are common sights throughout the region.

As the conflict is ongoing, it is somewhat difficult to present definitive statistics on the numbers of assassinations and other acts of violence mentioned above. The most recent report documenting this political violence at the time of this writing was issued by the Permanent Human Rights Observatory of the Aguán (*Observatorio Permanente de Derechos Humanos del Aguán*) in February, 2014. Focused on violent deaths in the region specifically, the report counted 123 violent deaths and 6 forced disappearances between 2008 and 2013, with 110 of the deaths and all 6 disappearances occurring between 2010 and 2013 (Observatorio 2014, 5). According to the report, 91 of the 129 assassinated and forcefully disappeared were campesino men and women, 14 were private security guards, 7 landowners, 1 member each of the police and military, and the remaining 15 were either lawyers or “collateral or indirect victims” (6). The report further recognizes that a massive rise in violence and deaths coincided with intensified militarization of the region in the summer of 2011, when the Operation Xatruch was installed in the Aguán (6). The human rights group PROAH (Honduran Accompaniment Project, or *Proyecto de Acompañamiento en Honduras*) places the number of murders in

the Aguán through February 2014 at 147, noting that the victims were primarily “campesinos and human rights defenders” (2014, 10).

The campesino movement organizations have unquestionably suffered the greatest losses of life in this conflict. The Permanent Observatory report documents that of the individuals assassinated, 49 belonged to the movement organization MUCA, 11 to MCA, 9 to MARCA, 8 to MOCRA, 4 to MCRNA, 3 to Movimiento Campesino de Rigores, and 1 each to the Empresa Asociativa Gregorio Chávez and the Movimiento Campesino Salado Lis Lis, while 4 did not belong to a particular organization (2014, 9). These organizations are among the roughly 20 that currently operate in the Aguán, and are all decidedly nonviolent movements focused on regaining their land and achieving food sovereignty and social justice.

The nearly absolute impunity with which these crimes and human rights abuses are perpetrated is astounding. The title of the previously cited 2014 Human Rights Watch report – “There are no Investigations Here” (*“Aqui no hay investigaciones”*) – originates from the following interaction:

When asked by Human Rights Watch about the status of investigations into killings and the general lack of accountability for such crimes in Bajo Aguán, Germán Alfaro Escalante – commander of military unit Fuerza Xatruch III deployed to the region to aid police in fighting crime and resolving the land conflict – said, “There are no investigations here.” (HRW 2014, 27)

I find Coronel Alfaro Escalante’s comment to be very illustrative of the dynamics of the conflict, and of the reasons why it continues. His words reflect the state’s complicity and overall lack of interest in pursuing justice in the region, either in terms of working to find a solution to the land disputes or of punishing those responsible for acts of violence.

The political violence against campesino movements in the Aguán is simply not a matter deemed worthy of investigation.

The struggle in the Aguán is in part the result of it being one of the most fertile and productive agricultural regions in the country, as well as the former “Capital of Agrarian Reform” (Macías 2001). On the perimeter of the primary banana-growing region in Honduras, the Aguán is now dominated by huge plantations of African palm trees. Introduced to the region on a fairly small-scale several decades ago, African palm cultivation has greatly increased in recent years – from covering 48,000 hectares in 1981 to 120,000 in 2009⁷ (Iriás n.d., 16). The climate in the Aguán is ideal for cultivation of the palm, which is grown for the oil contained in its fruit. That oil is then used primarily as cooking oil, in processed foods, as biofuel, and in cosmetics and a handful of other consumer products. Unfortunately, this expansion has come at the expense of the cultivation of food crops, and ultimately at the expense of peace and safety in the communities of the Aguán.

The three largest landowners in the Aguán are agro-businessmen Miguel Facussé Barjum, René Morales, and Reinaldo Canales. Together, they are in possession of some 75% of the land in this region, as I describe in the following chapter. Facussé, the richest and arguably most powerful man in Honduras, is the executive president of the Dinant Corporation (*Corporación Dinant*), which processes palm oil for use in biofuels and snack foods. Through Dinant, Facussé holds more than 22,000 hectares in the Aguán Valley – roughly one fifth of the total land (Frank 2011). Facussé wields tremendous

⁷ 1 hectare is equal to approximately 2.5 acres; thus 120,000 hectares is equal to just under 300,000 acres.

economic and political power in Honduras, and has many business interests in addition to Dinant. He is also commonly recognized as a major narcotrafficker⁸ and was a primary supporter of the 2009 coup. His nephew Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé was the President of Honduras from 1998 to 2002 and now owns *La Tribuna*, one of the country's main newspapers, and many of his other family members are powerful players in business and government.

Facussé's private security forces have been widely accused of perpetrating much of the violence in the Aguán, and he has admitted to their involvement in certain killings.⁹ Facussé's crimes received global attention in early 2014, due to concerns raised in an internal audit of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank's international lending arm, regarding a \$30 million loan made to Corporación Dinant. In their investigation, the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) demonstrated that the IFC had failed to properly investigate the many allegations of violence made against Facussé and the repressive context in which these loans were being utilized. The World Bank is subsequently investigating the situation to determine whether they will go through with the second \$15 million disbursement of the \$30 million loan in light of these revelations.¹⁰ Activists in Honduras and their allies have been pressuring the World Bank for several years to cease their funding to Dinant.

⁸ Evidence revealed in cables published by Wikileaks confirmed that the U.S. State Department has long been aware of Facussé's narcotrafficking activities, as noted by Dana Frank (2011).

⁹ For more on this, see Beeton (2012), and Frank (2012a).

¹⁰ For more, see CAO (n.d.), Woodsome (2014), and Vidal (2014).

I will discuss the nature of this conflict, the contemporary situation in the Aguán, and the grassroots response to it in much greater detail in subsequent chapters. I turn now to an explanation of the research methods I utilized to address my research questions and to craft the analysis that follows, and then conclude this chapter with a brief preview of the chapters ahead.

Methodology

In many ways, the research for this project began on June 28, 2009. I was living in San Salvador, El Salvador, when I awoke to the news of the coup in neighboring Honduras. As I followed the news that day, I realized how little I knew about the history, cultures, and political and social movements of Honduras, despite having spent several years studying these same things throughout Latin America. I had very little context through which to comprehend what was happening in Tegucigalpa and elsewhere that day. From that time, I began to follow developments in Honduras quite closely, and later decided to focus my graduate work on the contemporary situation there.

The primary sources of data for this project include documents published by movement organizations and their allies, videos of interviews and public statements made by activists, websites of movement organizations, and my observations made during more than six months spent in Honduras over the course of two and a half years. I gleaned a great deal of information through participant-observation, as I was present for many important events, including public demonstrations, press conferences, and the 2013 national elections. I witnessed state violence against campesino activists and the extreme militarization of the Aguán. During my time in Honduras, I also collected a number of

books, reports, news stories, documentary films, and other materials from a wide variety of sources that shed light on the conflict. Below, I outline each of these methods in turn.

Document Collection

Among the most important data sources to my study are written public statements (often called *comunicados* or *communiqués*) issued by movement organizations. These statements represent the stance of movement organizations on a given issue or issues, and are published on websites, read at public events, sent to media outlets, or distributed in other forums. They often include calls to action, movements' demands of the state, and/or appeals to the international community for support. These statements are important to my research as they clearly and concisely represent the collective voice of a movement, its analysis of a given situation, and in many cases, its proposals for resolution. Comunicados are issued irregularly when the need arises – often in direct response to acts of violence or repression – and are often issued jointly by several movement organizations and their allies. I have gathered a total of 16 comunicados from the campesino movements, Plataforma Agraria, the FNRP, MUCA and other allies. I primarily selected documents based on their availability online and the relevance of their subject matter to my research. In addition to these comunicados, I gathered many other documents published by movement organizations. These include reports on the state of the Aguán, including those documenting political violence and human rights abuses, analyses of *La Ley de Modernización* and proposals for a new agrarian reform law, and case studies of individual movement organizations.

I have also collected seven videos of various lengths and forms. Among these videos are interviews with and public statements made by movement leaders, which are often posted on movement organizations' websites or made available via websites such as YouTube or Vimeo. These provide important pieces of primary data, as they again represent the collective voice of the campesino movements (via their spokespeople) and their analyses of the conflict in the Aguán. Additionally, I viewed several videos produced by news outlets such as Alba tv, Al Jazeera and the Real News Network, which all include statements by the same movement leaders and participants. These public declarations are essential to my research, as they express the collective voice of movements in a way that interviews with individuals often cannot.

Finally, I analyzed the content of movement organizations' websites. In addition to the specific content of the videos and documents that are often available here, there is much to be learned from the websites themselves. Movement organizations often use these spaces to articulate their struggle to the wider public, and to document their history, the acts of violence they experience, and their vision for the future. These sites are among the primary venues through which the movements can reach the international community, and as such are very relevant to my analysis of the ways in which the movements frame their struggles for land and social justice.

Participant-Observation

I spent the summers of 2011 and 2012 in Honduras, and an additional ten days in November, 2013. In 2011, I served as a human rights observer in Zacate Grande, a peninsula on the southern coast of Honduras where residents are engaged in a struggle for

their land against Miguel Facussé. During this time, I learned a great deal about the dynamics of land tenure and struggles for social justice in Honduras. That summer also marked the beginning of my relationship with COFADEH,¹¹ as they operate the human rights observatory in Zacate Grande in conjunction with CICA, an Italian NGO.

I returned to Honduras for the summer of 2012 to complete fieldwork while working as an intern in the COFADEH office in Tegucigalpa. Over the course of seven weeks, I spent between forty and sixty hours weekly in the COFADEH office and on work-related trips. During that time, I was constantly immersed in the activities of social and political movements. I attended an important press conference held at the Tegucigalpa office of La Vía Campesina, during which leaders from the FNRP and MUCA denounced the increased militarization of and political violence in the Aguán, and reiterated the movements' position on both the causes of and potential solutions to the conflict. I had countless conversations with activists from diverse movements and parts of the country. I was surrounded by journalists and human rights defenders who have a deep understanding of the political landscape of Honduras, including the conflict in the Aguán, and who visit the region regularly.

In early August, I accompanied a colleague from COFADEH on a three-day trip to the Aguán. During that trip, we visited the community of Guadalupe Carney, which is affiliated with the campesino organization MCA and has been engaged in a bloody

¹¹ COFADEH, the Committee of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (*Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras*), is among the most well-known and esteemed human rights organizations in Central America. Since its formation in 1982, the members of this organization have worked fearlessly to document political violence and human rights abuses, provide training and legal defense to activists and communities, and advocate for social and political change in Honduras, among many other things. It is in many ways a center of activity for social movements in Honduras today. For more, see www.cofadeh.hn.

struggle for its land for more than a decade. My colleague interviewed several community leaders there, and while those testimonies are not directly cited in my research, they provided important information regarding the dynamics of their struggles and helped me comprehend the complexity of the movements in the Aguán and the degree to which their experiences vary at times. While in the Aguán, we also met with individuals from Fundación Popol Nah Tun, a local NGO that works with the campesino collectives on development and food security issues.

I had originally planned to spend two weeks in the Aguán following my work with COFADEH, and to conduct interviews with movement actors there. After this trip, however, it became very clear to me that this would not be possible. In the days preceding our trip, the violence in the area had escalated considerably. It was also brought to my attention that the military was closely monitoring all foreigners in the region. During such a critical and violent moment in this struggle, ethical considerations prevented me from injecting myself into this situation and asking people to give their time for my research. It was at this time I chose to focus on movement-produced materials as my primary sources of data in lieu of personal interviews, as I feel these materials more accurately represent a collective voice of the movements. I am confident that my research is based on a rich collection of data despite this limitation, and is perhaps the better for it.

In November, 2013, I returned to Honduras as part of the leadership team for an elections monitoring delegation organized by the Alliance for Global Justice and the Marin Task Force on the Americas. Our group spent the first week of this trip visiting

communities and social movement organizations in the northern part of the country, in order to document the context in which the November 24th national and local elections were taking place. During this time, we met with leaders of the CNTC and SITRAINBA, organizations representing campesinos and banana workers, respectively, among many other groups. We were also credentialed international observers for the elections, and our teams monitored polling places in five departments (states) on election day. These experiences further deepened my understanding of the contemporary situation in Honduras.

Data Analysis

I employ multiple means of data analysis to address my research questions in this project. In order to identify the policy implications of *La Ley de Modernización* (LMDSA), I follow best practices of policy analysis, while also recognizing the limitations of this approach and seeking to problematize it. While I do not undertake quantitative research, I utilize my qualitative research to describe the effects this particular policy has had on the populace of the Aguán. I also consider potential policy solutions to the current conflict, and engage a political economic analysis to identify the ways in which a market-based policy solution may not be appropriate for the problem of landlessness in the Aguán.

I engaged in content analysis using the primary documents I have collected, including comunicados, videotaped interviews, and other movement-produced materials. I coded these documents (including transcriptions of videos) using an open coding technique. I began by identifying key words, themes, and concepts, and used these to

build my analysis, seeking to triangulate across sources whenever possible. Both manifest and latent content in the data are relevant to my study, and I thus used both strategies, as discussed by Berg (2007), to interrogate my data.

Limitations of Study

This study is inherently limited in scope for a number of reasons. First, the highly volatile context is among the most relevant limitations for this project. As mentioned, safety and other logistical concerns prevented me from spending an extended period of time in the Aguán. Also, my own limitations of time and resources are relevant here, as one could spend many years attempting to fully comprehend the complex dimensions of the conflict in the Aguán. The roughly twenty campesino movement organizations all have unique experiences with the agrarian reform and counter-reform processes, and currently face varying degrees of political violence. There is no singular and definitive stance across movement organizations on many issues in the Aguán, and as such, my project cannot possibly reflect all the nuances of this tremendously complicated situation.

Additional limitations include my language abilities and cultural background. While I read, write, and speak Spanish with a high level of proficiency, it is not my mother tongue. As the majority of my data is in Spanish, as well as virtually all the communications and interactions I had during my time in Honduras, the opportunity for miscommunication is one of which I must be conscious. Finally, cultural barriers are unavoidable in this or any other intercultural research. Regardless of the amount of time I spend in Honduras and the degree to which I am dedicated to this struggle, I will always be an outsider and must always consider this in my analysis.

Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter II offers a review of the literature most relevant to this project and provides a theoretical framework that I argue helps us best understand my case study. Chapter III is dedicated to an analysis of *La Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola* (LMDSA), the policy that is central to both this project and, I argue, the ongoing conflict in the Aguán. Chapter IV examines the campesino movements in the Aguán. In that chapter, I offer an analysis of these movements that seeks to integrate culturalist, structuralist, and materialist concerns, and is informed by Doug McAdam's revised political process model (1999). Here, I examine the public discourse of the movements in order to more fully understand the nature of the movements and the ways in which they shape and are shaped by the context in which they operate. Chapter V offers concluding thoughts and policy recommendations regarding this situation.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This thesis seeks to explore the interconnectedness of neoliberal economic policy, political violence, and popular resistance in the Aguán Valley of Honduras, and to examine the ways in which campesino movements are framing their struggles and asserting themselves as legitimate actors in the policy realm. In order to understand the dynamics of these phenomena in this particular context, we must first explore the nature of each in turn. In doing so, I aim to make the relationships between these seemingly discrete topics evident.

The impacts of neoliberal policies have been significant in Honduras, as elsewhere in Latin America. These policies were systematically implemented throughout the region at the behest of international financial institutions (IFIs) in the form of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), which drastically altered national economic, political, and social landscapes. In the Aguán, the most direct effect of structural adjustment was the reversal of previous agrarian reform and the subsequent commodification of land via the *Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola* (Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector, or LMDSA), which I examine at length in Chapter III. This led not only to increased landlessness and rural poverty in the region, but also to the militarization of the Aguán and the use of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence to enforce elite property rights. The social

movements that have emerged to contest these realities employ a range of strategies and tactics, and in doing so both shape and are shaped by the ongoing conflict.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief discussion of the basic tenets of neoliberal economic policies and SAPs. I then examine neoliberalism as a political project, exploring the ways in which this doctrine serves to entrench the social and political power of elites and to exacerbate social inequality. Next, I move to the issue of agrarian reform, considering the nature of land in the neoliberal era and the competing models of state-led vs. market-led agrarian reform. The final sections of this chapter focus on political violence and social movements, and the nature of these in the neoliberal context. My intention is not to provide an exhaustive review of the literature in any of these areas, but rather to build a theoretical framework through which to best interpret and understand the current conflict in the Aguán.

Neoliberal Policy and Structural Adjustment

As James Ferguson (2009) has noted, the term “neoliberalism” is widely used and carries a number of meanings.¹² He argues that we can distinguish between neoliberalism

¹² It is important here to note that I fully understand the degree to which this discussion of neoliberalism is limited and, in many ways, superficial. I use the term “neoliberalism” in reference to the discourse and policy orientation that has driven the global capitalist system in recent decades, largely by way of U.S. imperial control over foreign economies and IFIs. While certainly important and relevant, a deeper analysis and critique of that system is ultimately beyond the scope of this project. As neoliberalism remains an important concept in my fields, I will utilize that term, its limitations notwithstanding. Here I find Hart- Landsberg’s (2006) assessment instructive: “While the term ‘neoliberalism’ does, in many ways, capture the essence of contemporary capitalist practices and policies, it is also in some important respects a problematic term. In particular, it encourages the view that a wide range of policy options simultaneously exist under capitalism, with neoliberalism just one of the possibilities. States could reject neoliberalism, if they wanted, and implement more social democratic or interventionist policies, similar to those employed in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, things are not so simple. The ‘freeing’ of economic activity that is generally identified with neoliberalism is not so much a bad policy choice as it is a forced structural response on the part of many third world states to capitalist generated tensions and contradictions. Said differently, it is capitalism (as a dynamic and exploitative system), rather than neoliberalism (as a set of

as a “macroeconomic doctrine” that promotes the ideals of the free market and holds particular views regarding the appropriate role of the state, and neoliberalism as the “regime of policies and practices associated with or claiming fealty to the doctrine” (170). These policies can be employed to meet certain political ends that may or may not relate to the economic doctrine of neoliberalism, leading David Harvey (2005) to distinguish further between the economic theory and practices of neoliberalism and its “political project.” I return to the political project of neoliberalism – which is particularly relevant in the Honduran case – later in this chapter, after first establishing the general orientation of the macroeconomic doctrine, and examining how the ideals it promotes manifest in specific policies and structural adjustment programs.

The principal features of the neoliberal doctrine have been extensively documented and are by now familiar to social scientists and economists alike.¹³ At the most basic level, these include an almost religious belief in the ideals of the free market – often termed “free market fetishism” – and a complementary desire to minimize the role of the state in the economic realm. The neoliberal state thus focuses on maintaining a climate that privileges “strong individual property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 64) through a host of standard policy prescriptions.

The doctrine also claims that social problems can be solved by the market. For Harvey, neoliberalism “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the

policies), that must be challenged and overcome” (n.p.). While I wholeheartedly agree that the nature of the capitalist system itself underlies the problems at hand in this case, I will focus my critique on the neoliberal orientation that has dominated the system in recent decades.

¹³ For more details, see Harvey (2005, 2007); Panizza (2009); Wallerstein (2008).

reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (2005, 3). Taitu Heron (2008) describes neoliberalism as “a theory which endorses the market as the mover and shaker of the economy and the key instrument through which social problems can now be solved” (89). Robert W. McChesney (2001) describes it as “the set of national and international policies that call for business domination of all social affairs with minimal countervailing force” (n.p.). In the realm of neoliberal economics, then, it becomes reasonable to address issues such as poverty, landlessness, and social inequality via market-based solutions.

The neoliberal doctrine gained increasing sway in global political economic discourse in the mid 1970s, largely due to the dominance of U.S. economists and policymakers in the realm (Klein 2007; Harvey 2007). This dominance is captured in the term “Washington Consensus,” which was coined by British economist John Williams in 1989, and is today commonly used to describe the neoliberal policy orientation dictated by IFIs around the globe (Williams 2004). This orientation manifests in policies focused on: “stabilization (of prices and national accounts), privatization (of the means of production...state enterprises), liberalization (of trade and capital flows), deregulation (of private activity), and fiscal austerity” (Veltmeyer, Petras, and Vieux 1997, 22). It is widely accepted that this approach had become hegemonic by the 1990s (see Harvey 2005, 2007; Heron 2008; Chomsky 1999), and McChesney calls it “the defining political economic paradigm of our time” (1998, 7). The proliferation of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed on scores of nations in the Global South, primarily during the final decades of the twentieth century, demonstrates the validity of these claims.

These SAPs included a relatively standard set of reforms adhering to the approach outlined above. Many national governments adopted the reforms as conditions attached to loans from the World Bank and IMF, which were granted in large part to aid nations in their repayment of external debts¹⁴ (Veltmeyer, Petras, and Vieux 1997, 16). The IFIs also presented these reforms as essential to the notion of “development.” As an embodiment of the neoliberal doctrine, these policies followed the logic that economic growth would produce wealth that would then “trickle down” to benefit the average citizen. For Dumenil and Levy (2004), however, neoliberalism was never truly intended as “a new model of development,” but instead “must be seen as a new social order whose purpose was the restoration of the income and wealth of the upper fraction of ruling classes, the owners of the means of production” (1). As Huron aptly describes, this approach “promotes a ‘development strategy’ that emphasizes efficiency, growth, and competitiveness over social justice and redistribution” (1998, 89). Further, he notes the assumption of universalism contained in this approach, where it is expected “that the application of these policies will amount to economic success,” and that “implementation of privatization, liberalization and deregulation will always guarantee very specific results regardless of the social and cultural contexts within which they may be subjected to” (1998, 95). The results of these SAPs, however, have been far from universally positive, as we will soon see in the case of Honduras.

¹⁴ For more on the manufactured “debt crisis” and its role in consolidating the dominance of the Washington Consensus’ neoliberal approach, see Klein (2007); Chomsky (1999); and Kolko (1988).

Neoliberalism as a Political Project

Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the importance of neoliberalism as a political project (e.g. Harvey 2005, 2007; McChesney 1998; Bourdieu 1998). David Harvey poses a very salient question: “In whose particular interests is it that the state take a neoliberal stance and in what ways have those interests used neoliberalism to benefit themselves rather than, as is claimed, everyone, everywhere?” (2007, 24). He argues that the “crisis of capital accumulation of the 1970s” led to a rise in popular movements that proposed socialist alternatives to the capitalist status quo, thus threatening “ruling classes everywhere” in both economic and political terms (2007, 27-8). Elsewhere, he makes the widely-cited assertion that we can view “neoliberalization either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (2005, 19, original emphasis). Harvey’s final point is of particular importance, as local elites are nearly always allied with the global forces instituting these policies (Lilley 2011, 50-1). Moyo and Yeros (2005) recognize that structural adjustment has disproportionately impacted peasant populations, arguing that the practice has “reinforced and deepened the postwar trend of incorporation of the peasantry into the sphere of commodity production at the same time as it has marginalized it” (18).

As Harvey notes, neoliberal discourse not only manifests in certain policies that privilege capital accumulation, but also results in “important structural changes in the nature of governance,” as within this approach “a way has to be found to integrate state decision-making into the dynamics of capital accumulation and the networks of class

power” that are being formed or restored in a given place (2005, 76). As such, we see increased corporate influence in the legal and policy realms, states that acquiesce to the needs and desires of capital, and many cases where corporations “acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)” (Harvey 2005, 76-7). What follows from this is that, at a time when the role of government is theoretically limited, the “coercive arm of the state” is regularly mobilized “to protect corporate interests and, if necessary, to repress dissent” (Harvey 2005, 77). I will explore this important function of the neoliberal state further in the subsequent section on political violence.

It is very apparent, then, that in an analysis of neoliberalism and the policies it inspires, we must always consider the power dynamics at play at both local and global levels. The neoliberal context privileges both the economic and political interests of elites as it creates conditions favorable to capital accumulation and allows rather direct elite and corporate control over public policy and law. The consequences of this reality for society at large are not, however, benign. Many scholars explore the impacts and outcomes of neoliberal policies on the non-elite sectors of society. McChesney (1998) describes these outcomes as such:

The economic consequences of these policies have been the same just about everywhere, and exactly what one would expect: a massive increase in social and economic inequality, a marked increase in severe deprivation for the poorest nations and peoples of the world, a disastrous global environment, an unstable global economy and an unprecedented bonanza for the wealthy. (8)

Similarly, for Heron (1998):

What has occurred has been the exacerbation of existing structures of inequality, thereby linking neoliberal policies to new forms of social exclusion. The neoliberal policy package draws its social power from the political and economic power of those whose interests it expresses: stockholders, financial operators, industrialists, conservative politicians and high-level financial officials. (91)

David Harvey thus concludes that “The main substantive achievement of neoliberalization...has been to redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income” (2005, 159). This redistribution, however, has occurred in an upward direction, as neoliberalism served “to transfer assets and channel wealth and income either from the mass of the population toward the upper classes or from vulnerable to rich countries” via a process of “accumulation by dispossession” (2007, 34). As an extension of the process of “primitive” or “original” accumulation identified by Marx,¹⁵ Harvey identifies several avenues through which this contemporary process of accumulation operates, including, among others:

(1) the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations...; (2) conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusively private property rights; (3) suppression of rights to the commons; (4) commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; (5) colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources)... (2007, 34-5)

Fred Magdoff similarly recognizes this process in a recent article titled “Twenty-First-Century Land Grabs: Accumulation by Agricultural Dispossession” (2013). He

¹⁵ See Marx’s *Capital*.

notes that while accumulation by dispossession has been a central process throughout the history of capitalism,¹⁶ the specific nature of the process has evolved based on the circumstances of a given historic era. He thus identifies, among others, the recent processes of “economic dispossession” and “accumulation by rural dispossession.” The former occurred by way of the imposition of neoliberal trade agreements globally, which were “a part of capital’s push to open up the nations of the South to easier exploitation” (6). These agreements manifested in policies that subjected Southern markets to increased international competition while simultaneously removing local protections, leading to disastrous results for small-scale producers throughout the South (6-7).

“Accumulation by rural dispossession” has followed in the wake of these trade agreements, where the neoliberal policies they spawn combine with increased financialization, rising food prices, greater demand for biofuels in the North (thus displacing food crops), and environmental degradation, as well as “insecure peasant land tenure in many countries and widespread corruption” (7). The result of this convergence is massive land grabbing throughout the Global South, and thus concentration of land in the hands of elites and corporations (7). While these trends often lead to dispossession due to inability to compete on economic terms, Magdoff argues that in the contemporary era “‘extra-economic means’ have also been prominent – new laws passed that abrogate customary rights or promote investment; the barrel of a gun; and corruption of local, regional, and national officials” (16). He concludes that these factors all combine in such

¹⁶ Magdoff writes: “The commodification of land – that most basic of resources, the source of terrestrial life, and the foundation of human civilization – was essential for the development of capitalism. And from the early modern capitalist era until the present, it is the commodification of nature...that is the underlying basis of the dispossession of people from their lands” (2013, 1-2).

a way as to warrant the recognition of “a qualitatively new, historically specific transformation” (16).

Magdoff’s analysis could not more perfectly describe the contemporary situation in the Aguán Valley of Honduras, where the process of accumulation by rural dispossession has been largely facilitated, I argue, by the LMDSA. The concentration of land in elite and corporate hands and the widespread landlessness that results among the peasantry is at the center of the current conflict. The “extra-economic means” identified by Magdoff are particularly relevant in this case, and combine with the other factors he cites to create a very troubling situation.

Land in the Neoliberal Context

The literature that addresses the importance of land – in terms of access to it, the relationships between this access and rural poverty, and the history of and possibilities for future land reform, among other topics – is vast, indeed. For our purposes, it is important to briefly review these issues in relation to the neoliberal context. Like the preceding discussion of political and economic power dynamics, understanding the particular characteristics of land and agrarian reform under neoliberalism is central to my analysis of recent policy (the LMDSA) and the conflict in the Aguán.

The highly unequal distribution of land and widespread rural poverty that plague most of contemporary Latin America are not new phenomena. Henry Veltmeyer (2005) argues that the fact that a majority of rural households there live below the officially recognized poverty line (and most of these below the “extreme poverty” line) is both the

result of recent neoliberal policies and “entrenched” land tenure and ownership policies that long predate neoliberalism (291-2). Others similarly draw direct connections between a lack of access to land and poverty, including Zoomers and van der Haar (2000, 17); de Janvry, Gordillo, Platteau, and Sadoulet (2001, 1); Brockett (1998); and Borras, Kay, and Akram-Lodhi (2007, 1). In his classic text *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (1981), de Janvry charts the history of uneven development in land and agricultural holdings in detail, demonstrating the relevance of this to ongoing rural poverty in Latin America and beyond.

While it is clear that the lack of equitable access to land predated neoliberalism, the discourse has altered the ways in which land is understood and valued, leading to the exacerbation of historical inequalities. Borras, Kay, and Akram-Lodhi (2007) recognize that “The neoliberal paradigm on land policies is the dominant current in today’s development policy discourse and practice” (18). The prevailing view is that land is first and foremost a commodity, completely divorced from what Borras, Kay, and Akram-Lodhi call its “social, cultural, and political dimensions” (2007, 21). Issa G. Shivji recognizes this new phase of capitalist accumulation, while noting that like its predecessors, it “is rooted in the destruction of people and their livelihoods and the pillaging of resources: land, forests, minerals, water, bioresources” (2011, 4).

This increased commodification of land is particularly evident when considering recent trends in agricultural policy. Charles Brockett (1998) cites the dominance of export-focused agricultural policies as “the preferred model of economic development,” leading to massive changes in “traditional agricultural structures and practices” – a shift

he refers to as the “contemporary agrarian transformation” (3). The effects of this transformation have been highly detrimental to the peasant population, he argues, and have only served to intensify inequality (4). Similarly, Tiney discusses the “transnational agro-export model” and its effects in restructuring the countryside, as it “eradicates the possibilities for small-scale production to subsist, and it promotes the expulsion of peasants from the countryside, generating poverty in its wake” (2009, 81).

The nature of local struggles for land is now increasingly connected to the nature of the global political economy. For Utsa Patnaik, “the classical land question” remains central today, particularly due to the proliferation of land grabbing in the South. The contemporary agrarian crisis, she argues, “is the direct outcome of the implementation of the neoliberal reform policies and trade liberalisation...with the state facilitating land grabbing by the international and national corporates” (51) She concludes, “Thus the land question has now become one of defending the right of peasants, including tribal peoples, to their land and livelihoods. Not only can it never be separated from the fight against imperialist globalisation, this fight is a necessary condition for any advance on the land question” (51).

These observations lead us to consider the “agrarian question,” which has received renewed attention in the literature in recent years. At its most basic level, the traditional agrarian question considered the effects of the transition from feudalism to capitalism on the peasantry.¹⁷ For Courville and Patel, the question “pivoted on the role of the small-farm sector and the pace of capitalism’s movement into agriculture” (2006,

¹⁷ See Lenin (1964), de Janvry (1981), Kautsky (1988).

5), and as Moyo and Yeros frame it, at center are “the familiar historical questions over the socio-economic character and political significance of the peasantry under capitalism” (2005, 25). Today, theorists have revived this debate concerning the nature of peasant populations in a new context: the neoliberal era of global monopoly capitalism. Moyo and Yeros examine the contemporary agrarian question at length, arguing that the “semi-proletarianization” of the peasantry, a state that earlier theorists predicted would disappear,¹⁸ instead “persists as the dominant condition in the countryside of the periphery” (2005, 19). They further note that, “So long as capital does not need to realise its profits nationally, semi-proletarianization and poverty are ‘functional’ to its reproduction” (20). This “functional dualism”¹⁹ is the relationship that agrarian reform, at least in its transformational form, aims to disrupt (2005, 20).

Competing Models of Agrarian Reform

Many states throughout the Global South have undertaken efforts to redistribute land to their citizens in a more equitable and/or efficient manner. Often as efforts to address the colonial legacy of the concentration of land in the hands of elites and the modern state, these policies of agrarian reform have come in many forms and have

¹⁸ See Kautsky (1988)

¹⁹ de Janvry (1981) examines functional dualism at length. He notes that “Functional dualism between peasant and commercial sectors in Latin American agriculture implies the increasing proletarianization and impoverishment of the rural masses. As the domination of capital over the peasantry increases, the struggle for survival induces not only a fierce competition for wages and product sales among peasants but also an intense search by peasants for additional productive resources (land and labor power) in order to increase the productivity of labor” (85).

enjoyed varied degrees of success.²⁰ Agrarian reform initiatives over the last century are generally divided into two basic categories: the first is alternately referred to as “populist” or “state-led agrarian reform” (SLAR), and the second as “neoliberal” or “market-led agrarian reform” (MLAR). While SLAR was the dominant model through the first half of the twentieth century, previously mentioned shifts in the global political economy – and in development discourse, specifically – have led to the prominence of the neoliberal or market-led model of agrarian reform in recent decades.

The aims of SLAR or populist reforms are largely redistributive in nature, often rooted in rights-based discourses or the notion of “land to the tiller” (Zoomers 2000a, 60). In these types of reforms, land is often granted collectively to farming or production cooperatives, and the government generally retains some control over it, prohibiting the purchase or sale of reform sector lands on the market (see Zoomers and van der Haar 2000; Rosset, Patel, and Courville 2006). Equity of access to and ownership of land are central considerations, as these types of reforms tend to take seriously concerns of social justice, food sovereignty, and honoring peoples’ connection to the land (Wolford 2007).

The approach to agrarian reform has unquestionably changed with the transition to the neoliberal era. While it is true that at an underlying level, as Zoomers notes, “the problem seems to be the same (unequal distribution of land and uncertainty over the right to cultivate land permanently), the context has changed considerably,” as have the approaches to addressing the problem (2000a, 59). At the forefront of the conversation today, then, are concerns about land markets and property rights, and policies are “driven

²⁰ For more on the history of agrarian reform, its theoretical orientation, and specific case studies, see Borras, Kay, and Akram-Lodhi (2007); Rosset, Patel, and Courville (2006); de Janvry (1981); de Janvry, Gordillo, Platteau, and Sadoulet (2001), and Zoomers and van der Haar (2000).

mainly by the quest for efficiency” (Zoomers 2000a, 60). The orientation of agrarian reform efforts thus reflects a state where:

The establishment of private ownership of land and the development of a full-fledged market are considered key elements in achieving various policy goals, such as stimulating agricultural development (national economic growth), poverty reduction (redistribution of wealth), and safeguarding the environment (sustainable production). There is widespread belief that land privatization (i.e., the granting of individual property titles) and abolishing the old restrictions are important instruments for producing a more efficient – and more equitable – distribution of the land, and creating a basis for sustainable land use. (Zoomers 2000a, 59)

Thus, many of the same goals and concerns are cited by advocates of both populist and neoliberal agrarian reforms, but the divergence lies in ideas about how to best attain these goals.

Wendy Wolford (2007) similarly characterizes the neoliberal trend in agrarian reform as one that aims to create efficient rural markets and increase production on the land, and that views the market as the best way to allocate land to meet these ends. Thus, she argues that a primary difference between the models “lies in their interpretation of *commodification*, both as a historical process and as a generalized state” (2007, 551, original emphasis). Advocates of the two models have conflicting views of the market, in other words, as neoliberals see it as “the optimal mechanism for allocating property to productive individuals,” while the populist view “assumes that the market is a vehicle for theft and exploitation,” where individuals own property not necessarily because they labored on it, but because they possess economic and political power (552).

The importance of relationships of power is central to many critiques of MLAR. In comparing case studies of MLAR around the globe, Raj Patel (2006) finds that “Perhaps the single unifying critique...is the stubborn refusal of market-led land reform policies to acknowledge the existence of differences in power between those who control land and those who do not” (98). Saturnino Borrás (2006) argues that “the fundamental problem with mainstream thinking about land policy...lies in its purely economic consideration of relationships” (111). For him, this view takes “a generally ahistorical view of the problem of landlessness and limits its concerns to the issue of economic efficiency today” (126), thus ignoring the “multidimensional character” of land, which includes “political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions” (121). Further, citing Anna Tsing’s argument, Borrás asserts that “property rights are not things; they are social relationships,” and while MLAR effectively ignores these relationships, they are the very thing “that land reform in its conventional sense is supposed to reform” (110).

Courville and Patel (2006) also recognize the importance of power dynamics and social relations to land, and argue that the “neoliberalization of agrarian policy” has led to the denial of any alternatives to this model within mainstream economic and development discourse (6). Like the neoliberal model in general, the market-led approach to agrarian reform has become hegemonic. Further, what was once considered a national issue has become a common feature of structural adjustment agreements and a condition of loans from IFIs. As Courville and Patel note, these land reforms “are now framed by considerations of equity and production efficiency arbitrated by the World Bank, with the full support of international finance institutions and their network of local elites” (2006, 6). Zoomers and van der Haar concur, noting that many of these IFIs “have abandoned

their previous attitude of non-intervention in such sensitive political matters as land reform, and are now actively involved in the promotion of new land laws, land titling, and registration projects” (2000, 18). As a result, earlier reform programs are often dismantled, leading collective land holdings to be parceled out and exchanged freely²¹ on the market (Zoomers 2000a, 59). This is exactly what happened with the imposition of neoliberal agricultural policy in Honduras, which reversed several decades of agrarian reform policies and drastically altered the social, political, and agricultural landscapes of the nation.

Scholars and practitioners increasingly agree that the purported benefits of MLAR have failed to materialize (see, for example, “Global Campaign” n.d.). Several argue that these policies have failed to reduce rural poverty (Rosset 2006; Zoomers 2000b); and in many cases they have actually served to deepen it (Akram-Lodhi, Borras, Kay, and McKinley 2007; Mondragón 2006). Zoomers also notes that “results are rather variable and often disappointing” in terms of efficiency and equity in land distribution, as well as economic growth (2000b, 290).

Others stress the point that the limitations of previous SLAR programs have less to do with the model itself than with entrenched structures of power. As Carmen Diana Deere argues, “the limited agrarian reform efforts of the past failed, not because of intrinsic problems of peasant agriculture but because of the lack of political will among elites in the face of entrenched resistance from the landlord class” (2006, x). These phenomena cannot be addressed by market-led agrarian reforms, as this model merely

²¹ I use this term cautiously, as the extent to which these transactions are “free” can certainly be called into question, as alluded to earlier in this chapter (e.g. Magdoff’s “extra-economic means”), and as I discuss further in Chapter III.

“exacerbates the power differences between those who control land and those who do not in favor of the former” (Deere 2006, x).

A question then remains regarding the future of agrarian reform. Many authors writing on the subject specifically cite the need for agrarian reform that is not purely economic in nature, but that also takes seriously political issues and power dynamics on local and global scales (Veltmeyer 2005; Rosset 2006; Moyo and Yeros 2005). As Peter Rosset argues, many “have tended to depoliticize the problem of landlessness, which by its nature can be addressed only by structural changes of a kind that fall squarely in the sphere of politics, rather than that of the market” (2006, 309). He proposes a model of “bubble up economics,” based on “redistribution of productive assets to the poorest strata” as an alternative to the failed “trickle down” model of wealth redistribution (317). Similarly for Moyo and Yeros, “economistic approaches to agrarian reform will continue to suffer unless the political dimensions of reforms are taken seriously, and the *political* grip of large capital broken” (2005, 23, original emphasis). For Courville and Patel, “Successful land reform will be, in a word, political” (2006, 12). Monica Dias Martins argues that it is not enough “simply to call for land redistribution to incorporate more farmers into the capitalist system;” she argues instead for an alternative approach that would require “shifting the entire agrarian structure of production, power, and cultural relations. This means that the whole economic-social-political system would have to be changed” (2006, 268). As Akram-Lodhi, Borras, Kay, and McKinley similarly recognize:

Granted it is important to reform and improve the relationship between people and land in the context of economic activities. Nonetheless, the basis for and imperatives of truly transformational land policies are the urgent and necessary

reforms of relationships within and between households, communities, and different social classes and groups, that often have competing political-economic and socio-cultural interests linked together in a variety of ways by their association to land. (2007, 391)

While the types of change these authors call for may appear unattainable, the case studies presented in *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform* can be taken together as evidence that transformational change is possible. In her foreword to the text, Carmen Diana Deere argues that “redistributionary agrarian reform could be the pillar of an alternative model of development to neoliberalism, one built on food sovereignty – favoring national agriculture over imports – and sustainable development – prioritizing small farmers over corporate agriculture” (2006, xi). Whether such agrarian change could effectively challenge the larger neoliberal agenda remains to be seen, but it would almost certainly have positive effects for the people and communities it directly affected. In Chapter V, I discuss a new agrarian reform law that the campesino movements of the Aguán and their allies have proposed to the Honduran Congress. This proposed law addresses many of the issues discussed in the previous section, and largely fits the model of reform called for by the scholars cited here.

Political Violence

I return now to the issue of the coercive arm of the state. In this section, I specifically consider the reasoning by which political violence is employed in the neoliberal context, and present theoretical tools that can help us better understand its prevalence in the case of contemporary Honduras. While the use of both state-sponsored

and state-sanctioned violence²² to further the interests of political and economic elites is an unfortunately well-established tradition in Latin America and beyond, the particular iteration of this phenomenon that plagues the Aguán today is directly related, I argue, to the themes outlined in this chapter.

The enduring presence of political violence in modern democracies is a problem that scholars across the social sciences and humanities continually grapple with. Following the work of Max Weber, we commonly agree that the state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force or violence within a society. That supposedly non-authoritarian states exercise this force against their own citizens in illegal and unjust ways appears contradictory, yet is a common feature in many democracies. For Diane Davis (2010), the persistence of state violence in contemporary Latin America may largely be attributed to “the path-dependent consequences of past political decisions about economic development, state formation, and industrialization,” while “the current intensification of long-standing problems of violence owes as much to the wholehearted *embrace* of liberalization, both political and economic, as to the weight of history” (38, original emphasis). In other words, this phenomenon is the result of both historical processes and the recent adoption of neoliberal policies.

²² I make a distinction here between state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence, as they are, at least in theory, two discrete notions. I define the former as illegal or unjust repression originating directly from state actors, such as military and police forces. The latter may be thought of as similar repression perpetrated by non-state actors who enjoy some degree of political power and impunity for their actions. As we will see in this section, the lines between these two types of violence are often blurred, as state and non-state actors often have shared interests and thus collude to perpetrate violence. In the case of Honduras, both state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence are widespread, and the distinctions between these actors are most definitely unclear. For the sake of simplicity, I will talk about them here together within the frame of “political violence.”

Violence in the Neoliberal State

Recalling Harvey's discussion of the contradictions between the theoretically non-interventionist neoliberal state and its frequent mobilization of force "to protect corporate interests and, if necessary, to repress dissent" (Harvey 2005, 77), we begin to see the grounds on which this use of force is justified. Scholars make direct connections between political violence and the logic of the neoliberal state. In *Violent Democracies in Latin America*, Arias and Goldstein argue that political violence is "much more than a social aberration;" it is more correctly viewed as "a mechanism for keeping in place the very institutions and policies that neoliberal democracies have fashioned over the past several decades" (2010, 5). Primary among these are those that "provide a stable and secure field for transnational investment and individual self-realization" (2010, 15), which would certainly include the protection of markets and individual property rights. For Naomi Klein, "The bottom line is that while Friedman's [neoliberal] economic model is capable of being partially imposed under democracy, authoritarian conditions are required for the implementation of its true vision" (2007, 11).

If, as many economists and policy makers have argued, neoliberal economic policies were intended to bring – or even capable of bringing – prosperity to all, it would not follow that force would be required to implement them. However, if these policies primarily serve elite and corporate interests and have overwhelmingly negative results for the majority of the population, as many scholars cited in this chapter argue, it is then understandable that force would be needed to repress popular opposition to these policies and their consequences.

Arias and Goldstein also connect the high levels of *social* violence that persist throughout Latin America to neoliberalism, arguing that this is “not the simple result of institutional failure but the logical outcome of neoliberal democracy’s unfolding” (2010, 16), where social violence ultimately becomes “an instrument for coping with the myriad problems that neoliberal democracies have generated” (5). As we have seen, the results of this system include increased social and economic inequality, heightened levels of poverty, and “declining public confidence in the representative nature of many neoliberal states” (Arias and Goldstein 2010, 16), as well as increased “social and political marginalization of the poorer sectors” and “the manifest depoliticization of the populace” (Silva 2004, 187).

Theoretical Tools for Understanding Political Violence

It is important to recognize the complexity with which political violence manifests in society. Here I briefly present two theoretical concepts that I find useful in thinking about violence, particularly in terms of complicating facile distinctions between what constitutes political versus social violence.

As Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (2004) recognize, widespread political and social violence persist in Latin American democracies, and have in fact “acquired greater variation and new dimensions beyond the conventional state and insurgent violence of the past” (6). They term this “new violence,” and argue that because of it “one of the most noteworthy characteristics of contemporary Latin American societies is the *de facto* existence of formal constitutionalism, (electoral) democracy and an often vibrant civil society on the one hand, and the use of force to stake out power domains or pursue

economic or political interests on the other” (6). Perhaps their most useful observation is the acknowledgment that in Latin American societies in particular, with their histories of political and social violence stemming from multiple actors, attempts to clearly differentiate and classify types of armed actors (for example, state vs. non-state, police vs. paramilitary) become difficult. They note that “most analytical distinctions become unfocused or confused when day-to-day situations bring about a systemic interaction between the armed actors involved, particularly in local configurations” (11).

“Violent Pluralism” is the interdisciplinary framework Arias and Goldstein present to help us understand the situation where we see “states, social elites, and subalterns employing violence in the quest to establish or contest regimes of citizenship, justice, rights, and a democratic social order” (2010, 4-5). They argue, much like Koonings and Kruijt, that Latin American nations are plagued by “an immense diversity of forms of violence” (20), and that while the particulars vary by context, it is common that “multiple violent actors operate within the polity and maintain different and changing connections to state institutions and political leaders, whether those states are officially democratic, authoritarian, or otherwise” (21).

I find the concept of violent pluralism particularly useful in thinking about conflicts between states, elites, and popular movements in contemporary Latin America. The approach, as Arias and Goldstein argue, “helps us develop a fuller conception of what relationships civil society and violent actors maintain to one another and to different elements of the state, including politicians, police, bureaucrats, and the military” (21). It also allows us to conceptualize these as dynamic relationships that are constantly shifting

in relation to the political and economic context and myriad other factors, and helps to create analytic space where “we can begin to ask what effects these arrangements have on politics and social relations” (22). This approach, the authors assert, “should help open a conceptual space through which we can understand in a more nuanced and sophisticated way the challenges facing these polities and their inhabitants” and “can more effectively contribute to some of the larger policy debates that exist today” (32).

In the case of Honduras, the factors that drive political violence are largely apparent, and fit tremendously well with the scholarly work outlined above. The state has faced increasing resistance to the implementation of neoliberal policies and to the clear privileging of business and elite interests over those of the average citizen. In the Aguán specifically, popular movements have coalesced to resist the LMDSA and its hugely detrimental impacts on campesino communities and the natural environment. While these resistance movements are explicitly nonviolent, they have been met with great repression from the state and the private security forces of powerful landholders. Using the concept of violent pluralism is instructive here, as it provides a framework to help us better understand the relationships between various violent actors and their impacts on political and social life and public policy.

Social Movements

The study of social movements and contentious politics provides myriad ways in which we can think further about these phenomena. The literature is vast and contains multiple theoretical traditions addressing the ways in which movements are formed and sustained, and how movement actors frame and articulate their struggles. The historic

lack of consensus among scholars of social movements illustrates the challenges involved in attempting to develop a single theoretical framework that accounts for the emergence of collective action among diverse peoples, with diverse realities, in diverse parts of the world. That this endeavor has been largely unsuccessful should perhaps not be surprising, nor should it be viewed as a failure; rather, the recognition of the importance of context and unique, situated political economic histories should be viewed as a step toward more meaningful social movement theories.²³ I will not trace or attempt to summarize these scholarly conversations here; instead I focus my discussion on the particular nature of popular movements in the neoliberal context, and then introduce the political process model, which I find to be most salient to the case of the Aguán. I discuss the specific components of the political process model in greater detail in Chapter IV, within the context of campesino movements in the Aguán.

Theorizing Social Movements in the Neoliberal Context

A fair amount of the social movements literature focuses on rural movements in Latin America and beyond, as these have been recognized as leading the popular struggle against neoliberalism. The Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, and Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) are particularly important in this regard, and many of the scholars cited in this thesis draw their insights from work with these movements.²⁴ Deere and Royce specifically connect the relatively recent increase in

²³ For further discussion of the relevance of theory, see Bevington and Dixon (2005).

²⁴ There are many important parallels between these movements and the contemporary campesino movements in the Aguán. As Vergara-Camus (2009) recognizes, the Zapatistas and the MST challenge scholars' previously-held conceptions of "peasant rebellions," and I believe the movements in the Aguán can similarly help us understand this new moment in contentious politics. While space limitations prevent me from exploring these relationships here, I hope to do so in a future project.

social movement activity in Latin America to changes in global political economy, and in particular to the impacts of neoliberalism and structural adjustment (2009, 1). They further argue that “the current dynamism of the rural social movements is in large measure related to the unprecedented attack on rural livelihoods unleashed by the neoliberal model of development” (1), which “has had a devastating impact on peasant economies nearly everywhere” (5).

The relationships between neoliberalism and social movement activity have become an important focus of scholarship. As Petras and Veltmeyer (2011) observe, “ordinary people and popular classes were quite disposed to resist these forces of capitalist development and change – to organize collectively and take action against the policies and institutions of the ruling class, including the model of neoliberal globalization used to advance the interests of the capitalist class and their imperialist backers” (1). In his introduction to *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance*, Barry Gills further articulates these relationships, as he argues that “The paradox of neoliberal economic globalization is that it both weakens and simultaneously activates the social forces of resistance” (2002, 3). He continues:

The key political tension in the coming era will be between the forces of neoliberal economic globalization, seeking to expand the freedom of capital, and the forces of social resistance, seeking to preserve and to redefine community and solidarity. It is by *acts of resistance* that we will establish our *solidarities* and our *identities* in the ‘era’ of globalization.” (3, original emphasis)

These observations challenge us to consider the ways in which both the claims of social movements and the nature of popular contention are shaped by the contemporary historical moment and, in particular, by the nature of the global political economy.

Social movement leaders are undoubtedly aware of these factors and the tensions that result from them, as are the movements' allies.

This calls our attention to an important feature of the increasingly globalized context in which movements operate – the sophisticated networks of which they are part. Transnational activist networks (TANs) are often the means through which displays of solidarity with social movements manifest. Keck and Sikkink (1998) note that one of the situations in which TANs are likely to be beneficial to local movements is when “channels between domestic groups and their government are blocked or hampered or where such channels are ineffective for resolving a conflict” (12). Keck and Sikkink developed the term “boomerang pattern” (also referred to as the “boomerang effect”) to discuss the phenomenon we see when local movements or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) employ TANs to pressure an intransigent state on their behalf (12-3). This tactic can potentially be successful because the TAN has access to the state that the local movement lacks, in addition to the ability to use resources and information as leverage against the state (12). These networks are thus an important tool with which movements can amplify the impact of their efforts.

The preceding observations illustrate the multiple factors that shape the nature of social movements and the contexts in which they operate. Many models of social movement activity fail to capture the complexity of these relationships, thus overlooking important aspects of contention. I argue that McAdam’s political process creates space for this complexity, and thus largely transcends the limitations of other approaches.

Political Process Model

In the second edition of *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Doug McAdam articulates his revised political process model. Through this model, McAdam seeks to “explore possibilities for theoretical synthesis across nominally distinct structuralist, culturalist, and rationalist approaches to the study of collective action” (1999, vii). He explains the impetus for this synthesis in the following observation:

Increasingly, one finds scholars from various countries and nominally different theoretical traditions emphasizing the importance of the same three broad sets of factors in analyzing the origins of collective action. These three factors are: 1) the political opportunities and constraints confronting a given challenger; 2) the forms of organization (informal as well as formal) available to insurgents as sites for initial mobilization; and 3) the collective process of interpretation, attribution and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action. (1999, viii)

McAdam also refers to these as political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes, respectively, which is the terminology I will use in my discussion of the model in relation to campesino movements in Chapter IV. I find this model to be tremendously useful in understanding the complicated dynamics of social movement activity, and as such his approach largely informs my analysis of contentious politics in the Aguán. I will elaborate on each of these three areas further in that chapter, directly connecting them to the case study at hand.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the theoretical relationships between neoliberalism, contemporary agrarian issues, political violence, and social movement activity, and has foreshadowed the ways in which these are important to the

contemporary conflict in the Aguán Valley of Honduras. I have attempted to capture the complex dynamics involved in these phenomena, while also maintaining the ability to examine them as distinct concept and processes.

The political process and violent pluralism frameworks, in particular, demonstrate the ways in which institutions, political and economic systems, and social, cultural, and historical processes combine to shape a given situation. Interrogating the nature of the neoliberal context helps us understand why it gives rise to social movements and political violence. Both of these phenomena are responses to the dire economic and social conditions that result from neoliberal policies – one reflecting popular sentiment to change these conditions, and the other reflecting the lengths to which the elite and the neoliberal state will go to in order to maintain the status quo. In the next chapter, I consider these factors in an analysis of the *Ley de Modernización*.

CHAPTER III

LA LEY DE MODERNIZACIÓN Y DESARROLLO DEL SECTOR AGRÍCOLA: A POLICY ANALYSIS

Introduction

By the late 1980s, the influence of the Washington Consensus was firmly entrenched in the global political economic sphere. The international debt crisis had begun to spiral out of control, as nation after nation struggled to meet its obligations to foreign creditors. The solution, as promoted by the World Bank, IMF, and other multilateral institutions, consisted of the by now standard set of reforms – market liberalization, public divestment, and so forth. As governments adopted these Structural Adjustment Projects (SAPs), political, social, and economic landscapes underwent drastic changes on both global and local scales. Importantly, as Veltmeyer, Petras and Vieux (1997) note, these SAPs represented a significant shift in the theoretical orientation of the multilateral institutions:

The [debt] crisis also resulted in a dramatic change in the priorities of the international lending agencies – from a professed concern for poverty alleviation and meeting the poor’s basic needs to securing the capacity and willingness of debtor countries to service their debts. And there was a similar radical shift in the economic policies pursued and in many cases imposed on Latin American regimes. By the end of the decade virtually all regimes in the region had adopted a neoliberal policy program of macroeconomic stabilization (fiscal balance and deflation) and structural adjustment (trade liberalization, market deregulation, privatization of state enterprises, and downsizing/modernization of the state). (16)

The government of Honduras was in no way immune to this trend. Over the course of the 1980s, its foreign debt had nearly doubled, reaching approximately US\$3 billion by the end of 1987 (World Bank 1994). This debt, equal to nearly 70 percent of the nation's annual GDP at the time (Kerssen 2013, 22), had clearly become unmanageable. As such, the government began negotiations with the World Bank, asking for its assistance in implementing a "major macroeconomic adjustment program through a series of Bank-supported operations in the agriculture, public sector, trade, and financial sectors" (World Bank 1994). Honduras's SAP was officially adopted via *Decreto* 18-90 in March of 1990, and consisted of "the typical combination of privatization, liberalization and deflationary monetary policy" (Kerssen 2013, 22). Its theoretical orientation and objectives were later described by the World Bank (1994) in the following way:

The essential aim of the Government's program was to stabilize the economy while laying the basis for addressing major macroeconomic constraints affecting long-term recovery and growth. In addition, by supporting productive employment it would enhance living conditions of the majority of the population. This would take place through reform of the public sector and public investment program, improved balance of payments management, credit and monetary policies and financial sector reform. (n.p.)

The general approach embodied in the nation's SAP was subsequently implemented through a number of sector-specific actions and policies. In the agricultural sector, indications of a sea change began with the privatization of the National Agricultural Marketing Board (IHMA) in early 1991. This resulted in the elimination of national policies that controlled imports and exports of basic grains, as well as "price guarantees for staples like corn, beans, rice, chicken and milk, leaving both farmers and

consumers at the mercy of the global market” (Kerssen 2013, 23). Later that year, the Action Plan for Central American Agriculture (PAC) would enact similar policies on a regional level. The cumulative effect of these policies, as Tanya Kerssen of Food First/The Institute for Food & Development Policy notes, led to a sharp rise in agricultural imports, thus “devastating the basic grains sector and transforming consumption patterns” in Honduras” (2013, 23).

With local campesinos already reeling from the impacts of structural adjustment in Honduras and the broader regional shift toward neoliberalism that it coincided with, the *Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola* (Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector, or LMDSA), was introduced. While large landowners and ranchers were united in their support for the new policy, the public, campesino groups, and government officials in the sector were largely divided on the issue (Pino 1992, 34). Despite a great deal of popular opposition, the LMDSA was quickly approved by the National Congress in early March of 1992, via *Decreto* 31-92.

This law has had indisputable impacts on the lives of rural Hondurans, and remains central in national policy discussions today. It was, in many ways, the quintessential neoliberal reform. Though a domestic policy, the influence of the global development industry in its creation is evident – not only did the policy stem from a World Bank-brokered SAP, but the language of the law itself was penned by Roger Norton, a USAID economist.²⁵

In this chapter, I specifically focus on the LMDSA and its impacts. I examine the rationale behind the policy, seeking to understand the dynamics involved in its

²⁵ The LMDSA is sometimes referred to as the “Norton Law,” for this reason.

implementation while also locating these within the global political economic context. I then consider the outcomes of the LMDSA, contrasting these with the objectives stated in the policy itself. I aim to provide an analysis of this important policy that takes seriously issues of political and economic power, and recognizes the need for a holistic approach to policy analysis that goes well beyond purely economic concerns.

Problem Definition and Policy Approach

The adoption of the LMDSA was predicated on two theoretical assumptions held by policymakers at the time: the superiority of neoliberal economic policy, as asserted by multilateral financial institutions dominated by the Global North, and the perceived failure of agrarian reform in Honduras. As previously discussed, global development discourse of this time was dominated by adherents to neoliberal economic policy. Institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, and USAID held very specific ideas regarding “development” – what it meant, why some nations lacked it, and how those nations should go about achieving it. The neoliberal approach was widely lauded as *the* solution to the economic “backwardness” that was blamed for so much poverty in nations of the Global South. Specific kinds of macroeconomic policies were thus implemented, justified on the grounds that they would generate wealth which would then “trickle down” to benefit the average citizen.

There is no question that Honduras was facing serious social and economic challenges at the time of its structural adjustment. As expressed by the World Bank in 1993, among Honduras’s problems at the time were “widespread poverty, low social indicators, severe indebtedness, institutional weaknesses, and economic dependence on

two major export commodities” (6).²⁶ The World Bank perceived these problems as the direct results of “inefficiencies in the marketplace and in the public sector” (1993, 6), therefore designating these as the realms in which feasible solutions would lie.

Additionally, as the agricultural sector was central to the Honduran economy, reforms in this arena became a fundamental part of the national development agenda. Policymakers thus presented the LMDSA as a means to address the larger issues facing Honduras by way of increasing the profitability of one of its primary sectors via neoliberal mechanisms. “Modernizing” the agricultural sector, they argued, would result in economic development, which would inherently benefit the people of Honduras.

Policymakers also portrayed the LMDSA as a means to address the perceived limitations and failures of the agrarian reform programs of the 1960s and ‘70s, though in a very indirect manner. It is certainly true that agrarian reform in Honduras had been flawed and, in many ways, incomplete. Despite the fact that some 60,000 families had received land on which to live and farm, landlessness and rural poverty remained serious issues (FIAN 2000). As part of agrarian reform, the state had failed to provide adequate technical assistance and the access to credit needed to support the incipient peasant cooperatives and allow them to compete with wealthy agro-industrialists. Lands granted through agrarian reform were often of poor quality and allotted in parcels that were too small to effectively support families. Additionally, a lack of government capacity in administering the program led to poor record-keeping and, consequently, misunderstandings and conflicts over property rights. These, however, were not the

²⁶ These two export commodities were bananas and coffee, which at the time accounted for more than 60% of agricultural export revenues (World Bank 1993).

issues that the Honduran government and its multilateral partners focused on in their agricultural reforms.

For proponents of the LMDSA, the primary concern at hand was the economic productivity of the agricultural sector, particularly in terms of agricultural exports and the presence of a well-functioning land market. Subsistence agriculture was not deemed an economically profitable venture in the dominant development discourse, and thus state-led agrarian reform (SLAR) intended to redistribute land to campesino families was not a viable policy option, regardless of how well the program itself functioned. The theoretical divide between those who conceived of and drafted the LMDSA and the campesinos of rural Honduras is evident in this observation by Tanya Kerksen (2013):

Aguán settlers did in fact cultivate food. Gould (1986) describes how the Aguán co-ops assigned individual plots to each family for the production of corn and beans for consumption, which were grown without pesticides or fertilizers (compared to input-intensive oil palm). But policy makers saw peasant subsistence as an obstacle to development instead of a desirable outcome – a view strongly reinforced by international aid agencies then and now. This helps to explain why by the 1990s, the co-ops were widely seen as a failure: Aguán peasants were still producing far too much food and not enough oil palm to keep the processing plants competitive. (20, my emphasis)

Policymakers, therefore, viewed endemic rural poverty and landlessness as policy problems that could – and in fact, should – be address via market-based solutions. A shift from subsistence agriculture to agro-industrial production was deemed the policy solution that would “modernize” the Aguán. These priorities are clearly reflected in the language of the law itself, and in the nature of the goals it expresses. The primary objectives of the LMDSA, as stated in Article 4 of its text are as follows:

- a) To establish the proper conditions for producers, whatever their form of organization or company, to develop their activities of the production of food and other agricultural products in an efficient manner by ensuring the conservation and rational use of the soil, water, forests, and flora and fauna;
- b) To consolidate the organization and institutionalization of the agricultural public sector and lay the groundwork for the rationalization and to improve the coordination of their activities;
- c) To establish an appropriate framework that encourages investment in the field, fair remuneration to agricultural producers, and the generation of rural employment in order to achieve food security and improve the living conditions of the rural population;
- d) To promote agro-industrial development and the export of agricultural products;
- e) To stimulate the internal and external marketing of agricultural products, preferably by means of entities created on the initiative of the people who produce;
- f) To ensure the expansion of the agricultural sector by improving the channeling of financial resources to the producers through state or private lending institutions;
- g) To strengthen the services of technology generation and transfer to the producers, and promote the establishment and development of private centers with those purposes;
- h) To secure a suitable framework of security of land tenure and access that enables businessmen and businesswomen who are not owners to make productive investments in the field through lease agreements with rural owners, or by joint investment mechanisms with independent farmers and beneficiaries of agrarian reform;
- i) To guide the expansion of agricultural activities into forms of farming that are compatible with the conservation and good management of natural resources, protection of the environment, and ecological balance of the country; and
- j) Others compatible with the above objectives. (Congreso Nacional 1992, my translation)

It is important to note that these objectives are nearly exclusively economic in nature, with some inclusion of environmental concerns. This reflects the nature of the Honduran government's development strategy of the time, which in turn was largely shaped by that of the dominant global institutions and the requirements of their structural adjustment plan.

The LMDSA and Agrarian Reform

The LMDSA, as we can clearly see, is an example of market-led agrarian reform (MLAR). As Charles Brockett (1998) observes, the adoption of the LMDSA “symbolized the change in government policy from agrarian reform to the promotion of commercial agriculture and the parallel reduction in the role of the state in agriculture, as the government turned instead to market forces” (198). Redistribution of public and under-utilized land to landless families had become a strategy of the past.

One of the primary components of this policy was what Kerssen (2013) calls the “implementation of land tenure ‘modernization,’ shorthand for privatizing and individualizing land titles so that they could be bought and sold on the free market” (29). Prior to the LMDSA, lands distributed via agrarian reform, which were collectively held by peasant cooperatives, were prohibited from being exchanged in the marketplace. If a family chose to leave the co-op, the ownership of their individual parcel reverted to the co-op. If an entire co-op were to dissolve, their lands were to be purchased by the INA, so they could be reallocated to other landless Hondurans through the reform process (Ríos 2010, 3). Under no circumstance were agrarian reform lands to be purchased or sold on the market. The LMDSA reversed these provisions, however, allowing for collectively-held land to be parceled out and bought and sold freely, or for entire co-ops to be sold to individuals or firms. These changes radically altered the dynamics of land ownership and notions of property rights in Honduras.

This feature of the LMDSA effectively reversed both the specific legal provisions and the larger spirit of the agrarian reform policy of the previous three decades. As

Kerssen (2013) notes, “It represented a shift from a national ‘land to the tiller’ paradigm to a so-called ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ paradigm promoted by the World Bank” (29). In the introduction to a recent publication of the text of the Agrarian Reform Law, the editors argue that, “with the LMDSA, the resource of land was subjected to the free play of supply and demand and the concept that it should fulfill its ‘social function’ was turned into a thing of the past” (Editorial Guaymuras 2004, 11, my translation). Pedro Emilio Marchetti (2001) similarly argues that, “in the current legislation, the social function of land is defined by purely technical-economistic criteria” (14, my translation). In fact, many have deemed the policy unconstitutional,²⁷ as it directly negates the mandate for agrarian reform as expressed in Chapter III of the Constitution of Honduras:

Article 344. Agrarian Reform is an integral process and an instrument of transformation of the agrarian structure of the country, intended to replace the *latifundio* (large estate) and the *minifundio* (smallholding) with a system of ownership, tenancy, and use of the land that guarantees social justice in the field and increases the production and productivity of the agricultural sector.

So is declared the need and public utility for the implementation of Agrarian Reform.

Article 345. Agrarian Reform constitutes an essential part of the overall development strategy of the Nation, therefore the other economic and social policies the Government approves should be formulated and executed in a harmonious way with it, especially those having to do with, among others, education, housing, employment, infrastructure, marketing, and technical assistance and credit.

Agrarian Reform will be implemented in such a way as to ensure the effective participation of *campesinos*, on equal terms with other sectors of production, in the process of economic, social, and political development of the Nation. (my translation)

²⁷ For example, see “Todos y nadie contra el ajuste estructural” in *Revista Envío* (1992, 7).

The contradictions between the Constitutional mandate for agrarian reform and the content of the LMDSA are obvious. While the Constitution speaks to the issues of social justice and direct involvement of campesinos in the development process, the LMDSA focuses on issues of economic efficiency and market stimulation. Though in theory these concerns need not be mutually exclusive, in practice the privileging of the latter have had dire consequences for many.

Here the critiques scholars have put forth regarding MLAR and the many questions raised in the literature regarding the suitability of the market in allocating land become important. Can market-based reform lead to an equitable and efficient distribution of land? Whose interests are privileged in this system? Does this kind of reform exclude the very individuals state-led reform is designed to benefit? I now turn to a discussion of the outcomes of the LMDSA, keeping these questions and critiques in mind.

Outcomes of *La Ley de Modernización*

The outcomes of neoliberal economic policies and SAPs in Latin America have been well documented. While there are certainly variations between cases, there is a great deal of agreement among scholars that these policy trends have been unfavorable to the majority of people in Latin American nations.²⁸ Veltmeyer, Petras & Vieux (1997) portray the situation as such:

The overall effect of structural adjustment in Latin America has been to shift wealth upward to the domestic dominant classes and outward to foreign

²⁸ See, for example, Veltmeyer, Petras and Vieux (1997); Abouharb and Cingranelli (2007); Kay (2007); Tiney (2009).

creditors. Stabilization and adjustment measures have decreased real wages and raised the cost of living through devaluations and the shrinking of state expenditures by means of cuts in subsidies for popular consumption and the removal of price controls, cuts in spending on welfare programs and other expenditure reductions....In short, structural adjustment has contributed to a shift in the balance of class power away from the popular classes and toward domestic dominant classes and their foreign allies. (73)

In Honduras, the LMDSA has produced economic gain for some. The equity with which the benefits of this policy have been enjoyed by the people of Honduras and the degree to which many of the proposed objectives were fulfilled may certainly, however, be called into question. An examination of specific outcomes of the LMDSA – both in comparison with the policy’s stated objectives and also those that were, perhaps, unintended – will shed light on the effectiveness of this specific policy and the general development strategy of which it was part. These outcomes are often interrelated and interdependent, but I will attempt to examine them as discrete phenomena here.

Increase in Exports

Among the objectives stated in the text of the LMDSA was the intensification of agro-industrial production, both for local consumption and export markets. Particular emphasis was placed on agricultural exports, as these played an important part in the national economy, and as the purchasing power of the majority of Hondurans was – and still is – quite limited.

It is true that overall exports as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased in the years following structural adjustment. According to World Bank data (2013), overall exports grew from 26% of GDP in 1988 to 47% of GDP in 1996, and

54% in 2000.²⁹ However, much of this growth is accounted for by the massive expansion of textile manufacturing operations, or *maquilas*, in northern Honduras during the same period, rather than increases in agricultural exports. The *maquilas* soon constituted the majority of national exports, in fact, comprising roughly 65% of all exports by 2005 (Cordero 2009, 1).

Therefore, while overall growth in national exports during this period is impressive, we would be wrong to assume that the same trends were present in the agricultural sector. If we turn our gaze to that sector specifically, the picture is rather different. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reports that while agricultural exports constituted upwards of 80% of national exports in the late 1980s, by 2003 this figure had fallen to less than 50% (2003). Further, agricultural production as a percentage of GDP fell from 21.6% in the late 1980s to only 17% by the late 1990s, representing increased activity in the manufacturing and other sectors, as noted above (FAO 2003). These figures are significant because the economic gains generated by this increase in exports did not benefit small farmers or the average Honduran – rather, they were concentrated in the elite business-owning classes, thus exacerbating social inequality.

Increased Rural Poverty and Food Insecurity

Despite the government's expressed objectives of improving food security and the living standards of rural Hondurans with the LMDSA, the evidence shows that these conditions have worsened in the wake of this policy. In 2010, the FAO determined that

²⁹ From "Exports of Goods and Services (% of GDP)."

Honduras continued to suffer the highest levels of rural poverty in Central America, at 78.8% (FIDH et al. 2011, 11). The editors at Guaymuras (2004) directly link the extreme hardships faced by rural Hondurans to the LMDSA, stating that:

With this law, the small and medium producers have been left on the margin of technical services and credit offered by the state and, even worse, of access to the resource of land. It is thus no coincidence that the levels of food security, poverty and destitution have been deepened in more than 80% of the rural population. (12, my translation)

Citing FAO data, Tanya Kerssen also notes that deregulation and liberalization in the agricultural sphere, resulting both from the LMDSA and other similar policies in the region, was highly detrimental to local food markets. These changes led to a steep increase in agricultural imports, which “grew by over 16 percent per year between 1990 and 2000,” thus greatly altering local diets (2013, 23). A 2011 International Fact Finding Mission report directly linked this “progressive displacement of basic grain production by export crops, accompanied by an excessive concentration of land in the hands of a few owners” to heightened food insecurity (FIDH et al.11). Indeed, as of a 2010 study by Honduras’s National Institute of Statistics (INE), 56% of rural households were food insecure (Irías n.d., 13). These figures are staggering in a country that was long known as the breadbasket of Central America.

Expansion of the Agro-Industrial Sector

This new emphasis on agro-industrial exports at the expense of food production for local consumption allowed for the proliferation of a relatively new cash crop in Northern Honduras. Though African palm had been cultivated there since the 1970s, the new policy landscape facilitated massive growth in its production, as Irías (n.d.) notes:

What is clear is that the driving factor of this process of land trading in the Bajo Aguán during the last 20 years has been the interests of the agro-export businesses and the production of African palm for export.... This is evident in the rapid growth of the area in production of African palm, which from 48,000 hectares in 1981 grew to 82,100 hectares in 2005, and to 120,000 hectares in 2009. 46% of this area is concentrated in the Bajo Aguán.” (16, my translation)

In fact, by December 2012, African palm had become the second largest agricultural export in Honduras (Secretaría 2012). Unfortunately, this has only exacerbated food insecurity in rural areas, as the vast expansion of palm plantations has encroached on land that would otherwise be dedicated to growing food crops, and the economic gains that have resulted from its expansion have not reached the pockets of campesino families. Rather, as Kerssen (2013) notes, “The benefits of this growth have been concentrated in the hands of a few powerful, Honduran-based agro-food corporations” (55). The law unquestionably “privileged export crops and established an auspicious legal framework for the large agricultural companies” (Editorial Guaymuras 2004, 12).

Deteriorating Local Economy

These changes in the agricultural structure of Northern Honduras have had largely negative effects on the local economies of the region. In the case of the Aguán Valley, the period of Agrarian Reform brought relative economic security to many. Gilberto Ríos, the national director of FIAN in Honduras, argues that “For more than twenty years (1970 – the early 1990s) the firms of the reformed sector³⁰ were the large producers of the Bajo Aguán. The region became one of the most important productive centers of the

³⁰ In other words, the cooperatives created through agrarian reform.

country, and Tocoa³¹ distinguished itself as the fastest growing city in Honduras” (2010, 5, my translation). This trend, however, would end with the changes brought to the region by the LMDSA. In his introduction to Miguel Alonzo Macías’s study of the impacts of agrarian counter-reform in the Aguán Valley, Marchetti (2001) argues that “The central discovery of this study is that, once the lands of the Agrarian Reform were purchased by Facussé, Rosenthal, Standard Fruit Company and René Morales,³² the local economy went into a recession” (13, my translation). He further notes that “even though the exploitation of lands of African palm has improved under Facussé, Rosenthal, Morales, the concentration of land in the hands of these economic classes that isolate themselves from the local economy does not achieve a wider social function for the wellbeing of the regional economy” (14, my translation).

In addition to changing the crops that rural Hondurans were cultivating and altering local diets and consumption patterns, the LMDSA also impacted where and how they were living. The deterioration of local economies that had once been relatively strong led many to seek employment elsewhere. As Kerksen (2013) notes, “The collapse of smallholder agriculture led to a flood of outmigration, disrupting family structures and community life in the countryside” (23).

Dissolution of Cooperatives and Sale of Collectively-Held Lands

The LMDSA drastically changed the nature of land tenure in Northern Honduras, and as many argue, nearly led to the destruction of the cooperative structure put in place

³¹ Tocoa is the primary town in the region.

³² Corporations owned by Miguel Facussé, Jaime Rosenthal, René Morales, Reinaldo Canales, along with the Standard Fruit Company, are the largest landowners in the Aguán Valley.

by agrarian reform.³³ With the elimination of laws preventing the sale of collectively-held agrarian reform lands, the enactment of the LMDSA coincided with a period of massive land transfers in the Aguán. At first glance, it may have appeared that the World Bank's "willing buyer-willing seller" paradigm" (Kerssen 2013, 29) was being taken up by many cooperatives in the region. A more critical examination of the circumstances under which many of these co-ops were selling their lands, and to whom they were selling them, however, brings the validity of this paradigm into question.

Many cooperatives did sell their lands in the wake of the LMDSA, nearly exclusively to members of the agro-industrial elite. Within two years of the policy's implementation, nearly 31,000 hectares, or 53.6% of the lands awarded during agrarian reform, had been sold by cooperatives (FOSDEH et al. n.d., 19). While these figures are substantial indeed, so too was the duress experienced by many co-ops at the time. Already feeling the impacts of structural adjustment and other national and regional neoliberal policies, the promise of an immediate influx of cash for their land was often too great to resist. As Kerssen (2013) observes, the reality was that, "Struggling under the weight of debt, low returns and rising input costs, highly vulnerable Aguán peasants were susceptible to these buyouts" (28). The lure of cash was not the only factor, however, as she further notes, that "These 'voluntary' sales were helped along through varying degrees of intimidation and manipulation: from bribes to peasant leaders, to menacing letters from INA, to violent threats from large landowners (MUCA 2010)" (29) – in other words, Magdoff's (2013) "extra-economic means." Even in cases where the sales were undertaken legally, the payments that co-ops often received amounted to less

³³ Tanya Kerssen (2013) calls the policy "the death knell of agrarian reform" (29).

than half of the value of the land (Macías 2001, 40). Aryeh Shell (2012) reports that land was often sold for as little as 1,000 Lempiras per manzana, which translates to roughly US\$52 for 1.7 acres. We can thus understand this massive selloff of co-op land as resulting from a combination of great financial need within the co-ops and campesino families, on the one hand, and external pressure in the form of threats and violence from wealthy landowners, on the other.

The end result was an extreme blow to the cooperative structure of agriculture in Northern Honduras. Irías found that, “of the 54 cooperatives and associative enterprises of African palm organized in the process of agrarian reform, only 9 did not succumb to the process of trading in lands” (n.d., 15, my translation). Similarly, MUCA reports that 40 of the 57 cooperative companies involved in the cultivation and production of palm oil sold their lands during this period (MUCA 2010). The organization further notes that the “phenomenon” of these sales has been widely contested and investigated ever since, both in terms of the “motivations [for] and the legal framework of the sales,” and the “campaign of intimidation and threats of death against the leaders who opposed the negotiations” (MUCA 2010, my translation).

Re-concentration of Land and Resources

As a result of these land transfers, the LMDSA also dramatically altered land ownership patterns. Within a few years of the implementation of the LMDSA, the redistribution of lands to campesinos that occurred through agrarian reform had been completely reversed, and land ownership was even more concentrated than before the reforms. This trend was particularly prevalent in the Aguán, where, as Kerssen notes, “In

a short period, a few wealthy individuals seized more than 21,000 hectares (over 70 percent) of peasant lands” (2013, 5) – a rate of land re-concentration some seven times higher than that experienced elsewhere in the nation (30). She importantly connects these extreme levels to the fact that the land in this region is the best suited to agro-industrial production, as it is among the most fertile and least mountainous terrain in Honduras.

With the vast majority of the land in the Aguán now in the hands of wealthy landowners, the problem of landlessness – the very problem that spurred the agrarian reform of previous decades – once again plagued campesino families. According to data from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), there were 205,000 landless families in Honduras in 1998 – an increase from the 126,000 reported in the nation’s farming census of 1993 (Irías n.d., 13). The most recent UNDP Human Development Report (2011) cited 161,000 landless families and an additional 116,000 families whose land consisted of parcels less than one hectare (roughly 2.5 acres) (57). So while the situation has improved slightly in recent years, overall levels of landlessness remain higher today than before the implementation of the LMDSA,³⁴ and the best agricultural lands remain highly concentrated in the hands of agro-business. As such, Macías (2001) argues, “There is no doubt that, currently, the greatest problem in the Honduran agricultural sector is the lack of equity in the possession of land” (160, my translation).

There is little disagreement in the literature regarding this phenomenon of land concentration and its relationship to the LMDSA and other similar policies. Macías (2001) calls the LMDSA “nothing more than a form of institutionalizing and

³⁴ See Brockett (1998) for more details.

consolidating an agricultural project that benefits the minorities that concentrate the productive lands” (160, my translation). He further criticizes the elite policymakers, arguing that their efforts “to distribute land to themselves and their allies and to create new *latifundios* was done with an overconfidence in the new neoliberal culture and a lack of seriousness in respect to the laws of the country” (15, my translation). In the words of Tanya Kerksen (2013), “Neoliberalism has set the stage for a massive re-concentration of land in the Aguán into the hands of a few influential elites. Like the industrialists of the *maquila* sector, these individuals were well positioned to benefit from the newly liberalized markets in land, trade and investment” (28). For Gilberto Ríos (2010):

the promotion of this concentrated model of property was justified by neoliberals as the condition *sine qua non* for achieving large and positive results in the development of the country: the farming activity now in hands of “genuine businessmen” would raise levels of productivity and growth of output to such a degree that the poor population would benefit substantially from the “overflow” effect. (7, my translation)

It is safe to deduce that the re-concentration of land and resources, then, was not an unintended consequence of the LMDSA, but was rather viewed by its advocates as a favorable result that would lead to increased agricultural productivity and a subsequent “trickle-down” of wealth to the majority of the population. This latter point is widely contested by opponents of neoliberal economic policies, as the postulated “trickle-down effect” has generally failed to materialize in the decades following the enactment of these policies throughout the globe, as it has failed to do in Honduras. What is also clear in Ríos’s statement is the degree to which the elite tend to see themselves as those who should rightly control the means of production and resources of society. It is then no surprise that the policy they chose to adopt produced these results.

Reconfiguration of Class Power

What follows from these many changes that stemmed from the LMDSA, and from structural adjustment and the shift toward neoliberalism more generally, is a reconfiguration of class power in Honduras. While social inequality has long been great in the nation and the presence of a powerful elite class is nothing new, the nature and orientation of this elite, as well as the implications for the political, economic, and social structures of Honduras, deserve further examination.

Kerssen (2013) argues that the “Structural adjustment policies of the 1990s...sparked a massive transfer of state resources to the Honduran private sector, granting north coast-based elites unprecedented access to global markets, investment capital and political power” (7), thus resulting in what she calls “the consolidation of a globally oriented agro-industrial bourgeoisie” (5). She relates this to David Harvey’s recognition of neoliberalism as “a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (2005, 19), rightly identifying these relationships and their consequences for Honduras today. Kerssen therefore deems this a “re-configuration of class power” that has resulted in the ongoing dominance of the agro-industrial elite in the economic and political realms, ultimately leading to the 2009 coup d’état (5). She concludes:

The coup that overthrew president Manuel Zelaya on June 28, 2009 can be read as the expression of a class process set into motion by neoliberal restructuring. The ‘new’ land grabs in Honduras then, look more like a deepening and intensification of a process already well underway. Put another way, the grabbing of state power is at least in part, the *political consequence* of an earlier wave of land grabs. (5, original emphasis)

I cite Kerssen's arguments at length here because they reveal much about the nature of the LMDSA and the motivations behind its implementation as they relate to social and political power structures in Honduras.

Outcomes in the Long-Term

While the previously mentioned outcomes of the LMDSA materialized primarily in the short- and medium-term (though they persist in the present day), there are additional, more long-term outcomes that deserve discussion here. Despite the fact that these outcomes are somewhat temporally removed from the policy, their relationship to the LMDSA is apparent. A brief examination of these important outcomes will reinforce my and others' arguments that the contemporary conflict in the Aguán has deep roots in this policy of the early 1990s.

Radicalization of Campesino Movements

The radicalization of campesino movements over the past decade is likely an unintended consequence of the LMDSA, though it is in many ways not a surprising one. The aforementioned outcomes and their indisputable impact on the lives of rural Hondurans spurred a level of organizing among campesinos that had not been seen in many years. As Marchetti (2001) argues, elites and policymakers "underestimated the capacity for popular response to the conditions of misery created by the counter-reform" (15). Kerssen (2013) concurs:

neoliberal restructuring and the militarized response to peasant movements have radicalized the Aguán. The new movements have gone beyond traditional demands for land redistribution (though these remain central) to demands for a *large-scale project of counter-restructuring that restores political and economic power to local communities*. This project necessarily entails a transformation of

state power, or ‘grabbing power back’ from the small class of globalized elites who currently control the state.” (127, original emphasis)

As I will argue in subsequent chapters, the nature of this resistance and the claims these movements stake are largely informed by the outcomes of the LMDSA and the national power structures that have consolidated in its wake.

Militarization and Widespread Political Violence

As part of the political project of neoliberalism that has led to the reconfiguration of class power in Honduras through the continued entrenchment of an economic and political elite, the use of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence to enforce this elite’s property rights has become commonplace. As discussed at length elsewhere, the Aguán has become a tremendously violent region, where state military and police forces, along with private security forces of large landowners, have been accused of countless violations of human rights and other acts of repression against the campesino movements. This violence has escalated tremendously since the 2009 coup, but the logic behind it can be traced to the political project of neoliberalism and the specific conditions created by the LMDSA.

Current Agrarian Conflict

It is thus understandable why many, including but not limited to the campesino movements and their allies, directly implicate the LMDSA as the catalyst for the current agrarian conflict in the Aguán Valley. It has undeniably contributed to, if not directly caused, the conditions that have led campesino movements to engage in active resistance, as well as those that have led the state to justify the use of force in the region. Gustavo Irías refers to the LMDSA as “the backdrop” for today’s conflict, and argues that “It is

necessary to recognize that the origin of this last cycle of conflict goes back before December of 2009 [when the violence in the Aguán began to escalate considerably], its starting point being the implementation of the *Ley de Modernización Agrícola*” (n.d., 14, my translation). Thus, in the minds of many, this policy and the current conflict are inextricably linked.

Conclusion

Any analysis of the LMDSA must go beyond an examination of its outcomes as compared with the objectives stated in the text to consider the larger policy context of which it was an important part. Deciphering the logic behind this reform and the motivations of those who created and implemented it allows us a deeper understanding of its repercussions, and ultimately, of the contemporary conflict in the Aguán.

Traditionally, policy analysis seeks to assess the efficacy of a given policy based on a number of factors. How, then, do we assess the “efficacy” of the LMDSA? I argue that the answer to this question depends very much on whom you ask and on what criteria the analysis is based. Economists might argue that a lack of effective demand and problems related to the implementation of the LMDSA prevented it from achieving its declared goals in rural Honduras. It is certainly true that the creation of a market for land could not solve the problem of landlessness in the Aguán or elsewhere if campesino families lack the material resources to purchase that land. It is also true that the Honduran state failed to provide the structures that might have helped facilitate this effective demand, such as access to sufficient credit and technological supports that might allow campesino-led firms to compete with established agribusiness in agricultural

export markets. While these and other critiques of this particular policy are valid, I argue that the problems here are ultimately more fundamental. An analysis that focuses on these economic considerations fails to capture the most salient issues related to this policy, which have much more to do with power dynamics and entrenched inequality than with the law of supply and demand.

The LMDSA was, without a doubt, very effective in enriching a handful of elite Honduran landowners and helping to solidify their influence in national economic and political realms. It was also effective in re-orienting agricultural production to a focus on agro-industrial commodities for export. What the LMDSA did not do effectively was address the structural causes of rural poverty in Honduras or the limitations of earlier agrarian reform. Instead, the new policy of agrarian counter-reform merely furthered the agenda of global development institutions and the emerging agro-industrial elite in Honduras. It did not improve the lives of rural Hondurans, I argue, because it was never intended to do so in the first place. Perhaps the makers of this policy did truly believe that it would create wealth that would trickle down to the average Honduran to some extent, but the policy's primary focus was clearly agro-business and not campesino families.

The connection between the LMDSA and the current agrarian conflicts in the Aguán and elsewhere, then, is clear. While the severity of the contemporary situation could perhaps not have been anticipated, several analysts weighed in at the time regarding the impacts this policy would likely have. I will quote two of these at length, as their predictions were remarkably accurate. Hugo Noé Pino, at the time a professor in

the National Autonomous University of Honduras's (UNAH) Central American Graduate program in Economic and Development Planning (POSCAE), wrote in 1992:

The absence of an action that reforms and transforms agriculture will result in high levels of unemployment, higher rates and degrees of poverty, greater dependence on the import of foods, reduction in nutrition levels, greater ecological and environmental degradation, all of which will have a strong impact on the living conditions of the rural resident. Simultaneously, the rural exodus to urban centers will increase, and the impacts of the application of the Law will also be made present in the cities. In other words, the Law will affect all Hondurans, including ethnic communities. (11-12, my translation)

Similarly, Juan Ramón Martínez, former director of the INA under Callejas, stated, as quoted in Pino (1992):

It is necessary to recognize from the outset that the *Ley de Modernización* is fundamentally an “agrarian counter-reform” that aims to curb the campesinos’ access to land in accordance to the methodology in practice in the country; to dismantle the developmental capacity of their organizations, both the unions and the economic ones; and to pass the handling of the agrarian conflict from the hands of the current government to the decisions of the few. Of course, with this last part, the weakest will have no other alternative than to reorganize themselves, with which the level of agricultural clashes – whose institutionalization is obvious to any observer – will rise considerably, generating more unease in agriculture. (34, my translation)

Finally, researcher Andy Thorpe (1995) references a statement from the Honduran newspaper *El Tiempo* from March 2, 1992, where Monseñor Héctor Enrique Santos, the former head of the Catholic Church in Honduras, felt it necessary “to warn that much blood would be spilt if the Law was not re-orientated to favour the poor” (206).

Prophetic words, indeed.

CHAPTER IV
FROM THE FIELDS TO THE STREETS:
CAMPESINO MOVEMENTS IN THE AGUÁN

Introduction

The preceding chapters have demonstrated the relationships between neoliberal economic policy, political violence, and popular mobilization, both in theory and in practice. They have considered the degree to which the current conflict over land in the Aguán is rooted in a specific national policy (the LMDSA) as well as the general nature of contemporary global capitalism and development discourse. They have also painted a rather bleak picture of the contemporary situation in the Aguán – one that is dominated by violence, injustice, and political economic forces that appear so powerful as to limit the ability of individuals to exercise agency on the ground.

But this is not the whole story. For each account of exploitation and repression there is a parallel story of resistance. For every force that seems to act *on* the campesinos of the Aguán, there is a counter-force that stems from them. In this chapter, I focus on the grassroots response to this conflict and the repressive context in which it occurs. I consider how the campesino movements of the Aguán frame and articulate their struggles, the significance of alliances and networks in these processes, and the ways in which the movements are constantly negotiating the volatile political environment in which they operate. I also examine the ways in which these movements make various types of claims on the state: demanding their human and subsistence rights, calling for an

end to the repression they experience, and asserting themselves as legitimate participants in the policy realm.

It is important here to recognize the diversity that exists among the campesino movements of the Aguán. For this reason I use the plural *movements* rather than the singular – to account for the fact that while there are many commonalities between movement organizations in terms of experience and identity, there is not complete homogeneity. There are roughly twenty distinct campesino movement organizations in the Aguán, and while they often collaborate and share positions on many issues, there is also divergence on others. These movement organizations are further comprised of campesino families from dozens of agricultural cooperatives, each with its own experience with the processes of agrarian reform and counter-reform, interactions with landowners and the state, and analyses regarding the problems their communities face. The information presented here thus cannot fully capture the diversity present among these movements; rather, it reflects what I perceive as the dominant discourse present in the region. The majority of the data informing my analysis originates from the movement organization MUCA (the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguán, or *Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán*), as they tend to maintain the highest public profile and produce the greatest amount of material. I also draw, to a lesser degree, from materials produced by MCA (the Campesino Movement of the Aguán, or *Movimiento Campesino del Aguán*), and MOCSAM (the Campesino Movement of San Manuel Cortés, or *Movimiento Campesino de San Manuel Cortés*), as these are also relatively high-profile organizations. Of particular importance are several *comunicados* which these and other movement organizations issued jointly, in cooperation with regional and

national campesino unions. These documents thus reflect shared positions on the conflict in the Aguán and other related issues, as expressed to the wider public.

To begin this analysis, I briefly revisit relevant social movement theory, considering the ways in which the political process model, in particular, can help us better comprehend the complex dynamics of contentious politics in the Aguán. I then follow the three primary veins of social movement theory as a means to organize my discussion of popular mobilization in the Aguán, demonstrating the relevance of each and thereby supporting McAdam's (1999) position that an effective model must integrate these approaches. In these sections, I analyze movement-produced materials³⁵ (*comunicados*, videos, statements to the press) to illustrate the movements' framing processes, their strategies and tactics, and the ways in which they mobilize and leverage pressure to create social change. Through an analysis of this public discourse produced by the movements and their allies, I seek to make evident the diversity of approaches these sophisticated movements utilize in their struggles. My aim here is not to provide an exhaustive account of the nature of these movements or the conflict in the Aguán. Instead, this chapter has two primary goals: first, to document (however incompletely) the struggles of these important movements, and second, to contribute to our understandings of how social movements function within the context of a highly repressive state in today's globalized world.

³⁵ All the translations in this chapter are mine. I include the original Spanish in footnotes as a means to preserve the integrity of the original statements made by movement participants and their allies.

Understanding the Movements via Political Process

As discussed in Chapter II, there are many different approaches to the study of social movements. Each tradition of theory tends to emphasize different components of movement formation and activity – namely, culturalist, structuralist, and materialist – and each can ultimately be critiqued as doing so at the expense of other factors. My approach, which is largely informed by Doug McAdam’s (1999) revised political process model, seeks to integrate these various strains of theory into a more historically-informed and dynamic view of contentious politics in the Aguán.

The insights gained from McAdam’s work are significant. His model encourages us to consider the impacts of the various political, social, and cultural processes at play, both those internal and external to the movement. It provides a framework through which to account for the ways these processes interact and constantly change and evolve. It further acknowledges the relevance of structural opportunities and constraints as well as the importance of organizational networks, while avoiding being overly deterministic by leaving space for individual and collective agency. In short, it provides a holistic and dynamic model with which we can craft an analysis that is conscious of the ways in which a given context and movement interact with and shape one another.

In the following sections, I organize the themes that emerged during my analysis of the public discourse of campesino movements in the Aguán around three theoretical constructs: framing processes, assessment of political opportunities and threats, and mobilization of structures and resources. These represent the primary veins of traditional social movement theory (culturalist, structuralist, and materialist, respectively). Though I

present these as nominally distinct areas for the sake of making clear analytical demonstrations, the degree to which they are interrelated and interdependent should, by now, be clear.

Framing Processes

Certain traditions of social movement theory pay particular attention to the importance of identity, beliefs, and values among movement members. The extent to which these phenomena are shared has important implications for movements' abilities to coalesce and thrive. However, it is not merely the "shared meanings" or "cultural understandings" (McAdam 1999, ix) themselves that are important here, but also the ways in which they contribute to a group's understanding of their social and/or political problems, and consequently, of the particular actors or processes that may be deemed as responsible for those problems. McAdam refers to these as "interpretive processes" and "collective attribution," and argues that they are significant for their ability to "require participants to reject institutionalized routines and taken for granted assumptions about the world and to fashion new world views and lines of interaction" (1999, xxi). Taken together (and following McAdam), these constitute what I refer to here as "framing processes."

The campesino movements of the Aguán frame their struggle in multiple ways. These frames have emerged from the movements' analyses of historical relationships, contemporary politics, and material conditions in the region. The movements often invoke rights-based discourses and notions of social justice in relation to the problems of landlessness, poverty, and political violence they face. They also draw on a strong

collective identity as campesinos, emphasizing the centrality of land to their way of life. They make clear that the material conditions in which they live are direct results of national policy and global political economic processes, as well as the privileging of the interests of the elite class in Honduras. While they are unambiguous in deeming the state and the elite responsible for creating the current conflict, they also present themselves not as helpless victims, but rather as active agents of change who deserve a say in their own destiny.

Rights, Justice, and Food Sovereignty

Among the most important concepts around which the movements frame their struggle and organize their constituents are notions of rights, justice, and food sovereignty. The emphasis on human rights is clear and consistent. The movements denounce the violations of their human rights on multiple levels – primarily, the denial of their right to access the land needed to sustain themselves, and their right to live free of political persecution and continuous violence. As Yoni Rivas, the General Secretary of MUCA, argues, “we are reclaiming our right which is a human right; access to land, it is a human right and it is incumbent upon us because we are poor and we need the land”³⁶ (Emanuelsson). This statement also gives us insight into the ways these concepts often intersect and overlap, as, for example, access to land is viewed simultaneously as a human right, an issue of social justice, and a necessity for the attainment of food sovereignty.

³⁶ “*estamos reclamando un derecho nuestro que es un derecho humano; el acceso a la tierra, es un derecho humano y nos compete porque somos pobres y necesitamos la tierra*”

Food sovereignty has become a central issue around which the movements organize and assert their rights in the Aguán. They frequently refer to the “agrarian and food crisis”³⁷ that Honduras currently faces. The movements’ efforts in this realm were acknowledged when MUCA was recognized for the US Food Sovereignty Alliance’s 2012 Food Sovereignty Prize. In a videotaped acceptance speech for this honor, Yoni Rivas thanks the organization, which he says “has supported, really our efforts, our sacrifices to contribute to this society, so that we can achieve genuine food security”³⁸ (“2012”). He describes locally-based agricultural projects in which their communities are engaged, noting that “through these products we are ensuring food sovereignty.”³⁹ He also laments the deaths of community members “who have been assassinated due to the fight for power and to have our own food.”⁴⁰ This message is visually conveyed by a poster that documents the community projects that Yoni speaks of. It appears in several photographs posted to MUCA’s Facebook page on July 3, 2013, and reads: “We the campesinos of MUCA struggle for a true food sovereignty,”⁴¹ and “These projects have been developed in an environment of criminalization and persecution against MUCA.”⁴²

³⁷ “*crisis agraria y alimentaria*”

³⁸ “*han valorado pues realmente nuestros esfuerzos, nuestros sacrificios por aportar a esta sociedad para poder alcanzar una verdadera soberanía alimentaria*”

³⁹ “*a través de esta producción estamos garantizando la soberanía alimentaria*”

⁴⁰ “*que han sido asesinado por la lucha a poder y tener nuestro alimento*”

⁴¹ “*Los campesinos de MUCA luchamos por una verdadera soberanía alimentaria*”

⁴² “*Estos proyectos se han desarrollado en un entorno de criminalización y persecución en contra de MUCA*”

The issue of food sovereignty is especially emphasized by the Plataforma Agraria, of which Vía Campesina, the group from which the concept originates,⁴³ is a member.

The horrible irony that rural poverty and food insecurity remain critical issues in the most productive agricultural region in Honduras is not lost on the campesino movements of the Aguán, and the connection between access to land and survival is direct. As a leader of MUCA, quoted by Gustavo Irías, remarked, ““For us the land is a key element, if we cultivate the land we have basic grains and vegetables....The land is essential for life”⁴⁴ (n.d.,18). Juan Chinchilla, another leader of MUCA, reminds us of the movements’ central concern regarding food and hunger in this struggle: “[for] us the war is not against the government, against the police, against the army...our war is against hunger”⁴⁵ (Emanuelsson). In the same interview, Yoni Rivas makes clear that their desire for land is directly related to food security and food sovereignty, and not for pursuit of commercial gain through mass production of African palm: “The Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguán is not much interested in the plantation. Our interest is in recuperating the land. Let us not forget that in the ‘80s Honduras was the breadbasket of Central America and our movement is interested in enabling us to produce what we consume daily in our houses, in our homes”⁴⁶ (Emanuelsson).

⁴³ For more on Vía Campesina and the concept of food sovereignty, see Claeys (n.d.), and Desmarais and Nicholson (n.d.).

⁴⁴ “*Para nostras la tierra es un elemento fundamental, si cultivamos la tierra tenemos granos básicos y hortalizas...La tierra es fundamental para la vida*”

⁴⁵ “[*Para*] nosotros la guerra no es contra el gobierno, contra la policía, contra el ejército...entonces, la guerra de nosotros es en contra el hambre”

⁴⁶ “*El Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán no tiene tanto así el interés en la plantación. Nuestro interés es en recuperar la tierra. No olvidemos que en los años 80, Honduras eramos granero de*

Taken together, these statements from movement spokespeople convey the multi-dimensional and overlapping ways in which these individuals and groups understand the situation of campesinos in the Aguán today. While on one level they are fighting for land, the movements are very conscious of the fact that this struggle is tied up in that of several others – struggles for social justice, self-determination, food sovereignty, and the protection of human rights. They are also mindful of the fact that their current struggle has deep historical roots, as does popular resistance in the region.

Identity and the Legacy of Organized Labor

The strong collective campesino identity that exists in the Aguán is another crucial piece of the movements' framing processes. Scholars trace this to the history of agrarian reform and the collective production processes it inspired, as well as to the legacy of banana workers in the region.⁴⁷ Settling lands granted through agrarian reform was no easy task, and as Kerksen notes, “peasants who benefitted from these reforms nonetheless had to fight to improve living conditions and gain greater control over the value of their labor” (2013, 16). This struggle thus instilled a collective identity that is inextricably connected to the land – an identity that is embodied in the motto of MUCA: “We are not fish that live in the water, nor birds that live in the air; we are men and women who live from the land.”⁴⁸ The sense of collectivity is further reflected in the words of Adolfo Castañeda of MUCA, who when speaking about what is at stake in their

Centroamérica y nuestro movimiento está interesado en hacer producir lo que consumimos diariamente en nuestras casas, en nuestros hogares.”

⁴⁷ See, for example, Kerksen (2013), Brockett (1998).

⁴⁸ “*No somos peces para vivir del agua, ni aves para vivir del aire; somos hombres y mujeres para vivir de la tierra*”

current struggle said, “If we are going to win, we all win, and if we are going to lose, we all lose”⁴⁹ (“Movimiento”). These statements demonstrate the interconnectivity of the campesino identity and the land, and help us understand why these individuals are willing to risk their lives in this collective struggle.

The legacy of organized labor among banana workers and other agricultural workers is also important here. Kerssen cites the struggles of banana workers against U.S.-based United Fruit and Standard Fruit companies, which culminated in the 1954 general strike – an event she aptly describes as a “watershed moment in Honduran social history” (2013, 16). Following the strike, the fruit companies terminated half of their labor force, a move that “only augmented the mass of people clamoring for land, creating a powerful movement of peasants and landless workers that the government was forced to reckon with” (Kerssen 2013, 16). Charles Brockett also notes the importance of the struggles of the banana workers, and argues that these led to the beginnings of “serious peasant mobilization in Honduras” (1998, 187). This history of resistance is still celebrated today, and continues to inspire individuals in the Aguán and beyond.

While the current campesino organizations are relatively young, the history of formal organization among Honduran campesinos undoubtedly contributes to their strength.⁵⁰ Many national campesino unions and federations date to the early 1960s, and Brockett argues that by the end of the decade “Honduran peasants had organized and were asserting themselves to a degree unparalleled in Central America and perhaps even

⁴⁹ “*Si vamos a ganar, vamos a ganar todos, y si vamos a perder, vamos a perder todos*”

⁵⁰ For a much more detailed discussion of the history of campesino organizations in Honduras, see Euraque (1996) and Brockett (1998).

in all of Latin America” (1998, 189). For example, the CCUC (the *Comité Central de Unificación Campesina* or Central Committee of Campesino Unity), which later became FENACH, formed in 1961. The following year, they began a series of land occupations and organized a march of 1,000 campesinos to the town of El Progreso – the largest public demonstration of campesinos that had been held to that time in Honduras (Brockett 1998, 187-8). ANACH (The *Asociación Nacional de Campesinos de Honduras*, or National Association of Honduran Campesinos), FECORAH (the *Federación de Cooperativas de la Reforma Agraria Honduras*, or Federation of Honduran Agrarian Reform Cooperatives), and UNC (*Unión Nacional de Campesinos*, or National Campesino Union) all formed during this time and are still active today. Also important is the “radio school movement” of the 1960s, which was an effort of the Catholic Church that as it developed “undertook more directly the successive commitments of peasant mobilization, organization, and support of confrontation with elite interests” (Brockett 1998, 189). Contemporary movements are able to draw on these strong legacies of organization and collective struggle to mobilize individuals and communities around the issues they face today.

Framing the Class Dimensions of the Conflict

The movements and their spokespeople often emphasize the extent to which the interests and concerns of campesinos and elite landowners are inherently distinct and very often at odds. We can conceptualize this as the conflicting interests of the capitalist class and the popular classes, or as the contradictions that emerge between the process of capital accumulation and the practice of subsistence-oriented agriculture. This difference is made particularly clear in the following comments made by Esly Banegas, coordinator

of the Committee of Popular Organizations of the Aguán (*Coordinadora de Organizaciones Populares del Aguán*, or COPA):

nd this resource of land, then, the landlord, the rancher is in the permanent search for this resource because that is where his wealth lies. And the campesino because he has never had it and because it is a right, in this case as a Honduran. So the contradiction is permanent. The fight for this resource is permanent – one to survive and for the right to feed one’s self, and the other to make himself rich.⁵¹ (“Lucha”)

Similarly, Juan Chinchilla of MUCA addresses the class divide: “What we are looking for is a way out of poverty. They [the elite], in nice cars, take the money to other countries, they don’t leave it here. And we are the ones who suffer the consequences. Here we don’t have medicine, doctors – we have absolutely nothing – education, all of that”⁵² (Emanuelsson). In a region where rural poverty is extreme and class divisions are especially apparent, these disparities become glaringly obvious.

Attributing Responsibility to Landowners and the State

While there is then a clear distinction between the classes, this alone is not enough to explain the violent conflict currently plaguing the Aguán. The process of capital accumulation is central to the equation, but the elite only achieved this degree of concentration of land and resources because the state was on their side – facilitating policy that favors their interests and sponsoring or sanctioning violence to suppress challenges to their power. As Rudy Hernández of MUCA indicates in the following

⁵¹ “Y este recurso tierra, entonces, el terrateniente, el ganadero está en la búsqueda permanente este recurso porque allí está su riqueza. Y el campesino porque nunca la ha tenido y porque es un derecho en este caso como hondureño y hondureña. Entonces la contradicción es permanente. La lucha por este recurso es permanente – uno para sobrevivir y por el derecho a alimentarse y el otro por enriquecerse.”

⁵² “Lo que nosotros vamos buscando es salir de la pobreza. Ellos en buenos carros, llevan el dinero para otros países, no lo dejan aquí. Y nosotros somos los que sufrimos las consecuencias. Nosotros aquí no tenemos medicación, médicos, o sea no tenemos absolutamente nada, educación, todo eso.”

statement, the landowners have achieved a tremendous level of influence in the Honduran government, to the point where they are essentially calling the shots:

The men against whom we are now fighting in the Aguán Valley are those who for years have kept the Honduran society under the yoke and suffering, in poverty. These are the men who generate poverty and wealth for themselves. They are those who manipulate information, they are those who tell governments what to do and not do. It is they who install and remove governments. These same men right now in the department of Colon...they have concentrated all the land, they have thousands of hectares. These men not only have the land that we are fighting for, elsewhere in the same department they have thousands of hectares, they fenced them off so no one can enter. The struggle that we are waging in the Lower Aguán Valley is a very difficult struggle, it is practically a fight against the Honduran oligarchy, against the Honduran state, because instead of looking for solutions what they do is sharpen the conflict over this issue.⁵³
(Emanuelsson)

This statement also reflects the sentiment that the elite and the state are not making efforts to actually end this conflict – rather, they continue to protect their own political and economic interests and in turn feed the conflict, which leads to hugely disproportionate losses to the campesinos.

Direct Implication of the LMDSA and Neoliberal Model

The movements of the Aguán are explicit in their condemnation of the LMDSA, and they identify this policy as a primary cause of the current conflict. Many comunicados contain strongly-worded language to this effect. For example, one such

⁵³ “*Los señores contra quienes luchamos nosotros ahora en el Valle del Aguán son los señores que por años han mantenido a la sociedad hondureña bajo el yugo y bajo el sufrimiento, bajo la pobreza. Estos señores son los que generan pobreza y riqueza para ellos. Estos señores son los que manipulan la información, son los que ellos dicen que hacer y no hacer a los gobiernos. Son ellos los que ponen y quitan gobiernos. Estos señores ahora mismo tienen en el departamento de Colon...este...tienen este concentrada toda la tierra, tienen miles de hectáreas. Estos señores no solo son de las tierras que estamos peleando nosotros, en otras zonas del mismo departamento tienen miles de hectáreas, las tienen cercadas para que nadie pueda ingresar. Entonces la lucha que nosotros ahora libramos en Valle de Bajo Aguán es un lucha muy difícil, es una lucha prácticamente contra la oligarquía hondureña, contra el mismo estado hondureño, porque esto en vez de buscar soluciones, lo que hacen es agudizar más este, el conflicto más la problemática*”

document issued by MUCA on February 5, 2014 states: “We clarify that the agrarian and food crisis that our country lives in was generated in 1992 in the government of Rafael Leonardo Callejas with the approval of the fateful and unconstitutional Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector.”⁵⁴ Another comunicado dated May 15, 2013 uses nearly identical phrasing,⁵⁵ and the expression “fateful and unconstitutional” (“*fatídica e inconstitucional*”) is frequently used in reference to the law. This position is further articulated in the first demand of a comunicado issued by several movement organizations and campesino unions, dated August 8, 2012:

We demand the immediate repeal of the “Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector,” that which we the campesino organizations have declared unconstitutional, as it is contradictory to what the article 344 of the Constitution of the Republic provides, and that which to present has only left us hundreds of dead, injured, and thousands of defendants in courts, and misery and poverty in the rural areas of the country.⁵⁶ (“Posicionamiento Campesino”)

One of the most powerful condemnations of the LMDSA and of specific landlords and state actors is a MUCA-produced poster (see Appendix) often present at press

⁵⁴ “Aclaremos que la crisis agraria y alimentaria que vive nuestro país, fue generada en 1992 en el gobierno de Rafael Leonardo Callejas con la aprobación de la fatídica e inconstitucional Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola.”

⁵⁵ “We clarify that the agrarian and food crisis that our country lives in was generated in 1992 in the government of ex-President Rafael Leonardo Callejas, who approved the fateful and unconstitutional Law of Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector.” Original Spanish: “Aclaremos que la crisis agraria y alimentaria que vive nuestro país fue generada en 1992 en el gobierno del ex presidente Rafael Leonardo Callejas quien aprobó la fatídica e inconstitucional Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola.”

⁵⁶ “Exigimos la derogación inmediata de La “Ley de Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola” la cual las organizaciones campesinas la hemos declarado inconstitucional, ya que es contradictorio con lo que contempla el artículo 344 de la Constitución de la República y que hasta hoy solo nos ha dejados centenares de muertos, heridos y miles de procesados en los Tribunales y miseria y pobreza en las zonas rurales del país.”

conferences and other public events. It is made from a large piece of poster board, and across the top reads “Consequences of the Law of Agricultural Modernization.”⁵⁷ Below this are a dozen very graphic photos of the bodies of individuals who have been assassinated in the struggle, including Ignacio Reyes, Teodoro Acosta, Israel Garcia, Matias Valle, Ivan Jose Peralta, Victor Maya, and others who are not named or whose names cannot be read in photos of the poster. In the center of the poster are the words “Responsible Groups,”⁵⁸ with images of five men underneath: Miguel Facussé, Juan Ramón Martínez, Rafael Leonardo Callejas, Rodolfo Irias Navas, and Jaime Rosenthal. Miguel Facussé and Jaime Rosenthal are two of the richest men in Honduras, large landowners in the Aguán and elsewhere in Honduras, and were primary supporters of the 2009 coup. Juan Ramón Martínez, Rafael Leonardo Callejas, and Rodolfo Irias Navas held the positions of director of the National Agrarian Institute (INA), President of the Republic, and president of the National Congress, respectively, at the time the LMDSA was approved in 1992. Below these photos are eight others that document the militarization of the Aguán – showing dozens of heavily armed soldiers, police dressed in riot gear, and private security guards. The visual impact of this poster is undeniable, and its message is tremendously clear.

A visit to MUCA’s website⁵⁹ further elucidates their position on this issue. The text at the top of the main page reads:

⁵⁷ “*Consecuencias de ‘La Ley de Modernización Agrícola’*”

⁵⁸ “*Grupos Responsables*”

⁵⁹ <http://movimientomuca.blogspot.com/>

In the early '90s, during the administration of Rafael Leonardo Callejas, the Law for the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector was passed in Honduras, and with it a plan was carried out to expropriate the campesino firms of the rights that the state assigned them in the '70s over thousands of hectares planted in African palm (*Elaeis guinensis*) in the region known as the Bajo Aguan in the northern department of the Atlantic coast of Honduras. The law in question became the political strategy of state officials in partnership with greedy businessmen to make themselves owners of 20 thousand hectares of the best land in the country (around 28 thousand *manzanas* or 48 thousand acres).⁶⁰

This statement reflects MUCA's analysis of what I have previously referred to as the political project of neoliberalism. While the LMDSA was supposedly a means to "modernize" agricultural production in the Aguán and to address landlessness via the market, MUCA more accurately recognizes the policy as a tool that would allow the elite to grab campesinos' land and thus to consolidate their economic and political power in the region. MUCA further recognizes the collusion between the state and the elite in this process, and the extent to which public policy is essentially hijacked to meet these ends. In this sense, the LMDSA is one example of many where elite interests are furthered via the actions of the state.

The movements' frames extend beyond the local context and the immediate needs of the campesinos, as they connect their local reality to larger political economic issues. The involvement and culpability of the United States, World Bank, and other international institutions are frequently cited, as the threats facing the Aguán are located

⁶⁰ "A principios de la década de los 90, en la administración de Rafael Leonardo Callejas, se aprueba en Honduras la Ley para la Modernización y Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola, y con ella se instrumentaliza un plan para expropiar a las empresas campesinas de los derechos que el Estado les asignara a mediados de la década de los 70 sobre miles de hectáreas cultivadas con palma africana (*Elaeis guinensis*) en la región conocida como el Bajo Aguan en el departamento norteño de la costa atlántica de Honduras. La ley en mención se convirtió en la estrategia política de funcionarios estatales en sociedad con empresarios codiciosos para convertirse en propietarios de 20 mil hectáreas de las mejores tierras del país (alrededor de 28 mil manzanas o 48 mil acres)."

within a global context. A September 13, 2012 comunicado issued jointly by several movement organizations and their allies states: “We declare ourselves in a permanent state of alert in defense of our agricultural food rights and national sovereignty”⁶¹ (“Posicionamiento de Organizaciones”). For Vitalino Alvarez of MUCA, the fight extends far beyond the fields of the Aguán; as he states, “we represent a movement in struggle to challenge the savage capitalist system”⁶² (“Movimiento”).

Proposing Solutions

As part of the processes of framing and attribution of the problems facing the Aguán, the movements also present solutions. Primarily, they demand the immediate repeal of the LMDSA and the implementation of new agrarian reform, along with the end to the violence against and criminalization of campesino movements. Nearly all comunicados articulate these same demands. The movements have taken concrete action to achieve these goals, and have actually designed a new agrarian reform policy. The movements and their allies presented the *Ley de Transformación Agraria Integral* (Law of Integral Agrarian Transformation, or LTAI) to the National Congress of Honduras on October 11, 2011. This proposed policy reflects the movements’ call to address the structural causes of the conflict and social inequality. The proposal is very progressive in nature, and actually addresses the limitations of previous agrarian reform programs, which the LMDSA largely failed to do. I will return to a discussion of the *Ley de Transformación Agraria Integral* in the concluding chapter.

⁶¹ “Nos declaramos en estado de alerta permanente en defensa de nuestros derechos alimentarios agrarios y soberanía nacional”

⁶² “representamos un movimiento en lucha para desafiar al sistema capitalista salvaje”

The desire to enact a program of agrarian reform that takes issues of social justice seriously is a central focus of the campesino movements of the Aguán. A statement by Rudy Hernández of MUCA particularly embodies the passion of the movements' claims in this area: "We repeat: we demand of Pepe Lobo and his cabinet to repeal the Law of Agricultural Modernization, because that law does much harm and thus the changes, as [Yoni] also said: change now! We want Agrarian Reform now!"⁶³ (Emanuelsson). While the urgency of this demand is not well relayed in the written English translation, it bears inclusion here, as this is an underlying and ever-present demand, along with an end to the repression and violence against the movements.

The movements have also taken steps toward participating in institutional politics more directly, while not abandoning their efforts at the grassroots level. In 2011, the FNRP formed an official political party, Libre (*Partido Libertad y Refundación*, or Party of Liberty and Refoundation), which many – though certainly not all – of the movement organizations and their members are affiliated with. In the highly contested November 2013 elections, multiple members of the campesino movements ran for and were elected to National Congress seats and local mayorships under the Libre banner. For example, Rafael Alegría, a long time campesino leader and coordinator of La Vía Campesina in Honduras, and Wilfredo Paz, spokesperson of the Permanent Observatory of Human Rights in the Aguán, were elected as congressmen (*diputados*) for the departments of Francisco Morazán and Colón, respectively. Many other allies of the movement won positions in these elections, and Libre's strong showing overall helped create a political

⁶³ "Nosotros repetimos: le exigimos a Pepe Lobo y a su gabinete que derogue esa Ley de Modernización Agrícola, porque esa ley hace mucho daño y de esa forma los cambios como él [Yoni] lo dijo también: ¡Cambio ya! ¡Queremos Reforma Agraria ya!"

climate that is at least marginally better for the movements in most cases, though it was far from an all-out victory.⁶⁴

The movements' ability to propose solutions that might realistically be enacted is obviously limited by power structures in the realms of national and local-level politics. This again draws attention to the importance of context, and makes clear that the movements themselves do not have complete control over their own destiny. They are working within a system dominated by particular vested interests and entrenched class structures, and access to that system is largely closed to many sectors of society. This reminds us that regardless of the strength of the movements' collective identity, the sophistication of their analysis, and their ability to create a narrative that resonates with individuals and inspires them to act, there are other factors that impact movements' success in significant and unavoidable ways.

Political Opportunities and Threats

While these various processes of sense-making and interpretation among movement members are clearly of great importance, external factors also impact movements' abilities to thrive. We cannot think of movements as phenomena that occur devoid of time and space. Considering the nature of the context in which movements operate, the actions of the state and groups that oppose a given movement, and the ways in which power is entrenched in a society are also key. Further, we must recognize that these factors are constantly changing, and that this has important implications for

⁶⁴ Again, the elections of November 2013 were highly contested and wrought with fraud, and the outcome is complicated. I reflect on these issues briefly in the final chapter of this thesis.

movements. As McAdam notes, “the particular set of power relations that define the political environment at any point in time hardly constitutes an immutable structure of political life. Instead, the opportunities for a challenger to engage in successful collective action are expected to vary over time. It is these variations that are held to shape the ebb and flow of movement activity” (1999, ix).

Recognizing the changing nature of a given context allows us to view social movements as constantly evolving phenomena, and to understand contentious politics as a dynamic process. Many theorists have focused on the ways that changing context, responses to movement activity by the opposition, and other external factors impact movements. These result in both the creation of political space in which a movement can more successfully stake claims or garner public support, and conversely, of threats that close that space and jeopardize the success of the movement. McAdam recognizes that “*any* broad social change process that significantly undermines the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured is very likely to cause a significant expansion in political opportunity for single or multiple challengers” (1999, ix, original emphasis). At times a particular event, cultural shift, or some other change can represent both a political opportunity and a threat.

The 2009 Coup

The 2009 coup d'état that deposed President Manuel Zelaya was clearly one of the most important events in recent history in Honduras, and has tremendous implications for the campesino movements of the Aguán and all other social movements in the nation. To say that the events of June 28, 2009 changed everything is not to be hyperbolic.

Though at the time it was impossible to predict the specific ramifications of those events, in retrospect we can not only assess the ways in which the coup created political threats to the campesino movements, but also identify potential opportunities that were born that day.

The ways in which the coup represents a political threat to the movements in the Aguán are rather clear. It resulted in the expulsion of a president who was relatively sympathetic to the situation of campesinos and their needs, despite the fact that he himself is a member of the landed elite of the nation. As previously discussed, Zelaya had been working with the movements in the Aguán, and during his administration much progress was made toward resolving a number of land conflicts. He had signed Decree 18-2008, which was to have granted 20,000 families in the Aguán title to their land. The coup preempted this from becoming a reality, however, as he was removed from office just days before the policy would have gone into effect. There is little doubt that Zelaya's movement toward redistributing land to campesinos in the Aguán was a major factor in his ouster, nor was this the first time that a Honduran president was removed from office for daring to implement land reform.⁶⁵ We can thus view the years of the Zelaya administration as having constituted a political opportunity for the movements.

The coup itself, then, and the post-coup regimes that have followed represented a swift closing of that political space and the appearance of a serious threat to the movements. The coup and the widespread repression that has followed sent a clear and unmistakable signal of this shift. This political threat manifested in an increasingly

⁶⁵ President Ramón Villeda Morales was ousted in a military coup on October 3, 1963, the year after instituting the original Agrarian Reform Law.

violent and repressive context and a string of regimes that are openly hostile to campesinos' concerns and quite plainly work to protect the interests of capital and the elite class.

However, I argue that we can also view the coup as having created political opportunities. As previously discussed, the FNRP emerged in the wake of the coup, and has grown and become immeasurably stronger in spite of much repression. This can be viewed as an opportunity in various ways. For example, it has led to new and stronger alliances between social movements, including the campesino movements and other sectors of the Resistance. It has also resulted in increased public awareness of many social issues and a deepened political consciousness in much of the society. Members of the Resistance often talk about the coup as an “awakening” for the people of Honduras, thus demonstrating their view of this as an opportunity of sorts. Many people have told me that they were not politically active prior to the coup, but that the crisis their society has since faced forced them to “wake up” to a wide range of issues and to take a stance on them. It is fair to say that a new generation of activists was born that day.

Criminalization of the Movements

The criminalization of resistance has been a reality across many sectors in Honduras since the coup. This materializes in various ways, most visibly in campaigns of misinformation and defamation in the media and public spaces, and the use of the legal system to bring illegitimate charges against activists. These actions pose a serious threat to the movements, as they not only impact public discourse in a way that can be counterproductive to the efforts of the movements, but can also have a demobilizing

effect on group dynamics and place additional burdens on individuals, potentially preventing them from becoming active in the struggle.

The diffusion of misinformation campaigns in the elite-controlled media is a common tactic used by those who wish to discredit the campesino movements and other sectors of the Resistance in Honduras. It is common to read blatant lies and distorted representations of the truths of the conflict in the Aguán in the newspapers and to hear them on television and radio. For example, these stories often report claims that the movements are heavily armed and forming guerrilla groups, that foreign agitators are infiltrating the area, and so forth. Gilberto Ríos argues that through these campaigns the media has essentially “reinvented the productive history of the valley in favor of the landlords”⁶⁶ (2010, 1). The impact of these campaigns cannot be underestimated. These are particularly dangerous within Honduras, where people in other parts of the country read or hear about the supposed danger the movements pose, and form opinions about them based on this misinformation. This can limit the local and regional support that the movements might otherwise enjoy. Repercussions might include lessened public support for policy that would benefit movements, such as agrarian reform, and conversely, support for the ongoing militarization of the region. These campaigns ultimately obscure the motives of the state and elite and unjustly present the movements as dangerous criminals as opposed to nonviolent campesinos seeking basic rights and improved material conditions.

⁶⁶ “*reinventado la historia productiva del valle a favor de los terratenientes*”

In addition to the promotion of false information in public discourse, the use of the legal system to unjustly accuse movement members and their allies of crimes has become widespread. Indeed, while killings in the Aguán nearly always go unpunished, the state has investigated a great deal of energy into processing members of the campesino organizations for alleged crimes such as usurpation and disturbing the peace, a point recognized by the 2014 Human Rights Watch report. This represents another major demobilization strategy on the state's end, and a clear threat to the movements. In addition to placing financial strain on individuals, requiring their time to attend legal proceedings and to report regularly to sign court registers, and contributing to the unjust perception of the movements as criminal, it also serves to diminish the ability of social movements to gain a footing in institutional politics. In Honduras, anyone facing criminal charges is prevented from voting. In the highly contested 2013 elections, more than 3,000 Honduran campesinos were prevented from voting due to pending criminal charges specifically related to their participation in the Resistance (AfGJ and TFA 2013, 6). When visiting communities in the lead-up to the election, I heard time and time again that this technicality was preventing large numbers of Libre supporters, including many members of campesino movements, from voting.

A particularly emblematic example here is that of Jose Isabel Morales, better known as "Chavelo."⁶⁷ I had the opportunity to meet Chavelo during our 2013 elections delegation, and to hear his testimony. At that time, Chavelo had been imprisoned for more than five years, accused of the killing of Manrique Osorto, the nephew of powerful

⁶⁷ Also often spelled "Chabelo."

landlord (and now head of the police force in the department of Olancho) Henry Osorto.⁶⁸ Chavelo insists that he did not commit this crime, and there is no evidence indicating his guilt. In 2010, he was sentenced to serve 20 years in prison for the alleged offense, but the sentence had recently been overturned by the Supreme Court when I met him in November, 2013. At that time, Chavelo was to have already been released pending a new trial the following January, but supposed issues with paperwork were causing his release to be delayed. Chavelo was ultimately never released, despite the orders from the Supreme Court to do so. In February 2014 he was again convicted of murder and sentenced to 17 and a half years, not including time already served. In addition to a complete lack of evidence in the crime, observers at the trial reported glaring inconsistencies in the testimony of state witnesses, who often directly contradicted testimony they had given at the first trial. His conviction was nearly solely based on the testimony of Henry Osorto, which was tremendously inflammatory and details of which were quite obviously fabricated. Chavelo's case represents one of the most egregious violations of justice in Honduras. It may, however, also be seen as having provided a tragic point around which the movements and their allies are able to garner support both nationally and internationally.

Repression as Both a Threat and an Opportunity

We can thus ultimately view the high levels of political violence, criminalization of the campesino movements, and increasing marginalization of the movements from the political sphere as both a political threat and an opportunity. The degree to which these

⁶⁸ For a detailed account of the events leading to the imprisonment of Chavelo and his subsequent trials, see McCain (2013a and 2013b).

phenomena constitute a threat is very apparent. They drain the movement's resources and individuals' energy, may instill fear or resignation in some, and threaten to demobilize the movements that so many have fought so hard to form. However, these same strategies of the state may lead to the opposite effect, and may actually serve to consolidate the very movements they seek to destroy.

As Tanya Kerksen argues, "In post-coup Honduras...the Lobo government's ruthless repression has paradoxically served as an unassailable point of unity – in the Aguán and beyond" (2013, 103). My experience has shown this to be true, as at some point it becomes difficult for anyone to justify and support the extreme levels of political violence and repression on any grounds. The strength of the FNRP clearly demonstrates this point. In this national resistance movement, smaller movements that would potentially otherwise not even be aware of one another's struggles, let alone actively engaged in supporting them, have united and are working together for social and political change in Honduras. The degree to which diverse movements support one another is impressive and inspiring. They come to one another's rallies, hold joint press conferences, promote each other's events via social media and other networks, speak out about injustices that other movements face, and collaborate on a wide range of projects.

Similarly, I argue that exposing the brutality of the post-coup regimes may be viewed as a political opportunity for the movements of the Aguán.⁶⁹ These tragedies may present a clearly unintended opportunity for the movements to further demonstrate the

⁶⁹ I make this claim very cautiously, as I in no way want to appear to be arguing that the violence itself is an opportunity or something to be capitalized on. The political violence occurring in the Aguán and elsewhere in Honduras is abhorrent, and should be viewed only as the injustice that it is. I merely mean to demonstrate that as the state becomes increasingly repressive and violent, it also becomes increasingly illegitimate in the eyes of many. I make this assertion with complete respect to the martyrs of this struggle.

justness of their cause and the absolute cruelty and illegitimacy of the current state. A key example of this is the movements' use of graphic images of the bodies of the martyrs of this struggle. I previously described a poster created by MUCA that displays such images as a statement about the impacts of the LMDSA and the actions of members of the state and elite in creating the conflict. This poster and other materials like it pay tribute to the individuals who have fallen in this conflict, and also make abundantly clear the losses that the movements have suffered to outsiders.

The political violence directed toward the movements does not end with members of movement organizations themselves, but has also resulted in the murders of many movement allies, some of them high-profile individuals. These killings tend to draw a great amount of negative attention to the Honduran state, and as such may result in another political opportunity to the movements. The story of Antonio Trejo Cabrera is particularly instructive here. Trejo was a human rights lawyer who represented movement organizations MARCA, MOCSAM, and MUCA in a number of land disputes, and had won a major case against Miguel Facussé in June, 2012. He was also a vocal opponent of the Model Cities/ZEDE programs and challenged their constitutionality in the courts. In August of 2012, Trejo was illegally detained with roughly 30 campesinos who were brutally attacked by police following a month of peaceful protests in front of the National Congress in Tegucigalpa. I was present at the jails where the detainees were held that day, accompanying colleagues from COFADEH who were particularly concerned about the safety of Trejo and several movement leaders while in police custody.

Trejo was assassinated one month and one day later, on September 22, 2012. As Dana Frank (2012b) notes, Trejo had appeared on national television earlier that same day to speak against the Model Cities, and when he was shot that evening he had “stepped outside of a church in the capital, Tegucigalpa, where he'd just finished officiating at a wedding, to answer an urgent phone call from a stranger.” His brother was killed a year later after publicly denouncing the lack of an investigation into Antonio's murder. Trejo's murder and the impunity of his killers received international media attention, and were denounced by multiple national and international bodies, including the IACHR, the UN, and even members of the U.S. Congress. Many pointed to Miguel Facussé as the man who had ordered Trejo's murder. Facussé addressed these accusations in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, simply saying, “I probably had reasons to kill him...but I'm not a killer” (Wilkinson 2012). The attention from this case further delegitimized the Honduran state and, if only briefly, drew the eyes of the world to the conflict in the Aguán.

The ability of movements in the Aguán to mobilize their constituents in response to these events is key to understanding their ability to resist the highly repressive state and elite forces in Honduras. As McAdam argues, “The shared assumption is that changes in a system of institutionalized politics merely afford a potential challenger the opportunity for successful collective action. It is the organizational vehicles available to the group at the time the opportunity presents itself that condition its ability to exploit the new opening” (1999, ix).

Mobilizing Structures and Resources

The nature of contentious politics itself makes the importance of movements' abilities to mobilize resources – both human and material – somewhat apparent. While the nature of social movements and the kinds of claims they stake vary greatly, it is generally the case that movements are engaged in a struggle where power is held disproportionately. Indeed, the very reason these movements operate outside the institutional political system is because their constituents are structurally marginalized in some way. In other words, there is already an imbalance of political and social power, so movements must seek alternative means to challenge the entrenched interests of the state and/or elite. While the ever-changing context in which movements operate provides occasional openings of political space in which movements can further their causes, it remains up to the movements to successfully capitalize on these opportunities. Their ability to do so, to some extent, depends on the structures and resources they have at their disposal. As McAdam notes, these structures can be conceived of as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (1999, ix).

For the campesino movements in the Aguán, these structures and resources include local, regional, and national campesino organizations and unions, which as previously discussed play important parts in the collective campesino identity and the historical legacy of organized labor and resistance in the Aguán. They also include the other constituents of the FNRP, which are strong allies to the campesino movements, and share resources with them, demonstrate public support for them, and contribute to the wider current of popular resistance in the nation, which undoubtedly aids those

organizing in the Aguán. Additionally, national and international human rights and social justice activist networks are important here, as they provide an opportunity for the movements to articulate their struggle on a global scale.

Alliances and Networks

As previously discussed, the campesino movements of the Aguán maintain close relationships with many other groups in resistance in Honduras, including but not limited to indigenous movements (most notably COPINH, the *Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas en Honduras* or Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations in Honduras), Garifuna communities (represented by OFRANEH, *La Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña*, or Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras), several labor unions, faith-based groups, human rights organizations, and others. COFADEH, the human rights organization with whom I have worked, works closely with the movements, documenting violence perpetrated against them, providing legal services, and advocating on their behalf.

The Plataforma Agraria, a coalition mentioned earlier in this chapter, is of particular importance and deserves further discussion here. The Plataforma describes themselves as:

a national network of more than 30 organizations whose objective is the fulfillment of the mandate of the Constitution of the Republic that establishes agrarian reform, and to achieve changes in public policy in favor of campesinos through the Law of Integral Agrarian Transformation – TAI – presented to the Honduran National Congress in 2011.⁷⁰ (Plataforma Agraria 2013, my translation)

⁷⁰“ una red nacional de más de 30 organizaciones, cuyo objetivo es el cumplimiento del mandato de la Constitución de la República que establece una reforma agraria, y lograr cambios en las políticas públicas

The organizations that constitute the Plataforma include movement organizations of the Aguán, campesino unions, COPINH, OFRANEH, regional and national community development organizations, and international organizations such as Vía Campesina, Heifer International, Veterinarians Without Borders, and La Alizana SARA (Food Sovereignty and Agrarian Reform, or *Soberanía Alimentaria y Reforma Agraria*) and Oxfam's Campaign *Vamos al Grano*.

The international scale is thus very relevant here. McAdam notes the failure of many theorists to recognize the impact of the international in looking at national movements (in his case, in US Civil Rights movement), arguing they “have generally failed to fully appreciate the multiple embeddings that shape the interpretations and actions of political actors” (1999, xxxi). This observation is important not only in terms of recognizing the ways in which global processes and actors influence domestic movements and the contexts in which they operate, but also in terms of transnational networks.

Through transnational activist networks, actors in even the most remote areas are connected to other activists and allies worldwide, and can thus mobilize global responses to violent or repressive acts almost immediately. Members of these networks can often leverage pressure and privilege against an intransigent state in ways local movements cannot, as Keck and Sikkink's (1998) “boomerang effect” makes clear. Activist networks have proven extremely valuable to the movements in the Aguán, whose struggle might otherwise go unnoticed outside the region. The movements have made

a favor de los campesinos y campesinas a través de la Ley de Transformación Agraria Integral -TAI-, presentada al Congreso Nacional de Honduras en 2011.”

frequent appeals to human rights organizations, both national and international, to come to the Aguán and see for themselves what is happening there. This can result in both increased awareness and the ability to mobilize resources that the movements might not have direct access to. The previously cited example of the public recognition of MUCA by the US Food Sovereignty Alliance is an example of this point. That recognition brought the struggle in the Aguán to the attention of many in the U.S. and beyond who share interests and goals with the movements, and who may then collaborate with or support the movements in some way in the future. Increased access to grassroots media and communications technology often helps to facilitate these transnational networks and build alliances and solidarity.

Importance of Media and Communications Technology

Community-based media and the internet have been indispensable resources for the movements. As the mainstream media outlets in Honduras are owned and controlled by the economic elite, the voices of popular movements are generally not heard in these venues. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, there is a great lack of freedom in the mainstream media, reflected by Honduras's ranking of 129 of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders' *World Press Freedom Index* for 2014. The campesino movements and other sectors of the Resistance thus rely on the use of grassroots media and the internet as platforms to project their voices and to counter the misinformation campaigns previously cited. They hold regular press conferences and issue the comunicados that have been so important to this project. Some of the movements – particularly MUCA – and many of their allies also maintain websites and blogs. Through these means, they are able to create their own news and to denounce political repression

and other injustices in their communities. Grassroots media has thus become a tremendously important resource to connect with rest of Honduras and the world, to share their struggle, and to counter the dominant discourse created by the state and elite.

The use of social media has also become an important tool for the movements in the Aguán. MUCA in particular maintains an active Facebook page, and posts videos to YouTube and Vimeo. Internet connections are still fairly limited in the Aguán, but these are quickly becoming more important resources to the movements. These tools also provide an important way to maintain their connections with activist networks and their allies throughout the globe.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the need for an analysis of social movements in the Aguán that is both broad and deep – one that considers history, the contemporary political and social landscapes of the region and the nation, and relationships of power, among other things. Such an analysis must also allow for the reflection of the dynamism and complexity of the campesino movements themselves and the context in which they operate. It must reflect the relevant cultural, structural, and material considerations, and the ways in which they affect and inform one another. The analysis I have presented here seeks to account for these various aspects, and to demonstrate the need to consider them all in a way that recognizes both the importance of context and the agency of individuals. While such an analysis is certainly messy, I argue that it is ultimately more meaningful than one that seeks to oversimplify these relationships and processes.

Further, this analysis seeks to acknowledge the agency of movement actors and the sophisticated strategies and tactics they employ to achieve social change within a highly repressive environment. The discussion presented here demonstrates that despite the seemingly overwhelming political repression the movements face and the burdens that global political economic processes place on the lives of movement actors, they are not powerless victims. Instead, these actors exercise agency to a degree that is impressive and inspiring, in spite of the many constraints they face.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The contemporary agrarian conflict in the Aguán Valley of Honduras provides an exemplary case study through which we can examine the ways in which the relationships between neoliberal policy (especially in relation to land reform), state-sponsored and state-sanctioned violence, and popular resistance manifest on the ground. In this case, we see how a political system dominated by elite interests and following a neoliberal economic tradition has marginalized much of the populace, leading these sectors to engage in contentious politics because conventional political channels are effectively closed to them. We have also seen intense and widespread political violence used to enforce the state's policies and elite property rights, and to repress popular resistance. In my analysis, I have tried to document and understand the complex ways in which the campesino movements of the Aguán are mobilizing in response to this vicious repression and to systematic violations of their human, social, and subsistence rights. I have also demonstrated the many levels on which the movements are engaged in this struggle – in their communities, in the streets, and more recently, in the halls of the Honduran National Congress.

This case makes clear the value of analyses that emphasize issues of power and privilege, as well as the ways in which local struggles are inherently connected to the global political economy and the impacts of the global capitalist system. Examining the conflict in the Aguán allows us to rather concretely observe the processes of economic dispossession and accumulation by rural dispossession, the ways in which neoliberalism

is employed as political project, how the coercive arm of the state is utilized to protect elite interests and property rights, and the failures of neoliberal policy and market-based attempts at solving social problems. Further, it underlines the need to recognize vested interests when undertaking analyses of public policy, and to seriously consider how policy is employed to further these interests. It emphasizes a need to consider power dynamics, history, and entrenched inequalities in a given context. The policy central to this case, the LMDSA, provides a clear example of the ways in which these tremendously important factors are often obscured.

As part of a World Bank-brokered structural adjustment program, the LMDSA demonstrates the tremendous repercussions that the actions of global financial institutions have on local communities. As Eric Holt-Giménez argues, “A market-based land reform project may be an agrarian failure for the peasantry, yet still be quite successful in terms of helping restructure the social and economic institutions in a country’s hinterlands in favor of agribusiness, tourism, or extractive industries” (quoted in Kerssen 2013, 122). This was certainly the case in Honduras, where the LMDSA and other policies like it have been instituted as part of a project to consolidate the economic and political power of the elite class. Many of the people of Honduras – and in particular, the campesinos of the Aguán – are well aware of these relationships and the ways in which they serve to exacerbate entrenched social inequalities. These injustices are what drive many communities to rise up and demand a different way forward.

As Petras and Veltmeyer so astutely assert, “Economic and social development requires changes in the structure of class relations and the configuration of political

power” (2005, 220). Many of the scholars cited in this thesis similarly argue that the only way to achieve transformative economic and social change is if that change is reflected in the political realm – and I believe the activists cited here would tend to agree. If popular sectors are to achieve significant and lasting change, they must, as Tanya Kerssen (2013) argues, “grab power back.” It seems this must happen on multiple levels; both formally and informally, in institutional and popular realms.

The 2013 Elections

For many, the November 24, 2013 elections represented an opportunity to achieve a substantial shift in institutional political power in ways that may start to “grab power back,” as Kerssen describes. These elections were the first in which Libre, the political party of the Resistance, and three other newly-formed parties would participate along with the National and Liberal parties that have long dominated Honduran politics.⁷¹ I was present in Honduras for these elections as part of the leadership team of an election-observing delegation with the Alliance for Global Justice, a U.S.-based activist organization. Our team spent a week in-country prior to the elections, visiting communities and social movements and taking their testimony in order to document the context in which these elections were taking place. What we found was very telling.

The Hondurans we spoke with leading up to the elections were not naive about how these elections would work. They knew that the ruling class of Honduras was not likely to roll over and allow the Resistance to take political control via the ballot box. The elite were not going to suddenly respect the voices of the people or the constraints of

⁷¹ There were four new political parties in the 2013 elections, making a total of nine parties on the ballot.

democracy. The extent of the fraud, intimidation, and threats made against communities in the weeks and months prior to the elections might have been surprising in another place. In Honduras, however, this has become the status quo in the post-coup era. Communities reported being threatened with the loss of important social programs, being offered outright bribes, and suffering more direct acts of political violence. We also documented extensive fraud on election day, which took many different forms.⁷²

Still, the excitement of the possibility of a victory for Libre was palpable. Few, if any, believed such a victory would magically fix Honduras's ills, but most felt it would at least create some political space in which the people could articulate their struggle. Such a victory would mean less militarization, fewer assassinations, and less political violence...and in Honduras, even a little bit less of these things would be rather substantial.

The people did not get their victory that day. While Libre made a strong showing in the polls, taking the second most seats in Congress and winning a number of mayorships across the country, the presidency was taken by the National Party's candidate, Juan Orlando Hernandez. Whether he actually won more votes than Libre's candidate Xiomara Castro⁷³ may never be known, nor will the exact impact of the extensive fraud and climate of intimidation that accompanied the elections.

Berta Cáceres, General Coordinator of COPINH stated around the time of the elections that "What they're going to do is safeguard the illegal legislative framework

⁷² For more details on our delegation's findings regarding the 2013 elections, see AfGJ and TFA (2013).

⁷³ Xiomara's husband is former President Manuel Zelaya, who was violently deposed in the 2009 coup.

that they have created to guarantee the interests of corporations” (quoted in Cuffe 2014). Her predictions proved accurate, when, in January 2014, the ruling class scrambled to protect all they had gained since the coup. As Sandra Cuffe notes, before the new government took office, Honduras saw what was “dubbed a “legislative hemorrhage,”” in which “more than 100 laws and almost as many contracts were passed between January 17 and January 20 following two weeks of already unprecedented activity that included Constitutional reforms” (Cuffe 2014). These reforms included the privatization of state-owned energy and phone companies, and many other laws that would facilitate the expansion of the neoliberal project and protection of elite interests. That they were hurriedly passed in the weeks before the new administration – and the Libre congressmen, congresswomen, and mayors – would assume office indicates the ruling class’s fear that they were losing their stranglehold on the affairs of the nation, as well as their willingness to exercise power, even in ways that sidestep existing governance institutions and practices.

Moving Forward

The question then remains of where to go from here. I am particularly interested in the ways in which the movements themselves are envisioning ways forward, and how they are integrating critiques of the established political and social systems into these efforts. It should be clear from the preceding chapters that a great deal of energy is being put into the grassroots struggle; to organize communities, mobilize individuals, and strengthen networks in order to confront the acute conflict in the Aguán as well as the political and social crisis facing Honduras as a whole. Simultaneously, the campesino

movements are increasing their participation in institutional politics, if only marginally to date. One primary way the movements are increasing this participation is by asserting themselves as legitimate actors in the policy realm, and proposing new policy in partnership with their allies.

Ley de Transformación Agraria Integral

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the *Ley de Transformación Agraria Integral* (Law of Integral Agrarian Transformation, or LTAI) was presented by the Plataforma Agraria to the National Congress in October, 2011. In the introduction to the text of this policy, the authors describe the national context in which it was created – one with high levels of rural poverty and landlessness, where 8 of 10 families, or roughly 375,000 campesinos, lack sufficient access to land, and where the best lands are concentrated in the hands of 1% of farmers (Plataforma 2011, 5). The authors also recognize the valuable productivity of small farmers, “who despite the poverty they face generate 76% of the country’s agricultural production, producing 40% more than the medium and large agricultural companies” (5, my translation).

In their presentation of this context, the Plataforma is critical of the government’s approach in the agricultural sector. They emphasize the political and economic factors that have shaped this context, namely “the deepening of economic adjustment measures of the neoliberal court,” as this led to the undoing of agrarian reform and the “dismantling” of the state and its ability to offer support to campesinos, while simultaneously implementing free trade policies that favor large-scale producers over

small farmers (5, my translation). The LMDSA was, of course, the primary policy through which this approach was pursued in rural Honduras.

In contrast to this approach, the LTAI was clearly crafted with the intention of addressing the structural issues that were ignored or obscured by the LMDSA. The law proposes a return to state-led agrarian reform, but with significant improvements upon earlier programs. Its general orientation may be understood as such:

This proposal seeks to modify the legal framework, it takes into account the new context of the country and establishes among its postulates a focus on gender and equity, a state commitment to provide itself the legal and institutional instrument to strengthen its capacity to stimulate the rural economy, the proper management of natural resources and environment, which takes on climate change, and is fundamentally focused on the human being by prioritizing small farmers.⁷⁴ (5, my translation)

The LTAI also contains specific provisions to improve campesinos' access to credit and technical assistance, which proved to be major barriers for benefactors of earlier agrarian reform programs. It centers issues of food sovereignty and food security, social justice, and human rights, while providing detailed and concrete means by which this program would operate.

While the obstacles remain great, the LTAI has the potential to be a truly transformative policy. It must, of course, be accompanied by a much broader shift in class power and political systems. A policy like the LTAI is unlikely to be instituted by a government dominated by the National party, which has proven itself largely

⁷⁴ “Esta propuesta orientada a modificar el marco legal, toma en cuenta el nuevo contexto del país y establece entre sus postulados un enfoque de género y equidad, un compromiso estatal para dotarse del instrumento legal e institucional para fortalecer su capacidad de incentivar la economía rural, hacia el buen manejo de los recursos naturales y del ambiente, que enfrente al cambio climático, y fundamentalmente centrado en el ser humano priorizando los pequeños y pequeñas agricultores.”

unsympathetic to the needs of communities and the “average” person. The campesino movements in the Aguán and the National Resistance will continue their struggles in their communities, in the streets, and in the halls of Congress.

Recommendations and Final Thoughts

My recommendations in this project are perhaps rather obvious and straightforward, yet they bear articulation here. First, the state of Honduras must put an immediate end to the political violence they have inflicted upon their people for the last five years. If there is any chance of recovering state legitimacy in Honduras, this violence must cease, along with the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators. Both the intellectual authors of the violence and the individuals and groups who carried it out must be held responsible for their actions.

Second, the government must sincerely engage with the campesino movements, who have proven their legitimacy and whose participation in rural development initiatives is required by Article 345 of the Constitution of the Republic. These movements have proven themselves more than capable and deserving of a say in the policies that so significantly impact their lives.

Finally, efforts to resolve this conflict and move forward must consider and directly address the structural causes of the conflict. If these are not addressed, there is virtually no chance of achieving significant social change. New agrarian reform must be instituted to address the chronic problems of landlessness and rural poverty. The LTAI provides a strong template for what this reform could look like, and this policy, or something very close to it, should be implemented in Honduras.

The case of the Aguán is clearly important in and of itself. The severity of this conflict makes it difficult to ignore or dismiss. Yet, there are also many important lessons to be learned that transcend the confines of the Aguán River Valley. These are lessons about how and why policy is actually made and for whom, the myriad ways in which it impacts people's lives on the ground, as well as the ways in which people and communities act in response to these consequences and mobilize to shape their own realities.

It remains to be seen whether the conflict in the Aguán will be resolved in any meaningful way, or whether those wielding political, social, and economic power will continue to utilize force to maintain the status quo. What is certain, however, is that the people's struggle will continue. The campesinos of the Aguán and their allies will not wait patiently for justice to be brought to them – they will continue to demand it while working to create it for themselves. As the famous protest chant goes, “*¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*” – The people united will never be defeated.

APPENDIX

CONSECUENCIAS DE LA LEY DE MODERNIZACIÓN



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