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Review/Reseña

Enrique Mayer, *Ugly Stories of the Peruvian Agrarian Reform*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Living to Tell the Tale:
Peruvian Agrarian Reform as Told by its Protagonists

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On October 3, 1968 the Peruvian military led a bloodless coup against civilian president Fernando Belaúnde Terry. Unlike other military regimes that seized power throughout Latin American in the 1960s and 1970s, General Juan Velasco Alvarado's Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (GRFA) was ideologically left of center, vowing to fight for the popular classes. True to its word, the GRFA implemented one of the most extensive agrarian reforms in Latin American history. This reform is the subject of Enrique Mayer's *Ugly Stories of the Peruvian Agrarian*

*Reform***.** But rather than focus on the reform process itself, Mayer lets the people who experienced it firsthand tell the story in their own words. The result is a rich and powerful account that is anything but ugly.

Ugly Stories is the product of Enrique Mayer's engaged scholarship on Peruvian society and culture. Although the bulk of the testimonies that fill the book's pages were collected in the mid-1990s, the author sprinkles in his own experiences and reflections—which span the entire period of study—for added personal touch. Whereas previous studies of the agrarian reform have focused on policy, statistics, and structural impact,[1] Mayer introduces a much needed human dimension to the equation. The narrative is story—rather than theory-driven—using oral testimony as the lens through which to gauge memory. Much like a playwright, the author compiles a diverse cast of characters—bureaucrats, activists, peasants, and landlords—and weaves them together into one compelling "script."

Chapter one surveys the history of agrarian reform in Peru. As Mayer shows, Peruvian leaders had been debating the viability of agrarian reform since at least the 1940s; a few even oversaw limited adjudications. Still, nothing in the nation's history compared to the reform carried out by the GRFA, which in its first ten years expropriated 15,000 properties (totaling nine million hectares) and benefited some 300,000 families (20-1). In addition to expropriating haciendas, rice mills, and sugar refineries, the military government established a special Agrarian Tribunal to deal with peasant grievances, and a political institution, the National System for Social Mobilization (SINAMOS), to oversee the reforms. The most sweeping measures were carried out while Velasco was still in power (1969-1975). His successors continued to scale down and reverse the agrarian reform until the 1990s, when President Alberto Fujimori implemented a series of neoliberal policies that ensured its demise.

The succeeding chapters are filled with lively stories from the historical actors who implemented, benefited from, challenged, and shaped

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[1] Abraham F. Lowenthal, ed. *The Peruvian Experiment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Cynthia McClintock, *Peasant Cooperatives and Political Change in Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Cynthia McClintock and Abraham F. Lowenthal, eds. *The Peruvian Experiment Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

the agrarian reform. Chapter two discusses the "heroes and antiheroes" of the agrarian reform movement. Here, one gets a sense of how the GRFA championed certain historical actors while silencing others. Contemporary peasant leaders such as Saturnino Huilca and José Zúniga received top billing in revolutionary propaganda, depicted—misleadingly, at times—as simple, humble peasants resisting an abusive, antiquated landowning class. At the same time, figures such as Hugo Blanco, arguably the most influential peasant leader at the time, remained curiously absent from state discourse, viewed as too leftist for the regime's political vision. Chapter three moves from peasant leaders to those they opposed: the landlords. As an activist scholar, Mayer acknowledges his personal reticence towards giving landlords "a sympathetic venue for their outrage" (76). Nevertheless, his decision to do so gives the book a level of depth and nuance that is rarely matched in contemporary ethnography. Here, we learn that former landlords' main objection was not to the idea of reform itself, but rather to the manner in which it was carried out. Most complained that they did not receive adequate compensation for their confiscated assets; others lamented that state officials and peasant beneficiaries mismanaged their properties after the expropriation. As we learn in the fourth chapter, these so-called "beneficiaries" saw things differently. Through their stories, Mayer elucidates his argument that the reform did not so much distribute land as *consolidate* it, thus transferring many of the pre-reform conditions and problems onto a new set of actors.

One of Mayer's most compelling observations is that there was a fundamental difference between what the reform was intended to do and what it ended up doing. This point is articulated in the final two chapters. Here, we see how peasant communities that had been left out of the reform process seized neighboring cooperative lands. We learn how peasants living on cooperatives secretly parceled out communal lands amongst themselves. We also learn of peasants who worked with the political, academic, and ideological left to challenge government-organized cooperatives. One of the most radical alliances occurred between peasants and Shining Path guerrillas during the 1980s. In some cases, peasants demanded that the rebels allow them to seize the lands of large "supercooperatives" known as

SAISes and redistribute them among the peasantry. Through these manifold strategies, then, peasants effectively challenged, expanded, and shaped the agrarian reform process.

There are, to be sure, important aspects of the agrarian reform that are not covered in the book. Some of the most interesting passages are those describing the propaganda that accompanied the government reforms. This begs the question: how did the Velasco reforms fit within a larger narrative of Peruvian state formation? Similarly, while Mayer does a wonderful job of chronicling the emotional impact that the agrarian reform had on individuals, he spends less time describing its impact on everyday life within peasant communities. How, for example, did the reform alter power relationships, social networks, and communal solidarity? To be fair, these questions, whose answers would require a deep engagement with the written historical record, are beyond the scope of Mayer's study. It is in this sense that *Ugly Stories* can be seen as a foundational work, paving the way for a whole new line of academic inquiry into the Velasco era.[2]

Ugly Stories is a welcome addition to a scant literature on Peru's agrarian reform. Its easy-to-digest presentation will appeal to specialists and general readers alike, and it is a must read for anyone interested in Peruvian society, culture, and history. While it does not, nor does it pretend to, cover all aspects of the agrarian reform, it offers an important first step. But while scholars will most certainly take Mayer's lead in revisiting this long-forgotten—yet historically significant—period in Peruvian history, few if any will match Enrique Mayer's narrative style. After all, while some of the stories in Mayer's text are in fact ugly, the way in which they come together into one coherent and moving tale is, in a word, beautiful.

[2] Some of this new scholarship is already underway. Ponciano Del Pino, for example, has begun to explore the impact of the reform on everyday peasant life. See Del Pino, "'*Se perdió el respeto':* Agrarian Reform, Politics, and Morality in Ayacucho Communities, 1969-83," paper presented at the American Historical Association Conference on Latin American History Annual Meeting (San Diego, 7-10 January 2010).