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Peru

# Hugo Blanco: “I was neither a ‘Castroite guerrilla’ nor a ‘terrorist’”

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**Hugo Blanco lives in Mexico, but he travelled to Europe to meet his new German-born granddaughter. Before that, he wanted to go and see his daughter Carmen in Sweden and it was there that the pandemic took him by surprise. Farik Matuk put us in touch with Carmen Blanco, who kindly asked us to send the questions in writing, because Hugo Blanco "can no longer answer by telephone". Here are the answers to the controversy sparked off by the documentary *Hugo Blanco, Río Profundo* (in English [Hugo Blanco, Deep River](#)).**

**Roberto Ochoa: Are you aware of the turmoil caused by the screening of the documentary [Hugo Blanco, Río Profundo](#)?**

Hugo Blanco: Yes, I am aware of the turmoil caused in Peru and internationally. And I am also moved by the multiple expressions of solidarity that reach me from several places in Peru and around the world. From those who are leading struggles close to mine, but also from young people who until then did not know of my existence, but who are now interested in my trajectory of struggles.

Every day, dozens of solidarity messages reach me and my daughter Carmen by email and other social networks. I thank all these expressions of solidarity, including those of personalities, unions and organizations who have taken a stand. Once again, national and international solidarity comforts me, as was the case in the 1960s when I was threatened with the death penalty, during the whole trial and when I was a prisoner in Arequipa and El Frontón. And also during other attempts to eliminate or stigmatize me which took place later, for example in the 1980s.

**Roberto Ochoa: Did you like the documentary?**

**Hugo Blanco:** The documentary is constructed from the point of view of a young woman, whose life was influenced as much by the struggles for the land, indirectly through the tales of her father, as by the bloody historical processes of the decade. 1980-1990.

Thus the documentary starts from the filmmaker's perceptions, but at the same time it contributes to recovering fragments of the history of collective struggles in Peru and helps new generations to know the history of collective struggles, which is not normally what is taught in schools. It is therefore very important that this documentary be screened in the provinces and localities of the country, as has happened in recent months, so that young people understand that the collective struggles of their ancestors have opened up breaches for their rights. This is in opposition to sectors which, although intending to fight injustices, believe themselves to be the owners of "the truth" and try to impose it by force.

Personally, what I consider to be most important in the trajectory of my life is the struggle for the land to belong to whoever works it, the organization of this struggle in a democratic way by making decisions in assemblies and the demand for the dignity of the indigenous and peasant population. And it is also important to remember the consequences that these struggles have for social activists, in my personal case the long prison sentence in the penitentiary on El Frontón Island .

But I am neither a filmmaker nor a librarian, unlike Malena Martínez . So she is the one who knows why she dealt with certain aspects in the film and not others. And I appreciate that the documentary also opened the way for reflections and discussions on these processes. As well as interviews like this which allow me to say what I consider

important.

**Roberto Ochoa: Retired soldiers contest the screening of the documentary, calling it " an apology for terrorism " and calling you a " Castroite guerrilla ". How would you answer them?**

**Hugo Blanco:** I would like to clarify that I was neither a "Castroite guerrilla" nor a "terrorist". The collective process in which I participated was a reaction against the abuse and exploitation of the peasantry of La Convención and against the servility of the police towards the feudal-type latifundists, who abused their power and exercised violence against the peasants. So, the assembly of delegates of the indigenous peasantry of the province of La Convención (department of Cuzco) decided to organize armed self-defence, and this assembly democratically appointed me to lead this self-defence. The Quechua peasantry of the Provincial Federation of Peasants of La Convención and Lares (FEPCACYL) initiated the agrarian reform that liquidated the semi-feudal latifundium, putting the land into the hands of those who work it. Seeing this, the indigenous people and other peasants of the Peruvian highlands also began or continued their respective struggles for the right to land and against the system of large estates.

**Roberto Ochoa: A year ago, we celebrated 50 years of the Velasquist agrarian reform . If you specifically fought for this reform, why were you deported by General Velasco? [1]**

Hugo Blanco: As I told you, the Quechua peasantry of the Provincial Federation of Peasants of La Convención and Lares (FEPCACYL) initiated the agrarian reform which liquidated the semi-feudal latifundium, putting the land into the hands of those who work it.

These events inspired other indigenous people and peasants of the Peruvian highlands to begin reclaiming land from the great landowners who for centuries had usurped the land of the indigenous people.

Faced with these processes which threatened to upset and overwhelm the system, General Velasco attempted to seek a solution that did not threaten the root of the land problem, a historical problem of the American continent since the invasion and conquest. He thus initiated a process of agrarian reform, that is to say of redistribution of land, but in conciliation with the big landowners.

Velasco therefore defended the interests of the capitalist system, which wanted to get rid of the feudal vestiges to move to a system of land exploitation more suited to capitalism. However, I obeyed the orders of peasant organizations which wanted the land to be not only worked, but also organized according to their own criteria, probably inspired by historical forms of organization of agriculture.

I was pursued and arrested under the presidency of Belaunde Terry [2]. Then, thanks to a coup, General Velasco became president. After some time he amnestied me and other comrades who had fought for the right to land. However, faced with my refusal to cooperate with his government, he forced me to live in Lima and not to return to the sierra. A punishment for someone whose base of struggle is in the countryside. Probably, Velasco feared that I would reintegrate myself into the peasant struggle.

As I did not agree with this measure, he then chose to deport me, which is unconstitutional, since you cannot deport citizens from their own country.

**Roberto Ochoa: Do you believe that this reform has worked?**

**Hugo Blanco:** Velasco's agrarian reform has only partially worked. Not only because the redistribution and the new

organization of land were carried out vertically, according to the criteria of the state agrarian officials, but also because the peasantry had to pay the usurpers, descendants of the conquerors, for their own land. These peasants who had been unpaid serfs had to pay for their land, thus remaining without money for tools, seeds, fertilizers, for the education of their children, medicines, etc.

Later, there was a neoliberal land counter-reform, meaning that although the large estates as such no longer exist, it is today the agro-exporting companies - especially on the coast - that control immense stretches of land. The land is not cultivated to meet the food needs of Peruvians, but in order to provide food for other countries. Thus, in Peru, located in the middle of the Andes - historically one of the agrarian centres of the world, which had domesticated foods like potatoes, quinoa, maize, etc. - our population suffers from malnutrition. And this is happening scandalously and overwhelmingly in rural areas.

**Roberto Ochoa:** The historian and archaeologist Luis Guillermo Lumbreras told us, in a recent interview, that "Velasco corresponded to an international strategy to prevent processes like the one that occurred in Peru with the Shining Path [3]. It was not an exclusively Peruvian initiative. In fact, we built a platform for state action to try to prevent the success of major popular demands. One of these demands was the question of oil, of land reform...". Do you share this opinion?

Hugo Blanco: I share this analysis. It was a time when the capitalist system saw that the unjust and unequal distribution of land throughout Latin America could lead to a social explosion, multiple and synchronized, and that this should be avoided. They saw that the struggle for land was gaining strength in several places in the Latin American region, this time not only on the basis of unjust access to land, but also inspired by the Cuban revolution which, a few months after it began, initiated an agrarian reform.

Therefore, either they carried out land reforms themselves under government control, or they ran the risk of land reforms, which would not be limited to this point, but could develop into revolutions that would challenge not only inequalities in relation to the possession of land, but which might call into question inequalities at all levels.

That is why, in country after country, during the 1960s and early 1970s, they hastened or "were pushed" to carry out land reforms, partially mitigating injustices in the countryside and thus slowing down peasant struggles.

**Roberto Ochoa:** A personal question. Why are you in Sweden and not in Mexico?

Hugo Blanco: My son Marco David and his partner, who live in Germany, were going to have a baby; my partner Ana and I wanted to be there. Before the birth of my granddaughter, I took the opportunity to visit my daughter Carmen who lives in Sweden. But, a few days before my arrival in Sweden, the pandemic broke out and I am staying there until the world health situation is normalized and I can return to Mexico where my partner lives. Considering my age, I belong to the group that runs the greatest risks and travelling right now would not make sense at all.

**Roberto Ochoa:** When was the last time you were in Cuzco?

Hugo Blanco: I made a short visit last year, and until three years ago I lived in Lima, so I could go there often. I really like Cuzco, which is like my mother, and I remember a song in Quechua, learned when I was a child: "Qosqo llaqta / Ohapaq mamay / Inka yawarniq samisqan" [4].

**Roberto Ochoa:** Do you maintain contact with the peasants with whom you fought in La Convención?

**Hugo Blanco:** About six years ago, I celebrated my 80th birthday by walking through emblematic places of these struggles and by visiting my comrades from La Convención . It was very important to me. Unfortunately, many peasants belonging to my generation, along with whom I have struggled, do not master the Internet, but sometimes when their children or grandchildren communicate with me, they transmit their messages to me. Recently, it was very painful for me to learn, through his granddaughter, of the death of Gerardo Carpio , one of those who fought alongside me in the self-defence units.

And now, with the turmoil caused by the documentary, several grandchildren of my comrades-in-arms at La Convención have contacted me, as they also see these attacks as attacks on the struggles of their fathers and grandfathers. . Young people from other places have also contacted me, they are the children of people that I have accompanied in their struggles, whether on the theme of the land as in Puno in the 1980s or in struggles against extractivism: in Ayabaca and Tambogrande , in Piura, Celendin y Bambarca , in Cajamarca, in various places of the department of Cuzco, such as for example Espinar , Valle de Tamba in Arequipa, etc. They contact me saying that they remember me when they were children or that their fathers told them that they knew me and sometimes they tell me that they themselves are also involved in current struggles, messages that arouse in me hopes for the future. For example, the united union of civil construction workers in La Convención spoke out a few days ago to support me. I take it that the sons or grandchildren of those who fought with me for the land are in the ranks of this union or that these young people carry the collective memory within them.

**Roberto Ochoa: What would you recommend to the Peruvian left?**

**Hugo Blanco:** I would recommend that they link together the traditional social struggles and the struggles in defense of Pachamama [5]. These struggles defend life itself and should involve all who are affected by the system. Capitalism systematically perpetuates ecocides everywhere, and these attacks on ecosystems threaten the reproduction of life and its continuity. Forest fires, water shortage and poisoning, natural disasters and possibly this pandemic are the result of this system's contempt for life. That is why I would recommend to the left, if it does not already do so, to unite the social struggles that the left has always led to the struggles for the defense of Pachamama. For this, I recommend that they hold assemblies of the different sectors of the oppressed, where we show how everything is connected and linked. Life is a living tissue and it is time for the left parties to defend all this living tissue. And, by the way, I would recommend that they listen to and learn from these various struggles and respect them. This means leaving aside the dogmas and verticalism that characterize the traditional left.

**Roberto Ochoa: Is it true that you were a member of APRA [6] before becoming a member of a Trotskyist party?**

Hugo Blanco: I was never an APRA activist, but my older sister and brother, Luisa and Oscar, belonged to it and they were repressed for that reason. So, very young, I also sympathized with APRA when it was still an anti-imperialist party and before its deformation and turn to the right, but I never joined that party.

**Roberto Ochoa: The pandemic has highlighted the enormous social inequalities and precariousness in the Peruvian state. How do you see Peru on the eve of celebrating the bicentenary of independence?**

**Hugo Blanco:** To begin with, I would say, like radical sectors in many parts of Latin America, where the 200 years since the start of the Republican stage have already taken place: “There is absolutely nothing to celebrate”.

On the one hand, injustices against indigenous people and Afro-descendants continue, large sectors of Latin American societies remain plunged into poverty, as the dispossessions, looting and ecocides initiated 500 years ago continue. As does the uneven distribution of land and water, vital for subsistence. Racism and aggravated machismo etc. also continue.

That is why our countries are by no means "independent", but they are ruled today not by a colonialist country, but by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the multinationals which plunder the planet.

"Independence" was political independence from Spain, of which we were a colony; but we are still embedded in an unjust global system of domination which treats us as the colony of the aforementioned companies and international organizations. In addition, in our societies, a colonized and colonizing way of seeing not only Pachamama, but also the beings who live there, including people, is maintained.

**Roberto Ochoa: You had a life that one could make a film about.. Do you repent of anything in your political trajectory?**

**Hugo Blanco:** I probably made a lot of mistakes, but I don't repent. Because when it happened, I did it without knowing I was mistaken.

*This interview was first published on 22 June 2020 by [La República](#) (Lima) on June 22, 2020. This version translated from the French translation by Hans-Peter Renk.*

## Peru Timeline 1900-1979

### 1911

Discovery of the city of Machu Picchu by the American archaeologist Hiram Bingham.

### 1958

On April 27, Richard Nixon was greeted in Lima by student demonstrations. Nixon was forced to return to his car under a hail of projectiles.

### 1960

On his return from Argentina, Hugo Blanco returned to Cuzco and worked in a hacienda in the valley of La Convención. The countryside had a semi-feudal regime inherited from colonialism. In exchange for permission to cultivate a plot of land, the owner required the peasants to work at the hacienda and do all kinds of domestic chores. The peasant unions called an indefinite strike that encountered the violent opposition of the landowners and sparked the creation of structures of self-defence.

### 1962

Hugo Blanco organized peasant leagues in the valley of La Convención . He became president of the Cuzco Workers' Federation.

Creation of the MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement), pro-Castro.

### 1963

Presidency of Fernando Belaunde Terry ( until 1968). The Communist Party contributed to his election. In May, Hugo was captured after an assault on a barracks of the Civil Guard.

### 1966

In September, Hugo Blanco, Trotskyist activist and leader of an organization of poor peasants, was tried by a military

court. He was sentenced to death following the death of two gendarmes during a demonstration. At his trial Hugo conducted a magnificent defence. A campaign in defence of him managed to successfully oppose the death penalty which would certainly have been handed down by the court if world opinion had not been alerted and mobilized. Thanks to a global campaign spurred by the Fourth International which garnered many supporters (Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Isaac Deutscher, Bertrand Russell, etc.) - Hugo Blanco escaped the death sentence and was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

### 1968

Velasco Alvarado became president of Peru (until 1975) following a military coup on October 3. He nationalized the oil sector, restricted freedom of the press, and nationalized key sectors of the economy (fisheries, mines, telecommunications, energy, grouped together in state-administered conglomerates). The exchange rate and foreign trade were tightly controlled. He established a partnership with the USSR and Cuba.

### 1969

In June, an agrarian reform aimed at eliminating the large haciendas with expropriation against compensation. But the peasants who had been unpaid serfs had to pay for their land, thus remaining without money for tools, seeds, fertilizers, for the education of their children, medicines, etc.

### 1970

Hugo Blanco was freed by the regime of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, which was seeking support from the Peruvian left.

### 1971

Mining law restoring full ownership of the subsoil to the state. State monopoly of the marketing of mining products. Two large American groups were expropriated. Hugo Blanco was deported to Mexico. He then lived in Chile.

### 1972

General Law of Education. Literacy.

### 1973

In May, in the vital fishing sector, the junta decided to take over the industry of fishmeal and fish oil by creating a national enterprise. Economic crisis.

### 1974

A strike by employees of the major newspaper *El Comercio* led to the nationalization of the press.

### 1975

Government of General Francisco Morales Bermudez (until 1980). “Gradualist” policy consisting in bringing back capital and reviving small and medium-sized industries. Return to economic liberalism.

### 1977

A general strike shook the government of Francisco Morales Bermúdez.

**1978**

Hugo Blanco returned to Peru and was elected to the Constituent Assembly representing the Frente obrero, campesino, estudiantil y popular (FOCEP).

Source [Inprecor](#).

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[1] Juan Velasco Alvarado (1910-1977): Peruvian general, President of the Republic (1968-1975).

[2] Fernando Belaunde Terry (1912-2002): Peruvian politician, twice elected President of the Republic (1963-68, 1980-85)

[3] The Shining Path: Partido comunista de Peru-Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL), Maoist organization, founded in the 1970s by Abimael Gúzman (alias president Gonzalo). Started armed struggle in 1980.

[4] “City of Cuzco / Mighty Mother / Infused with Inca blood”.

[5] Pachamama (Mother Earth): earth goddess in the indigenous cultures of the old Inca Empire (Aymara and Quechua peoples).

[6] APRA: American Revolutionary Popular Alliance, Peruvian political party, with its anti-imperialist origins, founded in 1924 by Victor Haya de la Torre.