Agriculture remains the main sector of employment in Latin America as a whole, and the major locus of poverty. A key question is whether the substantial gains in income per capita over recent decades have been shared by poorer rural families or, more specifically, whether the agricultural economy has evolved in such a way as to improve the lot of landless families, small sharecroppers, squatters and other low-income groups. A tendency towards proletarisation—i.e. a shift from self-employment to wage labour—has been reported by a number of commentators, often referring to specific regions of countries or to specific crops. Such a tendency is often viewed with concern. Others have commented on an apparent proliferation of small farms, and others on increasing concentration of land in large farms; these last two developments may or may not coexist. This paper, after briefly noting some aspects of the relationship between agrarian structure and the rural labour market, summarises some aggregate data relevant in judging the evolution of that structure and of the incomes of agrarian groups in major Latin American nations.

1 For example, Shepard Forman, The Brazilian Peasantry (New York, Columbia University Press, 1975), e.g. p. 40.
The nature of rural labour markets is intimately tied to and a reflection of agrarian structure, especially at earlier stages of development. The contrast between a plantation economy and an owner-operator peasant agriculture exemplifies this relationship. In the former the labour force is made up exclusively of paid workers, in the latter it is exclusively independent workers and their families and most persons working for wages are children of farm operators or the operators themselves on a seasonal basis. It appears that the labour force structure at a point of time (i.e. the extent of paid work, the permanence of paid work, and the way in which paid work and self-employment are combined) depends mainly on two features of agrarian structure: the degree of concentration of control of land or other non-labour inputs and the character of available agricultural technology. Important aspects of agricultural technology are its productivity, its factor intensity, the presence or absence of economies of scale, and productivity advantages or disadvantages of paid labour as opposed to self-employed workers (this last aspect reflecting other factors as well as technology).

The major production systems to be distinguished in Latin American agriculture are small-scale (peasant) family enterprises (whether corporate, as with the Mexican ejidos, or non-corporate); decentralised estates, where production on a large ownership unit is managed at a small-scale level (e.g. by sharecroppers); commercial farms, which are large enough to require non-family labour and which hire wage workers; and plantations, the closest rural facsimile of the industrial factory. Various intermediate and other categories could also be distinguished. Plantation agriculture is characterised by economies of scale or technological monopoly such that large producing units with wage labour forces have been the norm: it is usually export-oriented and therefore highly capitalistic. Examples from Latin America include the production of bananas, sugar and a few other crops. Frequently there is a mainly permanent labour force, though casual workers are common as well. This agricultural system provides the main locus for worker organisation.

The latifundio, of traditional fame in Latin America, is a large parcel of land on which traditional and sometimes pre-capitalistic arrangements between the owner and labour exist. There is usually a permanent labour force which, however, may account for a fairly small portion of

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2 Land is usually the main one. In some areas water is equally important. At later stages of agricultural development capital becomes increasingly important.