

NEOLIBERAL REFORM IN RURAL MEXICO: Social Structural and Political Dimensions*

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- AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND POLITICAL POWER IN MEXICO.* By Roger Bartra. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Pp. 221. \$45.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- MEXICO'S SECOND AGRARIAN REFORM: HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES.* By Alain de Janvry, Gustavo Gordillo, and Elisabeth Sadoulet. (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1997. Pp. 222 \$16.00 paper.)
- DECENTRALIZATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN MEXICO: COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN OAXACA'S MUNICIPAL FUNDS PROGRAM.* By Jonathan Fox and Josefina Aranda. (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1996. Pp. 74. \$11.95 paper.)
- RECONCEPTUALIZING THE PEASANTRY: ANTHROPOLOGY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE.* By Michael Kearney. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996. Pp. 224. \$59.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)
- REFORMING MEXICO'S AGRARIAN REFORM.* By Laura Randall. (New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996. Pp. 343. \$69.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)
- NEOLIBERALISMO Y ORGANIZACION SOCIAL EN EL CAMPO MEXICANO.* Edited by Hubert Cartón de Grammont. (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdez and the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1996.)

As the economy makes the transition from a state-guided and paternalistic economy toward a more ruthless and market-driven one, high rates of joblessness and income inequality will be facts of life.

Brian Bremner and Moon Ihlwan
"Korea: Rage and Despair"

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The struggle for democracy must have as one of its primary goals the establishment of a viable and democratic political society. . . , but democracy also requires the construction of a vibrant, vigorous and pluralistic civil society.

Larry Diamond
The Democratic Revolution

The Mexican countryside has been one of the most explosive political sectors in the twentieth century. The era opened in 1910 with the first major revolution in the world, and by the end of the century, the uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) on New Year's Eve of 1994 reconfirmed the effervescence of rural Mexico. These two critical junctures in Mexican history show that Mexican peasants have tenaciously refused to be wiped out as social actors. The issue central to both political conflicts was land (Wolf 1969; Collier 1994; Harvey 1996). During the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1910), peasant communities were deprived of most of their land by a small class of landowners. This situation eventually helped trigger the Revolution of 1910 (Katz 1981). At the end of the twentieth century, the Chiapas revolt is responding largely to the 1992 changes in Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, under which the state is no longer responsible for carrying out land redistribution (Cornelius 1992; De Walt, Rees, and Murphy 1994; Otero, Singelmann, and Preibisch 1995). In the past decade, new dimensions of struggle have been added to the demand for land that involve production, self-management, autonomy, and territory.

Peasants have been the subject of major debates among the forces of the political Left in most developing countries. At issue has been the role of the peasantry in a transition from capitalism to socialism like the one that occurred in Russia nearly a hundred years ago (Edelman 1987). Two main camps developed separate interpretations of this question. Populists, on the one hand, believed that peasants could play a progressive role within socialism and that peasant communities would have no difficulty in such a transition. This view was shared by most observers inspired by the Chinese Revolution and the writings of Mao Zedong. On the other side of the polemic were those who focused on the "petty bourgeois" dimension of peasants, as shown by their ownership of their means of production. This fact presumably rendered peasants more conservative and likely to ally with the bourgeoisie. Lenin thought that the peasantry was experiencing a rapid process of social differentiation in which its social agents were being transformed into one of the two main classes of capitalism. The majority

were becoming a rural proletariat, while a small minority were becoming part of the agrarian bourgeoisie. According to Lenin, poor peasants would do best by allying with the rural and industrial proletariat in the struggle for socialism (Lenin 1967). This essay will review several recent books on Mexico that deal with economic aspects of neoliberal reform and its political implications for the countryside. The first section will address briefly the original Mexican polemic on the agrarian question, one that dates from the 1970s. The second section will discuss the structural dimensions of neoliberal reform. Political dimensions are described in the third section, where the key issue is no longer the transition to socialism but the transition to democracy within capitalism. My conclusions will sum up the political implications of neoliberalism in terms of what type of transition is taking place and what possible basis is emerging for identity formation of agricultural direct producers. I will also outline my own view of political class formation in rural Mexico (Otero 1999).

The Mexican Debate and Beyond

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 prolonged the existence of the peasantry for several decades, giving rise to a heated polemic since the 1970s over agrarian structure, peasant differentiation, and the character of struggles in the Mexican countryside. This polemic has taken place at the cutting edge of discussions of the agrarian question in Latin America (de Janvry 1981; Harris 1978; Paré 1977; Hewitt de Alcántara 1984; Foley 1989; Barry 1995; Veltmeyer 1997). Scholars working on other countries have generally turned to the Mexican debate for theoretical inspiration in analyzing agrarian classes and political processes in various countries.

The six books to be discussed in this essay represent to some extent the positions in the Mexican debate or characterize the debate itself (Kearney). Only Roger Bartra's book locates its analysis within the parameters of the 1970s polemic. *Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico* is a compilation of works largely from that decade. The other five books attempt to make sense of the new circumstances of the Mexican agrarian structure after the reforms introduced by neoliberalism in the mid-1980s and the new Ley Agraria of 1992.

Bartra's *Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico* represents the strongest argument for the "descampesinista" or "proletarista" position in the Mexican debate. Bartra lucidly restated the Leninist position, and in a way, his work set the terms of the debate. His *Estructura agraria y clases sociales en México* (1974) has been reprinted more than fifteen times. Unfortunately, it took almost twenty years for an expanded English version to become available in 1993.

One of Roger Bartra's central contributions is his analysis of the peasantry as a simple commodity mode of production. He views the peasant mode as articulated in a position subordinate to the capitalist mode of production. In the simple commodity mode of production, peasants as well as craftsmen have a dual nature: "[T]his double nature is expressed in the fact that the capitalist and the worker are fused into a single person: the direct producer. The duality results from the fact that while the peasant and the craftsman are exploited by capital (by way of the market), they themselves are the direct agents of such exploitation to the extent that they work under noncapitalist conditions of production" (p. 17).

To arrive at this conclusion of unequal exchange, Bartra examined agricultural production census data using the concepts associated with ground rent developed by Karl Marx as analytical tools. From this perspective, agricultural products are priced according to the commodities with the highest production costs in the capitalist sector. Thus capitalist cultivators who produce under the most favorable conditions are able to obtain a ground rent according to greater proximity to cities or other markets, capital investments, or greater fertility of the land. Such favorable conditions producing "differential ground rent" enable capitalist farmers to make superprofits (above the average rate of profit). In contrast, producers with the lowest ground rent whose costs exceed the minimum in the capitalist sector, usually minifundia peasant producers, had a negative ground rent and therefore a negative profit rate.

Unlike other Marxist analysts of Mexican agriculture, Bartra drew also on the work of Alexander Chayanov to explain peasant behavior and why peasants continued to produce subsistence goods in the face of negative rates of profit. From the dual nature of peasant farming, one producing a fund for surplus and another a fund to cover a self-wage, peasants with the poorest working conditions often have to forego part of their self-attributed wage to the capitalist sector. This amounts to "peasant self-exploitation," a Chayanovian concept.

Another of Roger Bartra's key contributions to the debate is the notion of "permanent primitive accumulation," which evokes the contradictory nature of capitalist development in the Mexican countryside (and in underdeveloped countries in general). Marx used the concept of "primitive accumulation" to refer to the process by which noncapitalist direct producers, such as peasants and artisans, are separated from their means of production and left with only their labor-power to sell for subsistence. In the Mexican case, the process of primitive accumulation never seems to be completed and continues over the long term. This is especially true after the 1910 revolution, which re-created the peasantry on the basis of agrarian reform. This process redistributed land to the peasants, and yet capitalism continued to develop after the revolution (Otero 1989a). Bartra refers to this process of destruction of the peasantry's material basis for subsistence as

“an impossible, ongoing annihilation”—impossible because the peasantry became indispensable to the postrevolutionary political regime, but ongoing as capitalism advances in the countryside.

Thus in Bartra’s view, despite the political necessity of the peasantry for the state, the agrarian reform and the *ejido* as its main form of land tenure created major limits on capitalist development because about half the land was withdrawn from the market. This kind of argument has led some observers of the debate to liken the position of Marxists to that of the World Bank, with its tendency to favor market forces as the key mechanism of resource allocation. Bartra, however, was merely observing an objective process in which *ejidos* effectively hampered capitalist development. Meanwhile, more and more peasants lost their means of production even though they did not find wage employment in the larger economy. The latter trend led Bartra to talk about a surplus population beyond the needs of the reserve army of unemployed, which normally serves to depress wages in the capitalist economy. The surplus population exceeded those needs in that its presence posed a tremendous political threat to the regime.

On the indigenous question, Bartra has presented the Marxist interpretation of ethnicity as a phenomenon of the superstructure, as a social construct of the ruling classes that was useful to their domination:

The central idea that can be drawn from our studies of interethnic relations is that those relations have become a part of the extraeconomic mechanisms of an ideological nature that permit the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in Mexico. Interethnic relations do not simply reflect the particular features of social contradictions in the rural zones; instead, they are principally an ideological system that enables these contradictions to persist. They are an ideal image in the mind of the dominant classes that functions as an aid in the exploitation of the dominated classes. (P. 188)

In view of this conception of interethnic relations in Mexico, it is no surprise that Bartra today criticizes the notion of “uses and customs” of indigenous people (R. Bartra 1998, 1997), as invoked by the EZLN in the San Andrés Accords of 1996. Bartra believes that such “uses and customs” were introduced during the colonial period and generally hide a strong patriarchal structure in Indian communities. They thus fall short of the democratic ideal that the EZLN supposedly espouses. Bartra’s stance has caused a heated debate among some of the key students and supporters of the EZLN.¹

Michael Kearney, for his part, has undertaken a daunting task in *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in Global Perspective*, in which he reviews most of the literature on peasantry produced by anthropologists. Because much of his discussion focuses on Mexico, the Mexican debate, and Oaxaca in particular, his book is relevant to this essay.

1. The debate can be found in the Mexican journal *Fractal*, no. 8 (Aug. 1998).

Kearney's critique of anthropological studies of the peasantry make his book a valuable textbook for courses on various topics, including economic anthropology, cultural and social anthropology, peasant studies, Latin American development, and Mexico. *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* critiques the central problem of economically based class analysis, arguing that class has rarely been the basis for constructing identities. Part of the difficulty stems from economic reality, which has produced social actors who occupy more than one subject position. Kearney calls them "polybians," extrapolating from the word *amphibian*, a being that can live both in water and on land. By analogy, a polybian is a human being who can live in a plurality of situations (or subject positions), be they wage-labor activities, handicrafts production, agriculture, commerce, and so on.

Kearney then asks, how can polybians be constituted in terms of identity and be politically mobilized? The most promising unifying identities, he argues, are ethnicity, which addresses issues of human rights (and creates global citizens), and ecopolitics, which is also transnational. The main limitation of Kearney's argument is that it focuses on rural areas with indigenous people. One must therefore wonder how other peasant-like populations, which may also be polybians, might be constituted in terms of identity and political views if they do not have an indigenous ethnicity on their side. As Alain de Janvry and his coauthors point out in their book under review here, less than 15 percent of Mexico's rural population is now indigenous.

One may wonder similarly how peasants in other ethnic regions like Chiapas, which lack the same rates of international migration as those in Oaxaca, become politically constituted. The unavoidable impression is that Kearney, like many anthropologists before him, tends to generalize based on certain observations made in "his communities" to rural Mexico as a whole. Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara warned anthropologists against this bias: "Both foreign academics and Mexican colleagues have gone into rural areas in search of situations which fit their preconceived images of adequate field sites, and have done their best to see local reality in terms validated by a previously adopted set of assumptions" (1984, 178). Kearney does not want to cling to previous assumptions, and in fact, he tries to debunk them. But in so doing, he creates new assumptions that may not be substantiated by a broader examination of rural Mexican reality.

Social-Structural Dimensions

The other four books under review represent attempts to understand the more recent past in Mexico, since the neoliberal reforms introduced in the mid-1980s and the new Agrarian Law of 1992. By 1991 Mexican agriculture was contributing only about 7 percent of GDP, even though this sector involved more than a quarter of the economically active popu-

lation. Such disproportion reflected a tremendous technological lag and a deeply fragmented land-tenure structure. The rural-development strategy followed by the Mexican state was predicated on the omnipresence of the state, which intervened through diverse means (including selective indirect subsidies), most of them regressive. The ejido was the main form of land tenure assigned to those who received land as beneficiaries of agrarian reform, and they could neither rent nor sell the land. The ejido functioned as a means of political control based on corporatism and was heavily subsidized until the late 1980s. After the winds of democratization began to blow following the student and popular movement of 1968, the ejido ceased to be efficient.

Hence President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) set out to introduce another agrarian reform in 1992. Its three main components were land in ejidos could now be sold or rented; the state was no longer responsible for redistributing land; and while limits for individual landholding were kept to 100 hectares (240 acres), corporations could operate as much as 2,500 hectares as long as at least twenty-five individuals were associate members, and none of them exceeded the individual limit of 100 hectares (Cornelius 1992; De Walt, Rees, and Murphy 1994). This agrarian reform was combined with other neoliberal policies, including deregulating the agricultural economy, transferring former state enterprises to the private sector, eliminating most subsidies, severely restricting agricultural credit and insurance, and swiftly opening trade unilaterally in basic crops like sorghum, soy, and other processed and semiprocessed food products (Gates 1993, 1996; Encinas et al. 1995; García Zamora 1997). Thus the neoliberal reform as a whole represents a new model for the ejido. While free of state tutelage, the ejido is also deprived of virtually all state support. Ejidos could still become organizations of peasant support, but such an initiative would have to emerge from below.

Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform: Household and Community Responses, by Alain de Janvry, Gustavo Gordillo, and Elisabeth Sadoulet, is a relatively rare book in scholarship on Mexico in providing rich quantitative analysis of the agrarian structure and its evolution between 1990 and 1994. Most other works in this area tend to be historical and qualitative. The authors turn over virtually every analytical "stone," including many that proved to be rich in "mineral content" and a few that were poor. The high-value "stones" clearly predominate. The main value of this book is that it confirms many previously held views on various aspects of peasant economy, thus giving them a solid quantitative empirical basis. It also offers a number of policy recommendations based on the highly heterogeneous social and regional structures discussed. This book will become obligatory reading for years to come on the most salient structural profiles of the Mexican countryside.

Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform begins with a brief background of

the origins of the ejido system and its functions of political control, political representation, and organization for production. The book then summarizes the main features of the 1992 reforms and moves directly into presenting the 1990 and 1994 national surveys that constitute its empirical core. Although the land market was legally opened only in 1992, some activity was captured by the 1994 survey: of the five regions into which Mexico was divided, the land market was most active in the Gulf, Center, and North and least developed in the South Pacific, where tiny farms predominate. Also, the percentage of *ejidatarios* (beneficiaries of the original agrarian reform who have ejido titles) holding private land increased slightly from 2.5 to 4.8 percent.

International migration was found to be a critical variable as a source of income in the economic dynamics of the ejido sector. This finding would tend to support the views of Kearney and John Gledhill (1995) that class is becoming transnationalized. According to de Janvry et al., "Even in states with the highest levels of migration, migration is still accelerating, suggesting that the practice is far from reaching an equilibrium point" (p. 51). Data in this study confirm the theory that strongly established social networks at the points of destination facilitate the migratory process. Destination points are concentrated in California and Texas, while those of origin are concentrated in certain states in the North, North Pacific, and Center of Mexico.

Even though the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) introduced a comparative advantage for Mexican farmers to produce fruits and vegetables, the ejido's ability to adapt was limited by lack of access to credit and technical assistance. Corn and beans, which continue to be the only crops with some state subsidy, are overwhelmingly the most important crops: they occupied 57 percent of the total cultivated land in the ejido system in 1994. Farmers have been stripped of so much support from the state, however, that by 1994, only 8.6 percent of *ejidatarios* had some technical assistance (down from 59.6 percent in 1990). Mexican farmers were left in an institutional vacuum just when they needed to diversify and modernize to take advantage of NAFTA. Unless this vacuum is filled, the authors comment, neoliberal reforms threaten the ejido with loss of competitiveness and eventual bankruptcy (p. 86).

Among the activities supplementing agriculture, livestock grazing increased by 20 percent between 1990 and 1994, according to the authors of *Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform*. My own calculations with production census data do not confirm this increase, but I used data for both ejido and private sectors. Thus unless a parallel decline occurred in livestock production in the private sector, this figure calls into question the representativeness of the surveys or the sampling or weighting techniques used by de Janvry et al.

The state dramatically decreased its support to farmers in credit and

insurance between 1990 and 1994: access to loans increased through PRONASOL, a social assistance program. But the mass of credit to the sector declined, and access to credit was thus diluted by a larger number of users.

The chapter on organizations in *Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform* seems to yield the least satisfactory information, but this may be merely a reflection of the state of things in rural Mexico. The authors conclude "by observing that ejidatarios are not strongly organized, with only about a third belonging to organizations through the ejido, a quarter belonging to informal and social organizations, and 7 percent belonging to formal organizations within individual participation" (p. 119). The chief objective of the formal organizations has shifted from accessing land to creating economic benefits through supporting production (an idea confirmed in Cartón de Grammont's book reviewed below).

The most ironic social trend observed in *Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform* is the emergence of entrepreneurial peasants in the ejido sector. This outcome should have resulted from the original agrarian reform, but it was stifled by an overly interventionist state. With the neoliberal reform, four strategies underlie the rise of entrepreneurialism in the countryside. These strategies do not necessarily lead to success but at least help farmers to stay afloat: monocropping corn in the fall-winter cycle, diversifying into fruits and vegetables, increasing cattle raising, and reinforcing the migration strategy. The first strategy was most concentrated in the North Pacific region; the second in the Gulf. Cattle raising spread out more into the Gulf, South Pacific, and Center; and migration concentrated in the North and Center regions. The determinants of success were access to credit, irrigation, pastures and common lands, increased education, access to technology and access to migration social networks. Because most of these were in short supply, especially credit, only a small percentage of farmers managed to pursue entrepreneurial strategies.

The chapter on inequality in *Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform* contains a sophisticated quantitative analysis that reaches a number of strong conclusions: "The ejidos with the smallest internal inequality compared to external inequality were those in the Center and North, those with a mestizo majority, and those with the oldest [land] endowments. In contrast, it was the indigenous communities that had the highest internal inequality. In this case two-thirds of total inequality was internal to the community, and only one-third external. The communities thus had the dual characteristic of consisting of very small farms with large internal differences" (p. 167).

Something most agrarian analysts always suspected but rarely quantified was the extent to which rural producers depend on nonfarm incomes. It turns out that 81.9 percent of total income on the smallest farms comes from off-farm activities, including 46.7 percent from wages and micro-enterprises. The rest comes from migration, that is, from wages also.

When disaggregating income data by quintiles, off-farm income is most important for the middle quintiles, while on-farm income is most important for the poorest and the richest quintiles (p. 178). Other studies that have quantified this phenomenon of the increasingly semiproletarian character of the rural direct producers are Appendini and Salles (1976, 1980), and R. Bartra and Otero (1987).²

Poverty was found to be extensive and deep in rural Mexico. According to de Janvry and his coauthors, "Overall, 47 percent of the households are in poverty and 34 percent in extreme poverty" (p. 197). In contrast, 25 percent of Mexicans fall below the poverty line in the urban sector and 34 percent nationally. The book demonstrates conclusively that being a member of an indigenous community increases the probability of being poor or extremely poor (after controlling for access to land, education, and weaker migration networks). Indigenous communities make up 14.8 percent of the poor in the so-called social sector, which includes ejidos and indigenous communities, although they represent only 11.9 percent of the social-sector households. In fact, 71.2 percent of households in indigenous communities are poor, compared with 44.7 percent in the ejidos.

The main policy conclusions in *Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform* revolve around filling the institutional vacuum left by neoliberal reform. Measures in this direction would include a favorable macroeconomic environment, the promotion of organizations through the ejido system, and public investment in irrigation and education. The book stresses continuously the recommendation that differential policies should be pursued that reflect the regional and social heterogeneity of rural Mexico. Yet such an approach seems antithetical to neoliberalism, which prescribes homogeneous policies regardless of the sharp inequalities of rural conditions.

Reforming Mexico's Agrarian Reform, edited by Laura Randall, came out of a seminar held at Columbia University in April 1995, when most researchers were still generating empirical information for analyzing the impact of the reforms. This useful book surveys scholars' initial assessments of the significance of neoliberalism on Mexico's agrarian structure. Five parts cover various topics, including an introduction to land reform; economic consequences of land reform; land reform, agrarian organizations, and the structure of Mexican politics; land use and the environment; and land reform, property rights, gender, and migration. Each part features a chapter with discussion from the original seminar. A later book based on more empirical research is Cornelius and Myhre (1998).

The longest chapter on the economic consequences of neoliberalism, by de Janvry, Gordillo, Sadoulet, and Benjamin Davis, summarizes the

2. This article with Roger Bartra spells out our agreements on how to characterize the agrarian structure economically. For my main disagreements and an alternative view of the political implications, see Otero (1989b, 1999).

book just reviewed. Another chapter by Daniel Covarrubias Patiño describes an opinion survey on Procampo, Procede, and PRONASOL, three programs launched during the Salinas administration. Procampo was started in November 1993 to cushion the effects of NAFTA on Mexican agriculture while providing an incentive for peasants to shift from subsistence and grain crops to fruits and vegetables for export. Procampo was also geared toward the poorest corn producers. Procede is the institutional mechanism set up to implement land titling, an indispensable step in creating a market for land (a central goal of the 1992 Agrarian Law). PRONASOL was established to alleviate poverty and was launched by Salinas on the day he took office, 1 December 1998 (Cornelius, Craig, and Fox 1994). Much of this program targeted rural dwellers.

An intriguing result of the survey reported by Covarrubias Patiño is that Procampo has not reduced inequalities because its grants are awarded on the basis of land surface (a given amount per hectare), independently of yield. The approach seeks to reach the poorest farmers (some two million of them). Their production is usually geared toward self-subsistence and therefore has never benefited from price supports. Although peasants with 1 to 5 hectares received 70.5 percent of Procampo funds in 1993–1994, they received only 2.6 times the amount of program assistance (reflecting average landholding). As mentioned, the amount of program assistance was fixed per hectare. Therefore, those with 6 to 10 hectares got 20.9 percent of all Procampo disbursements, but each peasant in this range received 7.7 times the amount of program assistance. Those with 21 hectares or more received only 1.5 percent of all funds, but this total represented on average 39.5 times the amount of program assistance for each farmer per hectare. In sum, Procampo cannot be expected to diminish inequalities and cannot even be considered a development program. It should be viewed instead as an income-assistance program.

David Myhre's contribution to *Reforming Mexico's Agrarian Reform* deals with agricultural credit, which he considers "a missing piece of agrarian reform in Mexico." Myhre begins with an epigraph from Frank Tannenbaum (in whose honor the seminar was held). Written in 1950, it remains valid today: "The history of Mexican agricultural credit is a sad story at best." A key problem is that the financial system in Mexico has failed to reform itself to meet the new challenges of agrarian reform. In Myhre's view, the "reorganization of the rural financial system has simply replaced one 'sad story' with another. Until reorganization strategies are implemented that do not a priori exclude half of Mexico's rural population from financial services, the prospects for a happy ending are few" (p. 136). Amidst this somber economic scenario, rural unrest has reemerged with force during the 1980s and 1990s, demanding a return to the state support of yesteryear but also greater democracy, self-management, autonomy, and peasant control of the production process.

Political Dimensions

Now that the cold war has ended, the socialist alternative is hardly on the political agendas of any significant political force in Latin America (Castañeda 1993; Carr and Ellner 1993; Harris 1992). The question that remains is, what kind of democracy is Mexico turning into? Key words in the current debate are *transparency, community participation, autonomy, independence, accountability, self-management, appropriation of the production process, and control of territory* (Baitenmann 1998; Harvey 1998; Gordillo 1988; Otero 1989b; Moguel, Botey, and Hernández 1992; Rubin 1997). It may be argued that the EZLN has pushed most radically for reforms that include demands leading toward a democracy rooted in civil society rather than limited to the state. This shift has been suggested implicitly by the political practice of the EZLN: rather than focus on “revolutionary movements” whose goal is to take over the state, the new Left should continue to concentrate on the goal of many social movements in Mexico since the 1980s: the construction of a Mexican civil society (Foweraker and Craig 1990; Cook 1996).

Although capitalism may be compatible with a liberal democracy that is largely confined to the electoral dimension of politics and completely separated from the market and the economy (Meiksins Wood 1995), a democracy centered on civil society may posit some problems for capitalism. At the least, a societal democracy may lead capitalism in a social-democratic direction (Semo 1996; Otero, ed., 1996). How has the recent literature on rural Mexico addressed some of these larger issues?

Three contributions to *Reforming Mexico's Agrarian Reform* deal with emergent political issues brought about by neoliberalism in the Mexican countryside. First, the uprising in Chiapas, as discussed by Neil Harvey, highlights the vast heterogeneity of Mexico's agrarian structure. In Chiapas the law and public institutions usually represent the interests of the economically dominant classes. Introducing democracy in this context therefore would require a structural reform of significant proportions.

Second, regarding the state's role in rural Mexico, Armando Bartra argues that it is declining significantly in terms of economic production. Yet the state is becoming even more direct, paternalistic, and client-efficient in electoral terms (p. 174). In other words, traditional corporatism, via organizations such as the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), is being replaced or supplemented by neocorporatism via PRONASOL and Procampo. The money distributed by these agencies in 1994 reflected clearly an electoral goal for the government of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). With 3.5 million rural families receiving money from these programs, some “10 million or 15 million voters went to the polls duly rewarded and with reason to thank the official party” (p. 183).

Finally, Jonathan Fox's contribution to Randall's edited volume supplements these analyses by discussing electoral information from the 1994

presidential elections, using the Instituto Federal Electoral and the Alianza Cívica as his main sources. Fox focuses on the extent to which voters could exercise the right to secret balloting or if they faced pressure and also on the presence of opposition parties in rural areas. Fox first confirms some information provided by Armando Bartra on the distribution of Procampo funds. More than 2.8 million checks were distributed in the two weeks prior to the 1994 elections (violating the government's promise to stop distributing checks two weeks before elections). Fox then notes that it is impossible to measure the degree to which access to the funds of the state's new rural development programs was conditioned on electoral support. But the degree to which ballot secrecy was violated indicates "the pool of voters who were vulnerable to efforts to condition access to the reform programs" (p. 190). Other information presented in this study is that Mexico's rural vote is clearly tilted toward the ruling PRI: "In 'very urban' areas, [Zedillo] reportedly won only 34 percent, but in 'very rural' areas, he received 77 percent of the votes counted" (p. 191).

Violations of ballot secrecy in the 1994 presidential elections varied considerably, from not having screens, to having someone watching the voting, to voters showing their ballot to others. Such violations reflected a pattern consistent with the findings of Alianza Cívica: "the 1994 presidential elections involved two distinct election-day processes, one 'modern' and relatively clean, the other filled with irregularities, including widespread violation of ballot secrecy and direct pressure by local bosses on voters" (p. 205). These irregularities were rampant in places where opposition parties could not be part of the executive committee administering the balloting place. Because the opposition parties were least capable of sending representatives to the most indigenous municipalities, these places were least likely to have guaranteed access to a secret ballot.

Fox and Josefina Aranda's *Decentralization and Rural Development in Mexico: Community Participation in Oaxaca's Municipal Funds Program* is a pioneering study of the new World Bank policy that is supposedly targeted more toward alleviating poverty, with greater sensitivity toward environmental, gender, and indigenous peoples' issues. The authors raise the right questions about how to increase both the government's and the bank's accountability for their development decisions. Key conditions for reducing the gap between policy targets and practice are effectively increasing community-based participation, providing greater public access to information before implementing projects, and creating adequate institutional channels for investigating complaints made by affected "stakeholders."

According to Fox and Aranda, neoliberalism has created two policy trends related to decentralization. One is movement away from traditional clientelism and toward combinations of community participation, job creation, community implementation, and oversight of projects. The second trend is decreasing bias against the poorest municipalities in allocating

transfer funds. Several municipal reforms since 1983 have given municipalities increased responsibility for delivering services, and town councils have been created to decentralize municipal administration. Where these policy trends converge, as in Oaxaca, the result is increased municipal government capacity for responding to development needs with greater efficiency and accountability. But if decentralization is combined with the persistence of authoritarianism, then the result is not increased accountability but increased authoritarianism. The key message of *Decentralization and Rural Development in Mexico* is that a bottom-up and democratic approach in designing and implementing development projects is the most promising one for rural communities.

In *Neoliberalismo y organización social en el campo mexicano*, Hubert Cartón de Grammont has assembled another fine collection of essays that analyze the new challenges for rural social organizations. He has been one of the most active producers and promoters of rural studies in Mexico in the past two decades (Cartón de Grammont, ed., 1986, 1995; Cartón de Grammont 1990; Cartón de Grammont and Tejera Gaona 1996). In fact, Cartón de Grammont organized the first meeting of the Red de Estudios Rurales in Taxco, Guerrero, in 1994 and then its second meeting in Querétaro in February 1998. At the second meeting, the network was formally organized as the Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Rurales (AMER), which will meet periodically as a professional association of rural studies.³ Cartón de Grammont's introduction posits a new dualism emerging in the countryside. On one hand, a dwindling group of viable "producers" can play successfully according to the new market-led rules and remain eligible for official and private lending. On the other, a growing group of "the poor" is eligible at best only for government assistance programs, which cannot help much in production.

A major contribution of *Neoliberalismo y organización social en el campo mexicano* is that it helps clarify what "civil society" is all about in rural Mexico. After encountering the complexity and heterogeneity of rural producers and their organizations, readers get a much better grasp than the simplified version of "civil society" popularized by the EZLN. That group seems to imply that civil society is made up primarily of organizations of subordinate groups and classes. If this were the case, expanding civil society would change the balance of power between the state and society. Cartón de Grammont's contribution describes the organizations of private cultivators in rural Mexico. As it turns out, even if private-sector organizations are not monolithic, their organizations have been key players in influencing policy changes toward neoliberalism and the promotion of NAFTA.

3. AMER's web page may be consulted in <<http://serpiente.dgsca.unam.mx/piisecam-rer>>. Another web page with multiple useful links on rural Mexico is that of the Scholars for Mexican Rural Development: <<http://anthap.oakland.edu/anthap1/mrindex.htm>>

If some organizations in the private sector—big, medium, and small—are becoming more militant, it is because their former corporatist channels for exerting pressure on agricultural policy are no longer effective. With the advent of citizenship, three types of social actors have emerged: citizens as individuals, those defined by the kind of peasant or cultivator, and social movements. Social movements are taking on the character of broad fronts made up of local or regional organizations that keep their distance from political parties. These movements may nevertheless be linked to any of the existing political parties or even to the state apparatus, or they may remain independent of the state. While such social movement organizations may be described as “multiparty” because their members may also be party militants, their loyalty lies primarily with their social organization rather than with party membership.

Although the peasant movement of the 1960s and 1970s centered on the demand for land (A. Bartra 1979a, 1979b), the focus of rural struggles since the 1980s has shifted to concerns related to productive organization (Cartón de Grammont). Clearly related to this trend, rural social movements have struggled for self-management and democratic production (Otero 1989b), appropriation of the productive process in general (Gordillo 1988), territorial control and autonomy (Blanca Rubio in Cartón de Grammont; Moguel, Botey, and Hernández 1992), and the struggle to appropriate social and political life as well (Harvey in Cartón de Grammont). With the EZLN uprising, democratic reform of the state can no longer be postponed (Harvey).

The new social-movement organizations are also engaging in new forms of social action and expression. Direct action as well as intense mobilization and struggle have largely taken the place of negotiation and political subordination. Therefore the weakest link of traditional corporatism is the one between social organizations and the ruling PRI. The result is that new mobilizations are completely overflowing traditional channels of representation and policy making.

Editor Cartón de Grammont’s contribution addresses the organizations in the private sector, from small cultivators to large agro-industrial corporations, and describes their internal contradictions. Although they agree that land should be privatized, some favor private agrarianism of small cultivators with some state support and oppose NAFTA. Others, mainly those best positioned for agro-exports, largely support and promote neoliberal reform. Cartón de Grammont profiles the changing relations of private-sector cultivators with the state, moving from a rather cozy relationship to the currently belligerent situation engendered by the fact that only the largest and most productive can hope to survive in the neoliberal context.

Other contributors to *Neoliberalismo y organización* address the relationship of the corporatist CNC and the new peasant movement (Horacio

Mackinlay); the role of independent organizations (Blanca Rubio); rural work and labor organizations (Sara Lara); the new forms of representation brought about by the Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas (Harvey); the indigenous movement for autonomy (Sergio Sarmiento Silva); other forms of productive organization for commercialization (Juan de la Fuente and Joaquín Morales); women's productive groups (Rosa Aurora Espinosa G.); and expressions of resistance to the new Ley Agraria (Adriana López Mojardín). This collection provides a wealth of factual information on new organizational processes, based on primary sources and ethnographic material. From the new dualism posited by Cartón de Grammont, one might anticipate that the groups of the wealthiest and most productive cultivators and agro-industrialists will be the most successful in exerting pressure on the state. They may even be creating a new form of more autonomous and effective corporatism for their interests. The middle and poor producers, in contrast, will find such relationship increasingly frustrating, and many will be forced out of agriculture altogether. But prior to this outcome, we are likely to witness intense growth of a subordinate but combative part of civil society, of the sort so often praised in the EZLN communiqués.

From these texts, it can be seen that progress toward democracy in Mexico is slow, constrained, and limited largely to a liberal type of democracy. But where participation is promoted or allowed (as in some development projects), the results may be more encouraging, at least at an economic level. It remains to be seen whether Mexicans will be content with achievements of this kind or will continue to push for a more significant form of political transition that may allow them to steer the development model in a more equitable direction.

Conclusions

Contemporary discussions of rural politics in Mexico clearly indicate that the country is undergoing a political transition. But what kind of transition? The answer depends on which region of Mexico one is referring to. If to the state of Chiapas, Neil Harvey would say that it is a transition to democracy involving a major structural change in economic relations, in which public and private interests must be decoupled. If one is referring to other regions or states, then it is a transition to liberal democracy that should guarantee electoral freedoms (including secret balloting and being able to vote without external pressures) and electoral fairness in access to mass media and campaign financing. As long as the PRI continues to rule the Mexican state, it is difficult to imagine that fairness will be achieved anytime soon, even with advances in the area of electoral freedoms.

With regard to class-structural processes, the data provided by

de Janvry et al. indicate that few peasants remain in the Mexican countryside, at least when defined economically. Given the array of economic activities that direct producers engage in, most rural direct producers are what Kearney calls "polybians." The question then becomes, on what basis might such polybians, engaged as they are in a multiplicity of economic relations and subject positions, form identities and become politically constituted? Kearney's answer is that ethnicity may be such a basis. But this response is unsatisfactory to the extent that ethnicity will scarcely serve as an anchoring place to form identities across rural Mexico.

I have argued elsewhere that the process of political class formation is mediated by the prevailing forms of regional cultures, state intervention, and the type of leadership, in addition to the causal link with the position of class agents in relations of production (Otero 1999). Moreover, the structural position of most of these social agents is that of an agricultural semiproletariat, rather than a proletariat or a peasantry. The semiproletariat is in the most unstable condition in relation to its material basis of reproduction, torn as it is between occasional wage labor and insufficient access to land for subsistence. This semiproletariat accounts for the largest part of the rural population in Mexico. I argue that class-structural determinants have been misconstrued and mistakenly specified in the Mexican debate of the 1970s. Also, even when correctly specified (as by Roger Bartra), class positions do not directly determine political class formation (Laclau 1977; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

My book entitled *Farewell to the Peasantry?* (1999) shows that in regions where peasant social relations have been reproduced, semiproletarians are mainly involved in peasant-type struggles. When depeasantization is recent (a generation or less), even proletarians have struggled mainly to regain a peasant condition. But when a peasant culture has been severely undermined by capitalist development and the commodification of social relations, semiproletarians may still engage in struggles for land. These struggles, however, bear a new postcapitalist character: the demand for land is accompanied by the demand for other means of production and democratic control of the production process. I call this a "postcapitalist demand" because it involves a "bottom-up" approach in decision making within the labor process, and the fruits of production are distributed socially among direct producers.

Independently of whether rural conflicts center on peasant, proletarian, or postcapitalist demands, such demands do not have a predefined character as bourgeois-hegemonic or oppositional or popular-democratic. Instead, the character of state intervention affects individuals' capacity to defend their interests and the character of their class organizations established for such purpose. When interventions favor direct producers (peasants, semiproletarians, or proletarians), but the initiative lies with the state,

their organizations are usually co-opted and integrated into bourgeois-hegemonic discourse and politics. When the state threatens the basis of reproduction of direct producers, their organizations assume an oppositional character. Furthermore, when state interventions favor direct producers in response to their pressure, strength, and mobilization, their class organizations may take on an oppositional and popular-democratic character.

Finally, a third critical variable is the type of leadership. Leadership affects what kinds of alliances are established once class organizations are already formed and whether such organizations retain their independence from the state or the ruling class. Three basic types of agrarian leadership are explored in my book: charismatic-authoritarian, corrupt-opportunistic, and democratic. Charismatic-authoritarian and corrupt-opportunistic leaders are clearly associated with bourgeois-hegemonic political outcomes in which organizations lose their autonomy. But with democratic leadership, class organizations have the greatest chances of constructing popular-democratic alliances with other organizations at the regional or national level and thereby retaining their autonomy (Otero 1999). With this kind of political class formation of subordinate groups and classes, the oppositional segment of civil society can be invigorated and can steer economic and political developments in a social-democratic direction.

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