Some actors in the independent peasant movement

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At the end of the 1970 the first attempts began for the coordination of a national peasant movement, and from this decade onwards the peasant struggles, previously isolated by regions or levels of strength, became of national character.

The fight for land and the formation of the big independent peasant centrals were generalized throughout the country. At that time the peasant movement was consolidated as a social phenomenon, constituted by the convergence of social and regional struggles (Martinez, 1991: 47; Rubio, 1996: 113).

This work considers the independent movement as the actor which, because of its political autonomy and its lack of privileged ties with the state, embodies claims and needs of the majority of the rural workers and the agricultural sector itself. Some peasant organisations from the autonomous movement are mentioned here, due to their current social and political relevance in the peasant and indigenous movement of rural Mexico.

CIOAC. The CIOAC (Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Peasants) was born as a product of the rupture of a previous organisation called the Independent Peasant Central (CCI), which was founded in 1963 with the participation of members of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). The CCI was joined from the beginning by most of the agrarian leaders that had tried to provide an alternative to the Mexican corporativist system in the countryside.

After some divisions promoted by the government within the CCI, the CIOAC was founded in 1975, headed by Danzos Palomino, who had led the CCI, been linked with the PCM and used land occupation as one of his main strategies. From 1976 the political presence of the CIOAC increased, and it adopted a project focused, not only on the fight for land, but mainly on the formation of peasants unions, for credit and the defence of the peasant as a worker (Flores, Pare, and Sarmiento, 1988: 42, 92-93). This position was derived from a political affinity with the Leninist ideology, which considered the proletarian as a class with revolutionary potential (Renard, n/d: 9).

The CIOAC, because of its early links with the PCM and later with the former PSUM (Mexican Socialist Unified Party), is an organisation that aims for a global agenda and socialist change. But this doesn’t mean that the CCI and the CIOAC were peasant arms of political parties; according to P. Mejia and S. Sarmiento, the CIOAC has always been a wide organisation that defends its independence from political parties (1987: 213).

The organisation resists the current model of rural development, stressing the incompatibility between the social sector and private property: the former working with scarce resources, the latter, holding an agenda based on profit. At the same time, the CIOAC proposes, also, the expropriation of large amounts of private land used for livestock production, in order to convert it to social property; as well as expropriation of food agro-industry and machinery (Flores, Pare and Sarmiento, 1988: 94-95).
UNORCA. In 1983, different peasant producer organisations, including alliances and cooperatives, mainly based in their *ejido* after an effort to become closer, began to organise meetings to seek to exchange experiences and reflection about their problems and peasantry in general. In 1985, the 7th meeting took place in Cuetzalan, Puebla, with the participation of 25 organisations of ejido producers linked to the external market, and formally founded the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasants Organisations (UNORCA) (Martinez, 1991: 49-53, Garcia, 1994: 63). The UNORCA ‘...united distinct groups around common demands and actions, without compromising each other’s group autonomy (Fox and Gordillo, 1989: 152). The Union was structured in an horizontal system of representation, with two members from each organisation and no national executive committee in order to avoid power concentration (Martinez, 1991: 49-53).

Some of the issues discussed in their meetings are related to problems of supply, commercialisation and the fixing of guaranteed prices at a regional level. A policy of agreements followed with different organisations like the CIOAC, and with governmental programs to meet the basic needs of food supply. Other parts of the agenda are the elaboration of regional development plans, the discussion of alternative law reforms, and the demand for autonomy and democratization either through dialogue as mentioned, or by radical mobilisation like blocking roads and taking over governmental offices. The main demands of UNORCA are: ‘better guaranteed prices, credit, state support for the peasant appropriation of the productive process, commercialisation, supply, infrastructure and diverse services’\[i\] (Martinez, 1991: 53-54, Garcia, 1994: 63). Another aspect on which the union has focused is a housing strategy which, in opposition to the welfare model, is aimed at jobs creation, particularly the strengthening of training at ‘...organizational, and managerial capacity, and to capitalize self managed construction and materials firms that could survive beyond the life of the project’ (Fox and Gordillo, 1989: 155).

UNORCA has become one of the most important representatives of the peasant movement in Mexico, as Martinez suggests:

'The organic and structural level that UNORCA has achieved make it one of the non-official peasant organisations of greater importance nowadays, evidencing that the organization of the peasant as producer has been one of the basic strategies of the peasant movement’\[ii\] (1991: 54-55)

As mentioned by Garcia, one of the most notable aspects of UNORCA is its experience in the field of productive projects, financing rural development, as well as national and international commercialisation, which is especially relevant in the political environment of the re-privatisation of the rural sector, and the as the state gives up supporting the social sector (Garcia, 1994: 64). Now UNORCA is Mexico’s representative of the international peasant and small farmers movement Via Campesina, reviewed below.

COCEI. With one of the highest percentage of indigenous population, Oaxaca is one of the most politicized states of Mexico in terms of ethnic and peasant struggles against state intervention. Formed in 1973, the ‘workers-peasant-student Coalition of the Isthmus’, COCEI also includes market women and local zapotec intellectuals. It emerged as a ‘large but-well run organization capable of mobilizing more than 10,000 people at a time’ to the extent of deposing the governor in 1977’ (Campbell, 1994: 170; Blauert and Guidi, 1992: 193). In 1981 COCEI won Juchitan municipal elections, becoming one of the first cities to ruled by a left-wing party since the Mexican Revolution. Two years later, the organisation was overthrown by the government and members faced imprisonment, but they returned to municipal ruling post in 1989, and repeated their victory in 1992. During this period Juchitan ‘...became well known
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as the center of one of Latin America’s most active indigenous cultural movements’ (Campbell, 1994: XVI). The coalition was supported mainly by ‘landless and poorest landed peasants’ who were usually engaged in struggles over communal land, a characteristic associated with being one of the highly politized peasant sector.

Some of the fronts where the coalition has been active are the fight for municipal democracy, the demand for land, the demand for free formation of labour unions, communal work, and the defence of their own culture through the implementation of education according to the characteristics of the ethnic group (mainly bilingual and bicultural) (Mejia and Sarmiento, 1987: 123). COCEI’s struggles over production concern agricultural credit, crops insurance etc, but mostly land disputes. They have organised a number of land invasions and mass mobilizations in order to regain communal territory. COCEI is also a member of the National Coordinator “Plan de Ayala” (CNPA), one of Mexico’s most influential independent peasant coalitions (Campbell, 1994: 191-192). The particular strength of COCEI’s agenda has been associated with agrarianism, as well as an ethnic cultural project where opposition to outsiders and the combating of ‘powerful class enemies within the ethnic community’ were the main features of their strategy (Campbell, 1994: 170-171).

Via Campesina. Via Campesina (the peasant way) is a significant case for this analysis, since it is the most ambitious attempt to create an international peasant network, as a lobbying organization with the support of European, Canadian, and Indian activists (Edelman, 2001: 305). It is particularly relevant here because it frames in general terms the concerns of a wide range of small organized farmers, which is most of the time linked with local, regional and national issues on agricultural topics in a global context. As defined by themselves, the Via Campesina is ‘...an international movement that coordinates peasant organisations of middle and small farmers, of agriculture workers, women and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America and Europe’, with UNORCA among them. They consider themselves as an autonomous movement of national and regional organizations, independent of economic, political and other denominations (Via Campesina, 2002), and are regarded by some scholars as ‘perhaps the largest and most significant agricultural social movement in the world’ (Desmarais, 2002: 103).

The idea started in 1992, from some peasant leaders from North and Central America, and Europe who were gathered in Managua, Nicaragua; but its official constitution was passed a year later in Mons Belgium, at the 1st International Conference of Via Campesina. In their second conference in Tlaxcala, Mexico they analysed a set of issues regarded as being of central concern for middle and central, producers such as: food sovereignty, agrarian reform, credit and external debt, technology, women’s participation, rural development, and others which were added later to the agenda like international trade, human rights, biodiversity, bio-security and genetic resources.

At the same time, Via Campesina has its roots in the rejection of neo-liberal agricultural policies and the exclusion to which the people that actually work the land have been subject, following the GATT negotiations on agriculture. The decreasing prices of local products and the flooding of local markets with low-quality, cheap food imports are attributed to forced liberalization of trade in agricultural products. Due to this, their efforts are focused on developing ‘...alternatives to neo-liberalism and to make their voices heard in future deliberations on agriculture and food’ (Desmarais, 2002: 96 , 100).

One aim of Via Campesina is the achieving of the principle of ‘food sovereignty’, which is understood as
the right to produce their own food in their own territory, as the core of their alternative project of agricultural development. In other words, it would make a shift in who defines and determines the purpose and terms of knowledge, research, technology, science, production and trade related to food (Desmarais, 2002: 100). In this respect, food sovereignty is distinguished from food security by Via Campesina, because ‘...it requires the accompaniment of the Via Campesina’s broadly conceived agrarian reform’, which is not limited to redistribution of land, but demands for a further reform of agricultural systems to enhance small-farm production and commercialisation. Although the coalition is not opposed to agricultural trade, they state clearly that the main principle and purpose of agricultural production is to ensure food sovereignty, in contrast with the free-trade-oriented WTO Agreement on Agriculture policies (Desmarais, 2002: 105,109). As one author stresses:

What the Via Campesina is talking about...is the need to build peasant cultures and economies based on principles ‘which have not yet completely disappeared’ such as moral imperatives and obligations, fairness, social justice and social responsibility. This, according to the Via Campesina, is what building rural community and culture is all about (Desmarais, 2002: 100).

Via Campesina highlights the role of ethics and values as concrete mechanisms for an alternative model (Desmarais, 2002: 100). It does this in a different fashion from how the peasants design their strategies and targets: challenging borders and the affinity for national and community-based political projects at a moment when, as an UNORCA member asserted after Mexico’s neo-liberal reforms, ‘the enemy is lost from sight’ (Magaña, 1993). Via Campesina detects the enemy in a transnational dimension, and acts accordingly.

The participation of the EZLN (or Zapatista Army of National Liberation) has not been omitted from this review of the key peasant movements in Mexico. As Rubio points out, the EZLN does not constitute, strictly speaking, a peasant movement. It is a revolutionary movement with a peasant and indigenous base, which gives it a national dimension. Under the broad EZLN claims the longstanding demands of the previous and present peasant movements. As an example, it is found among its key demands for the rural sector are found:

- The revision of the Free Trade Agreement.

- The cancellation of the constitutional article 27 reform, concerning the allowance of selling ejido land.

- Fair prices for rural products (Rubio, 1996: 147, 153).

The Zapatista movement is a complex configuration that goes beyond the countryside, towards a direct opposition to the exclusion politics of neo-liberalism and which is broadening its scope according to its increasing links with resistance movements from other countries and oppressed groups. A deeper approach is needed for the analysis of the presence of peasant politics within the Zapatista project.

The peasants’ struggles have been closely linked with the situation of production, and have especially fought against the inequalities underlying the relations of production, within a process that includes production, marketing, and consumption, and the constraints coming from the policies, and exclusionary attitudes of the political system.
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