

Some basic factors introducing the peasantry in Mexico

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This section does not try to make a summary, but stresses three key moments that contributed to shape the character and development of the peasantry as a social, economical and political actor in the 20th century.

To understand the dynamic of agricultural producers, it is convenient, first, to be situated in the context of the world political economy whose capital expansion processes outcomes of the achievement of food self-sufficiency in countries from the North, and the loss of this in the South.

The role of the so-called underdeveloped countries has been one of exporting raw materials and agricultural products to the industrialised countries. In Mexico, after a shift in which the demand for base products decreased sharply as well as the prices, a economic disarticulation process began, where the country changed from an exporter of basic agricultural products to an importer of them, and where a process of recurrent economic crisis began from about 1976 (Martinez, 1991: 21-22).

In this macroeconomic context, the development of agricultural production has had to face the political conditions of the Mexican nation state, in a configuration that, in addition to the agency of producers, has shaped the character of peasantry in Mexico. Three critical stages in this history help us to understand the current social dynamic of production and the political outcomes derived from it. They are reviewed briefly as follows:

1. *Corporativism*. A process of agricultural modernization started from the 1930s, with its peak in the 1960s. One of the pillars of the Mexican political system is the institutional organization of the majority groups, such as the popular-urban sector, labour, and, the peasants, in an interrelation with the state which, tried to carry out peasant mobilization to further its own interests (Martinez, 1991: 28-29).

2. *Cardenism*. The presidential administration of the Gral. Lazaro Cardenas from 1934-1940 was a crucial period about 20 years after the Mexican revolution, when a massive distribution of land was carried out for the first time through the common land tenure system of the '*ejido*', along with strong support for agriculture, peasants, and agricultural businessmen. In this period the nation-state was finally consolidated under a project of broad popular participation, when the process of corporatization took shape as a way of widening the government's social base (Martinez, 1991:23). Martinez comments:

The peasant movement accepts the establishment of an alliance with the state, which assumes its aims as its own, namely: to distribute the land and constitute the ejido and the community as economic and socio-politic forms of organization *par excellence* in the countryside. Nonetheless, with changes in the economic and politic project set later at state level, this relationship, more than an alliance between autonomous forces with certain convergences of interests, is converted into a control system over the peasant movement (Martinez, 1991: 29)ⁱⁱ

Corporate control, institutionalised since the cardenista period, was represented by an organisation created in 1935, the CNC (National Peasant Confederation), which was a key factor in the reduction of the possibilities of social conflict (Flores, Pare and Sarmiento, 1988: 32). Although the neo-liberal model, undermined the corporate system, it was replaced, as Otero argues (from Bartra, 1993), by a neo-corporative structure supported by governmental programs such as the former PRONASOL and PROCAMPO.

3. *The Neo-liberal reform in Mexico.* As usually is underlined in studies of peasant movements, the traditional claim around which turn all the political projects of agricultural producers is the demand for land. In this respect, the figure of the ejido has been a fundamental part of the peasant struggles in the 20th century. First Zapata's demand for Land and Liberty, was one of the axes of the Mexican Revolution; secondly, its materialization in the Lazaro Cardenas rule, brought a long period of political control, much of it through the manipulation of land, subsidies and patron-client relations; and finally, its dismantling was achieved through neo-liberal reform, by president Carlos Salinas de Gortari from 1988 to 1994, and was continued by his successor, Ernesto Zedillo from 1994 to 2000. This was one of the main reasons of the 1994 zapatista uprising in Chiapas.

President Salinas agrarian reform in 1992 focused on three main aspects: 1. The right to sell or rent the ejido; 2. the end of land distribution by the state; 3. and 'while the limits for individual landholding were kept to 100 hectares [...] 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' (Otero, 1999: 193). This policy was accompanied by other similar ones for other sectors, including the deregulation of the agriculture economy, the privatisation of state enterprises, the elimination of most subsidies, the restriction of agricultural credit and insurance, and trade liberalisation through the NAFTA.

Such a model represented and still represents, tremendous challenges for the ejido and the people who work in it; on the one hand it is released from state tutelage, on the other it is 'deprived of all state support' (Otero, 1999: 193), at the same time deepening the structural problems of the countryside and undermining the possibilities of overcoming them; in addition, with the weakening of corporativism, the 1992 reform may be fostering opportunities for bottom-up models of community participation and rural producers' autonomy.

[\[i\]](#) My translation