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Between State and Market: The Campesinos' Quest for Autonomy

Jonathan Fox and Gustavo Gordillo

Should the state or the market dominate resource allocation? This dichotomy has long framed debates about Mexico's development.

What role can democratic social movements play? Since 1968, diverse social actors have increased their capacity to articulate their interests with relative autonomy, challenging the state's traditional control over the "rules of the game" for social, political, and economic decision-making. This study shows how Mexican peasants have attempted to democratize the rural development process, shifting their terms of trade with both the state and the market by creating more representative and autonomous economic initiatives.

Conventional interpretations frame Mexican social movements in two mutually exclusive categories: "official," or government controlled, and "independent," usually understood as in open opposition to the government. Changes in the peasant movement in the 1980s render this dichotomous approach obsolete. The state's familiar forces of repression and cooptation continue to divide and conquer social movements, but perhaps it is more useful to analyze Mexican social organizations within a framework that focuses on *degrees* of autonomy as the crucial variable.¹ Autonomy is inherently a relative concept. It is defined here as group capacity to make decisions about means and ends internally

This essay was completed in March 1988, before the rise of *neocardensimo*.

¹Roxborough's study of Mexican auto unions pioneered a parallel approach (1984).

(i.e., without external intervention).² In this view, overt organizational independence represents one extreme along a continuum, a political choice made by grassroots groups which are highly autonomous vis-à-vis the state, although not necessarily autonomous in relation to opposition political parties.

What characterizes the Mexican peasant movement in the mid-1980s, and what prospects does it have for participating in the development process? Many observers conclude that there are essentially no positive prospects on the horizon for the Mexican peasant movement for two reasons. National development decisions continue to give priority to restoring private investor confidence, so there is little political space for extending large-scale land redistribution, even though the landless population today is greater than at the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910. The principal opposition parties are mostly urban based, and most independent peasant organizations are weak and divided, although there are some regional exceptions.

Since the early 1970s, however, waves of grassroots peasant mobilization, combined with efforts by reformists within the state, have created complex and often contradictory layers of legislation, public institutions, grassroots organizations, mobilization capacities, and finely honed bargaining relationships. Is this inherited context flexible enough to accommodate both increasingly autonomous social forces and an economic policy constrained by austerity and the veto power of large private capital?

This investigation suggests that Mexico's history of reform initiatives from above, combined with mobilization from below, has created some political space for consolidating a "democratic social sector" of self-managed rural enterprises.³ Many of these enterprises process and market crops, but others are community-based productive and service enterprises which benefit landless and sub-subsistence peasants as well as producers of surplus. Given the constraints imposed by the crisis, we suggest that the future prospects for representative and autonomous peasant political forces in Mexico depend largely on

²The boundaries between internal and external are often blurred in practice. Unfortunately social science has yet to develop finely tuned conceptual tools with which to analyze the dynamics of changing degrees of social organization autonomy.

³"Democratic" is another inherently relative concept, particularly since we define it in terms of a synthesis of representative and accountable leadership with active rank and file participation in decision-making. For further elaboration of these two "axes" of organizational democracy, see Fox 1987. For reasons of space, this article concentrates on the groups as the key unit of analysis. An ongoing research project focuses specifically on the dynamics of grassroots participation that unfold *within* autonomous economic organizations in rural Mexico.

consolidating an autonomous base for articulating and defending peasant interests vis-à-vis both the state and the market.⁴

This analysis of the last two decades of state-peasant movement interaction discusses regional power structures, rising peasant mobilization in the early 1970s, and the changing terrain of conflict in the 1980s.

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE RURAL SOCIAL SECTOR

The political system which shapes Mexico's development decisions has traditionally been dominated by a bargaining process in which the state delivered selective material concessions to organized interest groups in exchange for at least nominal political subordination. Since the state's post-1982 loss of budgetary room for maneuver, however, it is more difficult to divide and conquer social forces with material concessions.⁵ As the continuing economic crisis strains traditional corporatist bargaining arrangements, the state increasingly confronts the choice of either permitting more pluralistic participation in decision-making for at least some mobilized groups, including new social actors, or increased coercion of its former allies—organized labor, agrarian reform beneficiaries, and national industrialists. After years of austerity, power is all the state has left to give—the right to democratic and autonomous participation—but how, and to whom?⁶

⁴While peasants' immediate material interests clearly vary depending on access to land and capital, we suggest that the rural majority shares a common interest in democratizing governmental policy-making and resource allocation toward the countryside. For the definitive empirical class analysis of the Mexican peasantry, see CEPAL 1982. See also Paré 1977.

⁵The current economic crisis had its roots in the failure of Mexico's 1978–82 oil-debt boom, which combined contradictory elements of nationalist reform and massive subsidy of public- and private-sector waste. Most of the government's partial attempts to promote industrialization and grain self-sufficiency have since been rolled back. The 1982 crisis is widely identified with the "last gasp" of Mexico's traditional nationalist-statist structural reform project, including most notably the nationalization of the private banking system. International pressures strengthened those government policy currents predisposed to organize a gradual but steady retreat from state regulation of private capital. The incoming de la Madrid administration's financial crisis managers opened up significant areas of economic activity to the private sector. The important changes in food and agricultural policy include the withdrawal of most grain-oriented production incentives and consumer food subsidies. Yet most forms of state intervention in agriculture have been modified rather than eliminated, more a result of pressures for austerity than for privatization per se (i.e., crop support prices, input provision, crop procurement, etc.).

⁶This dilemma underlies the contemporary Mexican debate over the content behind the 1988 presidential campaign slogan, "political modernization."

Most discussion of the crisis has focused on government-business relations, but what has the crisis meant for economic actors who do not fit the conventional categories of state or market? The Mexican Constitution of 1917 considers property relations to be socially defined; land, water, and the subsoil are national resources. A 1983 constitutional amendment organized property into three ostensibly equal categories: state, private, and social.⁷ The social sector is composed of enterprises owned and managed by trade unions, cooperatives, and peasant organizations, but because of systematic state intervention in the internal affairs of official social organizations, many enterprises which appear to fall in the social sector are largely state run. This discussion therefore uses the term "democratic social sector" to refer to those enterprises which are relatively self-managed.

What are the contours of the social sector in the countryside? The Mexican Revolution led to one of the most extensive land reforms in the nonsocialist developing world. In an uneven pattern loosely related to cycles of peasant protest, the state has allocated approximately 55 percent of Mexico's scarce arable land to government-regulated ejidos and *comunidades agrarias*.⁸ Ejidos are the pillars of the rural social sector. Their current economic and political weakness constitutes their most serious challenge since armed landlord resistance in the 1930s. Some ejidos have been virtually abandoned through emigration. Most merely survive, often shaped by seasonal migration. A significant minority are modeling their own rural development initiatives.

What does the crisis of Mexico's traditional mixed economy, and the concomitant push toward privatization, mean for the prospects of the rural social sector? How can the social sector become more self-managed rather than vertically state-managed (as most of it is in practice)?⁹ This study suggests that a democratically organized social sector is already finding a niche, transcending the traditional dichotomy of state versus private market-led development. The question that follows is: under what circumstances could this sector become nationally important?

⁷By making state and private property constitutionally equal, this amendment was part of the administration's largely unsuccessful effort to woo flight capital and restore investor confidence after nationalizing the private banking system. The official legitimacy ceded to the social sector made the amendment politically acceptable to alienated factions within the ruling coalition (i.e., progovernment labor leaders).

⁸For analyses of the Mexican agrarian reform, see, among others, Esteva 1980, 1983; Falcón 1977; González Navarro 1985; Gordillo 1979, 1980; Salamini 1978; Sanderson 1981; Schryer 1980; Warman 1980a, 1980b.

⁹Some nominally social-sector enterprises actively exploit peasants, as in the recent case of cotton marketing in the north-central Laguna region (*Proceso*, 22 February 1988).

If the economic crisis encouraged self-managed development efforts by legitimating their "de-statizing" thrust in theory, it also limited the resources for putting them into practice. Earlier efforts to develop social-sector enterprises depended largely on positive-sum resources; During the oil-debt boom, previously excluded peasant-managed enterprises began receiving government support largely because they did not compete directly with powerful, entrenched interest groups. Since 1982, however, government resource allocation has become much more of a zero-sum process. The crisis therefore increased the political space within which peasant-managed enterprises operate, while reducing the pool of economic resources for which they bargain and compete.

How can the democratic social sector realistically challenge the dominant state- and market-led approaches to rural development? In some ways it cannot. Popular participation alone cannot generate agricultural development. To increase output of priority crops, whether for domestic consumption or foreign exchange generation, producer and input prices must create effective incentives for production and investment.¹⁰

RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL POWER STRUCTURES

The prospects for the interplay among the state, the market, and the democratic social sector remain an open issue, but one can begin to analyze them by defining rural *underdevelopment* in Mexico. Rural underdevelopment is the process by which a small minority dominates the key decisions which shape the lives of the rural majority via concentrations of social, political, and economic power. Minority control over the production and allocation of the economic surplus reinforces the underdevelopment of the rural majority. It leads to lack of accountability in allocating rural surplus. The surplus is often diverted to real estate, commerce, consumption, or capital-intensive luxury/export production, instead of rain-fed grain production, labor-intensive job creation, or broad-based rural capital accumulation. If one accepts this characterization of rural underdevelopment, then development can be defined as a process of increasing the rural majority's influence over how the surplus it produces is generated and allocated.

¹⁰Only if both state and market pull in the same direction will resource allocation effectively encourage priority crops, using production factors in proportions which reflect their real scarcities. Yet agricultural growth does not necessarily lead to rural development, a concept which inherently embodies criteria of distribution, equity, and power.

This definition of the rural development problem leads to a heterogeneous picture of the Mexican countryside. Effective freedom of assembly and capacity to mobilize vary widely. In some areas, regional elites still hold unchallenged sway, refusing to bargain and responding to democratic peasant mobilization primarily with repression (i.e., Chiapas, Veracruz). Peasants in other regions have managed to consolidate countervailing power, winning significant concessions from elites (i.e., Chihuahua, Sonora). Most of rural Mexico falls somewhere in between, and the resulting panorama obliges one to approach the prospects for rural development from a regional point of view. While rural development policy is formulated nationally, actual resource allocation is largely shaped by implementing agencies at the regional level. The history of Mexico's past rural development efforts is one of program after program foundering on the rocks of entrenched regional elites. The rural balance of power is fundamentally a regional balance of power; the region often constitutes the crucial arena of politico-economic conflict.

How are regional elites structured? The system known as *caciquismo* concentrates economic and political power in the hands of small regional groups. *Caciquismo*, or "bossism," is not simply an archaic holdover from precapitalist forms of production. While traditional regional elites are no longer influential in most national policy decisions, they have proven remarkably capable of changing with the times. Regional power structures now fuse powerful interests entrenched in the state's administrative and electoral apparatus with regionally dominant private-sector interests.¹¹

The source of cacique power is control over the terms of trade between the region and the national state and market. It often shapes a region's integration into the national economy. Rural elites traditionally based their power on direct land ownership, but since the agrarian reform many moved into commerce, often dominating both regional input and product markets. They are, moreover, rarely strictly "private" economic actors, frequently influencing the local implementation of national development programs including road building, credit allocation, and irrigation construction.

Second, *caciquismo* often shapes a region's integration into the national political system as well. In return for economic influence, regional elites offer short-run political stability to national state managers, a political exchange based on the elite's capacity to isolate the population from national political alternatives, and the cooptation or repression of autonomous local political or economic initiatives.

¹¹For further discussions of *caciquismo*, see R. Bartra et al. 1975; Cornelius 1973a, 1977; Gordillo 1987; Roniger 1987; Salmerón Castro 1984; and Ugalde 1973.

Caciquismo has eroded in areas where competition has emerged—either from grassroots movements, new economic actors, rivals within the political apparatus, or some combination of these. Such competition is easier to block in remote rural areas, but *caciquismo* continues in some urban communities and trade unions as well. Traditional elites are often replaced by new concentrations of power, modernizing rather than eliminating *caciquismo*. Only the consolidation of democratic regionwide political and economic counterweights is likely to sustain a shift in the balance of power in favor of the rural majority.

THE HISTORY OF STATE-PEASANT MOVEMENT BARGAINING, 1934–1972

A quarter century after revolutionary warfare first broke out, populist president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) eliminated rural conflict by incorporating the rural sector within the institutional framework. This guaranteed relative rural social peace for more than three decades. The original revolutionary peasant armies were militarily defeated, but their programmatic ideas were incorporated into the new regime's constitutional framework. Revolutionary peasant leadership was integrated into the political system, and alternate sources of rural power, large landowners and clergy, were politically broken—though not eliminated.¹²

Agrarian policy in the 1920s decapitated the leadership of mass peasant movements through cooptation or repression, but the Cárdenas administration sought to absorb the peasants' "natural leadership" by institutionalizing their programs as government policy. Radical land redistribution became an incentive for mass mobilization, through which the state broadened its social base. The ejido, until then seen only as an instrument to contain peasant demands, took on a new, contradictory dynamic which continues today. The ejido is simultaneously a state apparatus of political control and an organ of peasant representation. Much of government-peasant movement interaction since then can be seen as a struggle over which aspect of ejido politics will dominate.¹³

¹²For analyses of the Cárdenas reform period, see Córdova 1974; Cornelius 1973b; and North and Raby 1977.

¹³The ejido is a community institution whose leadership is ostensibly chosen through democratic elections. Paternalistic government intervention in this process is institutionalized, however, with the state playing a "tutelary" role toward the *ejidatarios*. Ejido leadership, with state support, often became new caciques. Until agrarian legislation was modified in 1983, losing candidates for leadership formed "oversight councils" (*consejos de vigilancia*) in an effort to keep elected leadership accountable and maintain representation of minority positions.

The Cárdenas administration called upon the ejido to play an economic, as well as a political, role, supplying food and raw materials while broadening the internal market based on the consumer demand generated by peasants with access to land. To guarantee the ejido's simultaneous functioning as an organ of political control, a pyramidal mass organization was created along corporatist lines to represent the peasant "sector" in the ruling party. The National Peasant Federation (CNC) was founded in 1938, and all agrarian reform beneficiaries were automatically considered members.

Although the CNC was founded by presidential decree, its formation was not an exclusively top-down process. Several years of government-supported land reform mobilizations preceded the establishment of the CNC. Many of them coalesced into regional and state level agrarian leagues. The state allied with the peasantry, arming mass rural militias to fend off landlord attacks. While Cárdenas set the terms of the alliance, the formation of the CNC represented the convergence of mobilization from below and state efforts to consolidate its hegemony in the countryside.

The growing participation of the state in the countryside went beyond the formation of a corporatist mass organization. The official agrarian agencies were also vested with a broad range of powers to "guide" the development of ejidos and, above all, to regulate access to land. The formation of collective ejidos in highly developed irrigated zones was linked to the creation of government rural development agencies, most importantly the official agricultural bank. In theory, these agencies were to support ejidos in becoming self-reliant. Instead, their bureaucratic dynamics and political priorities led them to emphasize government control over agricultural production and marketing.¹⁴ Government rural institutions evolved a division of labor; the CNC managed the channelling of peasant demands, while the rural development agencies handled their regulation and response.

PEASANT MOBILIZATION PUTS RURAL DEVELOPMENT BACK ON THE AGENDA, 1972-1976

The *cardenista* state built up huge political capital in the countryside; an estimated one-third of the rural population received land during the 1930s. The combination of institution-building, redistributive measures, political buffers, and legal controls known as "the state-peasant movement alliance" worked relatively smoothly for three decades. Then a crisis of the peasant economy and increased willing-

¹⁴See, for example, Aguilar and Araujo 1984; Gordillo 1979; Hewitt de Alcántara 1976; and Rello 1987.

ness to engage in collective action to undermine the corporatist framework launched a new cycle of more autonomous mobilizations in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁵

The 1972-76 wave of peasant mobilization derived from a convergence of economic and political factors. First, the agricultural growth model followed since the 1940s, with its subordination to industry and its emphasis on irrigated export production, had begun to weaken by the mid-1960s. Producer prices and agricultural investment both fell, weakening food production and decapitalizing the peasant economy.¹⁶

Second, the decades of conservative land redistribution policy began to undermine mass political legitimacy in the countryside. President Díaz Ordaz's agrarian policy (1964-1970) combined record levels of distribution of *nonarable* land with a political discourse that heralded the end of land reform. This undermined one of the principal pillars of social stability among the landless: the hope of someday having one's own plot of land, and therefore access to a steady income. The CNC was particularly weakened as the traditional "proper channels" closed.¹⁷

Pressure on the land mounted, meanwhile, on three distinct fronts. First, population increases on ejidos meant that the children of land reform beneficiaries lacked sufficient land for subsistence. Second, waged workers in export-oriented agribusinesses began to demand implementation of the agrarian reform laws, whose land ownership ceilings were widely flaunted. Third, indigenous communities increasingly protested their violent displacement by large ranchers, who turned fertile cropland into extensive pasture, primarily to feed Mexico City's growing demand for beef.¹⁸

¹⁵While waves of peasant mobilization punctuated the intervening decades, they were limited to certain regions and did not affect the national development agenda. The most important movements were led by the General Union of Workers and Peasants of Mexico (UGOCM), founded in 1948; by Rubén Jaramillo, assassinated in 1962; and by the Independent Peasant Central (CCI), founded in 1964. Both the UGOCM and the CCI split into pro- and antigovernment wings. On this period, see Hardy 1984.

¹⁶For a variety of perspectives on the origins of Mexico's food crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, see, Appendini and Salles 1980; Barkin and Suárez 1985; Boltvink and Pessah 1981; Cartas Contreras 1988; CEPAL 1981, 1982; DeWalt 1985; Esteva 1980, 1983; Fox 1986; González Rodríguez 1977; Grindle 1981; Hall and Price 1982; Hewitt de Alcántara 1976; Luiselli and Mariscal 1981; Montañez and Aburto 1979; Mújica Vélez 1980; Rama 1985; Redclift 1981b; Reig 1985; Reynolds 1978; Sanderson 1986; Spalding 1984; Wionczek 1982; and Yates 1981.

¹⁷Some regional and local CNC leaders nevertheless continued to attempt to represent their membership to some degree, while others retained support through paternalistic services and brokering with government agencies. See Hardy 1984.

¹⁸The displacement of indigenous peasants by ranchers was particularly violent in Chiapas (L. Fernández and Tarrío García 1983) and the Huastecas (Avila and Cervantes 1986). On the livestock sector more generally, see Reig 1985, and Sanderson 1986.

When land invasions broke out in a handful of highland states in 1972, they were partially tolerated by the Echeverría administration (1970–76). The repression of the 1968 student movement had led to a new rhetoric of populist reform and political “opening” which increased the likelihood that the government would make at least some concessions for the sake of renewing popular legitimacy. The land invasions were generally seen by rank and file participants as an extension of a decades-long process of working within the system, but one which needed speeding up by more militant action. From 1972 to 1976, most of Mexico’s thirty-two states felt the pressure of land hunger. The state of Guerrero was the center of two peasant-based regional armed uprisings beginning in the late 1960s.¹⁹ Pressure from below forced the radicalization of the official peasant organizations in some areas, and in other regions new independent movements bypassed progovernment federations.²⁰

The central axis of the movement was the demand for land; but because the primary issue was implementation of agrarian law, the movement was shaped by the local specificity of most of the conflicts. Nonland demands covered everything from municipal democratization to fair producer and input prices, trends which would grow in the future. Because of this decentralization, the mobilization was less “national” than the simultaneous convergence of many regional movements. The result was a national political presence without a single national expression, with a multiplicity of urban political currents competing for peasant movement leadership.

Pressure from below was both cause and effect of a dramatic change in agrarian policy in the early 1970s. Landlord evasion of agrarian law was officially recognized as a serious problem for the first time, and nonviolent grassroots movements found allies in a wide range of government agencies. Government reformists tried to limit official repression, even encouraging land invasions in some cases. Negotiation, involving substantive concessions, became central to the government’s attempt to keep the mass movement within bounds considered acceptable. Mainstream agrarian politicians gained suffi-

¹⁹See, for example, Mayo 1980.

²⁰Competing pressure from above and below provoked tension between regional and national CNC authorities. See Hardy 1984 for the most careful analysis of the internal politics of the CNC during the 1970s. For further studies of Echeverría-period agrarian conflicts, see, among others, Astorga Lira and Hardy 1978; Avila and Cervantes 1986; A. Bartra 1980, 1985; Canabal 1984; Castell Cancino and Rello 1981; Durán et al. 1986; Gomezjara 1979; Gordillo 1980, 1988; Levy 1977; Menéndez 1983; Montes de Oca 1977; Ramos García et al. 1984; Rubio 1987; Székely 1977; and Warman 1980a.

cient influence within the government to aspire to the nation’s highest offices.

The Echeverría administration internalized much of the leftist critique of past agrarian and agricultural policy and responded with a wide range of rural development programs. But commercial agriculture had matured under the state’s protection, and by the 1970s large producers were well organized. Intense rural social conflict increased pressure for concessions from the government. Reformists within the state found large agribusiness interests difficult to defy. It was far easier to isolate and confront intermediaries and caciques. Hence the official definition of inefficient and inequitable rural markets as a key obstacle limiting rural progress. Since subsidies and market regulation delivered substantive benefits at less political cost than land redistribution, market intervention and employment creation through public works became rural development priorities.²¹

Yet some regional farmworker movements succeeded in putting land redistribution squarely on the national agenda. Echeverría was eventually forced to cede large tracts of illegally concentrated land to thousands of landless peasants in the heart of some of Mexico’s most fertile irrigated districts.²² The many ways in which the state increasingly intervened in the countryside shared one common characteristic: government agencies, with their own institutional interests, increasingly displaced the CNC, the traditional “demand manager,” from decision-making in the mediation of the state-peasant relationship.

²¹The government pursued several major efforts to reform rural income distribution. The official food trading agency, CONASUPO, began to carry out a wide range of innovative rural development programs, mostly associated with makers attempted to organize peasant communities to offset cacique power, with mixed results. Another government agency, PIDER, carried out short-term employment creation projects under the banner of “integrated rural development.” For an official World Bank evaluation, see Cernea 1983. The National Agricultural University also organized Plan Puebla, a smallholder production program which eventually supported several regional producer groups. For a variety of views on the Plan Puebla, see Díaz Cisneros and Feltehausen 1985; Feltehausen and Díaz Cisneros 1985; Niño 1985; and Redclift 1983. These reform efforts did not produce rapid or systematic changes in the rural balance of power, but where reformists controlled actual resource allocation, some were able to channel resources to incipient grassroots movements.

²²Official figures do not reflect the important distinction that an unusually large share of the thirteen million hectares (has.) distributed by the Echeverría administration was of relatively high quality. Redistribution included 42,000 has. in the Yaqui and Mayo valleys of Sonora, more than 20,000 has. in Sinaloa, over 100,000 has. in Chihuahua and Durango, over 20,000 has. in Zacatecas, and significant but smaller extensions in Tlaxcala, Puebla, and Guerrero. On the Sinaloa case, see Hardy 1984. For accounts of the dramatic Sonora experience, see Benjamin and Buell 1985; Gordillo 1988; Rello 1986a; and Sanderson 1981.

Aside from redistributing some rural income and property, the Echeverría administration also carried out legal and institutional changes which would reshape the rural panorama through the 1980s. The 1971 reform of the Agrarian Code presented a new "integral" vision of the ejido as an economic, as well as a political, institution, making peasant-managed rural development an official priority for the first time since the Cárdenas era. Toward the end of the Echeverría administration, agrarian policy focused on attempting to collectivize thousands of existing parcelled ejidos, and consolidating the ejido sector politically and economically under government tutelage. Because it was promoted largely by fiat, the effort failed almost universally.²³

In the context of this emphasis on "organization" as the "post-redistribution" phase of the reform, the Agricultural Credit Law, amended in 1975, encouraged small producers to form regional associations for the first time since the 1930s. The Agrarian Reform Ministry (just promoted to cabinet status) then promoted what were called "second- and third-level organizations." Second level was defined as bringing together two or more local producer groups, such as ejidos, indigenous agrarian communities, or private production societies and cooperatives; Unions and Ejidos (UEs) were the most common. Third-level organizations brought together two or more second-level groups and were known as Rural Collective Interest Associations (ARICs). These new legal forms attempted to bring community-based producer groups together around some common economic interest (i.e., credit and input provision, processing, marketing).

Almost three thousand ejidos were organized into 181 UEs during the Echeverría administration.²⁴ Many of these received official registration, required for collaborative economic activity, at the insistence of one government agency or another. The official agricultural bank was particularly active, since entrepreneurial administrators could "unload" large loans easily if they concentrated many producers together into large, usually agroindustrial projects. The size and technical sophistication of these projects facilitated bureaucratic control, creating many opportunities for political and economic aggrandizement by rural development officials. Because of this top-down approach, many UEs formed during this period soon existed only on paper. In the longer run, however, the outcome was different. The legal framework created for multicommunity, peasant-managed enterprises, as well as the "developmentalist" legitimacy conferred on these "higher" forms of

²³On ejido collectivization, see César Dachary 1987; Székely 1977; and Warman 1980b.

²⁴For detailed official data, see Secretaría de Reforma Agraria, "Directorio de Uniones de Ejidos," 1985.

organization, left an institutional resource which could be taken advantage of by grassroots producers' movements in the future.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM OIL-DEBT BOOM TO CRISIS, 1976-1986

Echeverría's dramatic last-minute redistribution of illegally concentrated agribusiness holdings in the state of Sonora spurred a powerful private-sector countermobilization, contributing to a major political and economic crisis surrounding the presidential transition. Like most of Echeverría's populist measures, this major concession to a militant regional peasant movement was too little, too late to build a political alternative that could pursue land redistribution beyond the presidential transition.

Incoming president López Portillo (1976-82) inherited Mexico's most serious economic crisis since 1940. Social reform efforts were ruled out, tarred with the brush of Echeverría's populist efforts to pursue economic solutions to political problems.²⁵ The 1976 presidential transition had a decisive impact on the peasant movement. Echeverría's policy of occasionally responding with substantive concessions had greatly increased the incentive to run the risks inherent in rural collective action. López Portillo's agrarian policy began by generously compensating expropriated landowners, while official rhetoric stressed the importance of bettering rural incomes instead of redistributing property. This shift meant that peasant mobilizations previously considered legitimate would no longer be tolerated, and many of the newly formed independent groups found that their tactics met with repression rather than negotiation. Mobilization also declined largely because the Echeverría government made substantive concessions to some of the most powerful movements.²⁶

As further land redistribution became politically unviable, many observers concluded that rural reform in general was impossible and predicted that López Portillo's early proposal for the probusiness Agricultural Development Law (LFA) meant reversing the agrarian reform process. In 1980, however, the administration's emphasis began

²⁵In part because Echeverría failed to open up the political system significantly, López Portillo was elected unopposed, and waves of capital flight weakened the government vis-à-vis the private sector. The ruling coalition's right wing dominated economic and social policy, although reformers retained sufficient influence to pursue a partial opening of the electoral system. On the 1977-79 political reform, see, among others, Gómez Tagle 1982, 1984; Middlebrook 1981, 1986; and Rodríguez Araujo 1981. On the post-1976 shift in ideological terrain, see Gordillo and Rello 1980.

²⁶See note 22. For documentation of the post-1976 fall in mobilization, see Alcántara 1981; Aguado López et al. 1983; and Camahji 1979.

to change. The oil-debt boom's resource inflow gave the government enough maneuverability to shift its focus from renewing the conditions for capital accumulation to renewing the mass legitimacy of the political system.

After three years of relative neglect and a particularly disastrous 1979 crop shortfall, López Portillo decided to increase the resources channeled to agriculture. After beginning the COPLAMAR program of rural clinics and subsidized food distribution outlets, the president adopted the Mexican Food System (SAM) strategy for recovering Mexico's self-sufficiency in basic grains.²⁷ Agricultural policy was to shift its emphasis from livestock and irrigated production of export and luxury crops to rain-fed basic grains predominantly produced by peasants.²⁸

For the 3–5 million landless farmworkers, the 1980 focal shift meant at most a brief increase in employment and access to rural social services through COPLAMAR clinics and food outlets. For most grain producers who already had sufficient access to land to harvest a marketable surplus, more support became available in the context of a "modernized" emphasis on productivity.²⁹

The SAM production strategy emerged from a national political stalemate over property relations, relying primarily on increased crop prices and input subsidies. Large private ranching and commercial interests, with their conservative allies in the national agricultural agencies and state governments, were sufficiently powerful to block significant extension of land reform, but they were too weak to reverse it. They were unable to create a "free" market for land in the reform sector and permanently remove the threat of expropriation.³⁰

At the same time, grassroots peasant movements and their urban allies inside and outside government were too weak to force a major

²⁷For an elaboration of this analysis of the origins of the SAM, see Fox 1986, chap. 3.

²⁸The SAM strategy generated a wide-ranging debate about the limits and possibilities of agricultural reforms. See, for example, the special issue of *Nueva Antropología* 17 (May 1981). For analyses of the SAM strategy as implemented, see Austin and Esteva 1987, and Fox 1986.

²⁹Land redistribution did increase sharply during 1980–82 but remained at low levels compared to 1972–76, according to official agrarian reform data. Much of the land officially titled after 1976 had long been contested, where the government simply formalized long-standing de facto occupations which had caused intense regionwide land conflicts, i.e., the Huastecas and Chiapas.

³⁰The Agricultural Development Law, eventually passed in 1981, legitimated the widespread practice of rental of ejido land for the first time. The law was a political victory for the advocates of a top-down, capital-intensive approach, but it remained largely symbolic, as pro-SAM reformists managed to block most of its implementation in practice (Fox 1986).

revitalization of the agrarian reform. The potential threat of their response to a reversal of the reform nevertheless gave them a certain veto power which paralleled that of the right. In response to this stalemate, the SAM decision was fundamentally a "reform from above," a result of creative maneuvering by "post-populist" reformist policymakers close to the president. Studies of reported peasant mobilization during 1976–1982 find little evidence of mounting peasant pressure preceding the SAM decision (Aguado López et al. 1983; Fox 1986; Rubio 1987). Moreover, reported peasant mobilization increased sharply only in 1981 and 1982 (Aguado López et al. 1983; Rubio 1987), suggesting that the SAM strategy encouraged rural social movements.

Because of the SAM's top-down origins, most efforts to implement its radical-sounding food policy reforms channeled increased resources to basic grain production without changing the rural balance of power. The SAM and COPLAMAR rural development efforts nevertheless created a small but significant opening from above for autonomous peasant movements. Small because it was limited to those few policy areas and geographic regions where reformists effectively intervened in the implementation as well as the formulation of rural development policy (i.e., rural food distribution). Significant because it offered useful political and economic resources to representative and autonomous peasant organizations. In an important minority of Mexico's contested regions, this opening helped consolidate regional peasant organizations and shifted the balance of power away from rural elites.

The peasant movement responded to the changing balance of forces within the state during the 1970s and 1980s with a wide range of strategies. By the late 1970s, however, two ends of this spectrum were effectively eliminated. At one end, those areas which either had experienced armed peasant uprisings (e.g., Guerrero) or appeared to authorities to have that potential (e.g., northern Puebla, central Veracruz) were subjected in the mid-1970s to politico-military demobilization strategies that emphasized coercion (Mayo 1980). At another extreme, the 1976 change in agrarian policy meant a total reversal for the official peasant organizations, which until then had been moving to the left to avoid being outflanked by independent alternatives. They dutifully shifted their attention from *neolatifundismo* (illegal land concentrations) to the new priority of "organization," in the context of the president's Alliance for Production with the private sector.

The wide range of peasant groups, surviving and representing the concerns of their members, fit somewhere in between these extremes. They fell into five broad categories, defined both by their membership and activities: First, official commodity producer organizations "recovered" membership which had wavered in the early 1970s. Second, local land reform movements continued to mobilize and resist repression.

Third, unions attempted to organize landless farmworkers. Fourth, reformist food policies opened up opportunities for the formation of autonomous regional consumer organizations to participate in the distribution of subsidized grain. Fifth, new forms of autonomous economic initiatives increasingly organized producers into regional enterprises. These different forms of expression of peasant interests were complemented by increasingly important mobilization of nonpeasant rural identities; indigenous peoples fought for autonomy and respect, while rural citizens demanded municipal democratization and local control over natural resources.

OFFICIAL PRODUCER ORGANIZATIONS

For many peasants the experience of the 1970s was one of participating in an official organization until a more effective route to land distribution developed—in the form of a more militant, independent group—and then returning to an official organization when the independent route was no longer politically viable. Many of the radical groups which emerged in the early and mid-1970s eventually lost much of their base. This occurred in a variety of ways.³¹ In one common scenario, an independent movement helped mobilize peasants to win land demands but was then abandoned by much of its former constituency after some participants won concessions. Independent organizations during this period rarely offered a viable alternative for working the land, while the official organizations, with easier access to government agencies, could facilitate access to productive inputs.³²

Perhaps the most important way in which the state reasserted itself as an organizational alternative was through the consolidation of official producers associations. López Portillo's "production first" approach promoted the organization of growers along product lines as a way of integrating small producers into state-owned or regulated

³¹In one scenario, increased repression largely crushed an independent organization, and a progovernment organization was waiting in the wings to fill the vacuum that followed. This appears to describe the case of the Unión Campesina Independiente (UCI) of northern Puebla and central Veracruz. For an account by activists, see Ramos García et al. 1984. The group which grew in the wake of the UCI's setbacks was the Antorcha Campesina, a secretive, highly centralized paramilitary peasant organization which uses violence in its campaigns against independent left competitors and local caciques. The group has maintained ambiguous relations with government allies, leading to charges that it acts as the paramilitary wing of the CNC. For unusual interviews with the mysterious leader of Antorcha, see *La Jornada*, 12-14 November 1986.

³²Note, for example, the case of the Frente Popular de Zacatecas (FPZ). In the mid-1970s, thirty thousand peasants reportedly marched through the narrow streets of the colonial state capital, but by the late 1970s the rural base had shrunk to several consolidated ejidos. FPZ leaders have recognized that their radical collective production strategies were inappropriate for most of the recently titled *ejidatarios* (*La Jornada*, 2 April 1985).

agroindustrial systems. Many regional and national state enterprises which processed and/or marketed industrial crops were launched by the Echeverría administration and consolidated as key rural political and economic actors during the López Portillo period. Together with the CNC, they were leading forces in promoting official commodity producer associations which grouped growers of coffee, sugar, wheat, tobacco, fibers (cotton, henequen, *ixtle*, *candelilla*), rubber, *barbasco*, and palm oil.³³

Official producer organizations were not always new, and their demands for better credit terms, inputs, prices, and marketing arrangements were often long standing, but the López Portillo administration's emphasis on organization for production increased the potential room for negotiation. Unless the membership mobilized, however, the producer organizations lacked significant bargaining power vis-à-vis the state enterprises. Membership was not always voluntary, since the state enterprises sometimes required CNC credentials before buying a grower's crops.

The economic influence of the official producer associations created new sources of power and vitality within the CNC, partially offsetting the decline in its traditional role. The commodity organizations usually lacked mechanisms to keep the leadership accountable to the base, however, leading to the emergence of "peasant entrepreneurs" who often pursued both organizational and individual capital accumulation at the expense of members' interests. As more autonomous producer associations began to emerge, competition between official leadership factions for membership loyalties created more incentives for providing services to the base. When leadership remained unresponsive, some chapters of official producer associations began to consider an "exit" option as nongovernmental producer groups grew into viable alternatives.³⁴

PERSISTENT AGRARIAN RESISTANCE

Some of the independent organizations which emerged in the early and mid-1970s managed to survive the 1976 shift in official agrarian

³³For example, after 1973 the Mexican Coffee Institute (INMECAFE) greatly increased its penetration of rural markets. Largely through de facto provision of tied credit (in the form of "advances"), INMECAFE increased its national market share from 6.4 percent in 1970-71 to 47 percent in 1981-82. The number of members of its associated production and marketing unions increased from 53,272 in 1978 to 94,493 in 1982. According to the Eco-Development Center's field surveys, INMECAFE managed to organize 67 percent of producers interviewed by the 1977-79 period (Nolasco 1985, 189).

³⁴In 1984, for example, several thousand members of the official coffee producers association broke away to join an independent federation, UNCAFABCSA, because of the CNC's unwillingness to support them in their struggle for higher prices. (UNCAFABCSA is a part of the CIOAC—see below.) See *Proceso*, 27 August 1984.

policy. During the late 1970s their struggles were largely defensive, dedicated mostly to resisting government and cacique repression while continuing to press long-standing land reform demands. This tendency includes most of the groups which joined together in 1979 to form the National "Plan de Ayala" Network (CNPA).

The CNPA first came together on the anniversary of Zapata's death, their meeting provoked in part by the government's plans to move his remains from his home to the Monument of the Revolution in Mexico City. This affront to traditional agrarian militance provoked a gathering of a wide range of groups, including independent regional organizations, left-leaning official groups, and left party-linked groups. By 1980 the range had narrowed, leaving the more militant independent regional groups to pioneer a new form of organization, the *coordinadora*, or coordinating network. In contrast to both independent and official traditions of organizing in the centralized and hierarchical confederation, or "central," the CNPA was a loose national network which permitted each group to retain its autonomy while uniting around basic demands and confrontational mobilization for land and against repression.

The CNPA primarily represented indigenous and other sub-subsistence producers. Indigenous peoples are particularly oppressed in Mexico—both politically and economically—but the survival of traditional community ties greatly reinforces their unity and solidarity, crucial resources for sustaining mobilization under harsh conditions. By the mid-1980s, the CNPA coordinated the actions of about twenty organizations in fifteen states.³⁵ After allied actions with militant slum-dweller and teachers' groups in the early 1980s, the CNPA participated in its first major joint action with other left peasant groups in 1984, coordinating the most important peasant march on the capital in decades.³⁶ Democratic teachers movements and Christian Base Communities played important roles in supporting several CNPA affiliates. In 1985 the CNPA began small-scale economic projects for the

³⁵For the CNPA's analysis of its history and descriptions of its member groups, see CNPA 1985. See also A. Bartra 1985; M. Montes 1982; and Rubio 1987.

³⁶This march became the first in a series of coalition efforts to mobilize around the anniversary of Zapata's assassination. The other organizations participating in the march were the Mexican Union of Peasant and Workers—Red Faction (UGOCM—Roja), a splinter from the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), and the Independent Central of Peasants and Agricultural Workers (CIOAC). Both had moderately significant mass bases in several regions. For discussions of the April 10 marches of 1984, 1985, and 1986, see, for example: "Las movilizaciones del 10 de abril de 1984," *Lecturas Campesinas* (Universidad Autónoma Chapingo), 1984; "La marcha nacional campesina del 10 de abril: símbolos y realidades," *Boletín Agro* 4 (IIS/UNAM), 1985.

first time, such as direct producer-consumer food marketing projects with radical urban community organizations.³⁷ In 1986, however, long-standing internal tensions heightened over the role which left parties should play, leaving the CNPA seriously divided between pro- and anti-party forces.

FARMWORKER UNIONIZATION

Mexico's high levels of structural un- and underemployment in agriculture leave farmworkers in a weak bargaining position. Seasonal migration patterns make organizing difficult, since wageworkers often see work in the United States as more viable sources of regular employment, undercutting their determination to organize the rural work force at home. And while the government has nominally permitted agricultural wageworkers to unionize, in practice only a handful of official unions have won bargaining contracts. In response to independent organizing, the official labor and peasant organizations have voiced demands for the right to organize farmworkers, but neither has made a serious effort.

The most important agricultural unionizing efforts have been led by the Independent Central of Peasants and Agricultural Workers (CIOAC). The CIOAC was originally associated with the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) but grew more autonomous after the PCM became more pluralistic and united with most other left forces. The CIOAC's organizing has concentrated in the agribusiness fields of the north, especially in Baja California and Sinaloa—where strikes have mobilized as many as 10,000–15,000—as well as in the semifudal plantations of Chiapas.³⁸

AUTONOMOUS CONSUMER MOBILIZATION

The government began a large-scale rural food distribution program in 1979, jointly administered by CONASUPO, the government food trading company, and COPLAMAR, a special presidential rural

³⁷See the proceedings of a grassroots movement conference on self-managed marketing which included CNPA-linked groups, among others (Equipo Pueblo/Instituto Maya 1987).

³⁸For the most comprehensive collection on rural unionization, see de Grammont 1986. The classic analysis of rural proletarianization is Paré 1977, while Astorga Lira 1985 and Grindle 1988 analyze the dynamics of rural labor markets. See also López Monjardín 1987 on rural workers movements. In Chiapas, the CIOAC's relatively moderate trade union demands have been largely frustrated by repression. For studies of rural movements in Chiapas, see Moncada 1983; Odile and Singer 1984; and an entire issue of the journal *Textual*—4: 13, Sept. 1983—of the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo. For a rare case study of a CIOAC state chapter, in the state of Puebla, see C. Montes n.d. (c. 1985).

development agency. By the end of López Portillo's term, it had extended to over ten thousand village stores. To ensure that CONASUPO's bureaucratic apparatus delivered supplies to the many remote outlets, the management of the stores, including oversight over the crucial wholesale-to-retail distribution process, was turned over to organized communities.³⁹

Strategically located reformist policymakers provided political legitimacy and massive logistical support (i.e., over three thousand trucks) for democratic community mobilization against a counterattack from entrenched public- and private-sector interest groups opposed to the program. Since each warehouse was to be co-managed by a community food council elected from surrounding villages, the movement first developed at the regional level, but by 1983 the first statewide network of food councils had come together in Oaxaca. By 1985 the Oaxaca councils led to the formation of an incipient national network, independent of existing peasant organizations and political parties but allied to autonomous producer groups.⁴⁰ This movement challenged CONASUPO for better performance and greater local control over program operations, with some success, but it eventually overextended itself. Formerly tolerant CONASUPO policymakers then turned to "divide and conquer" tactics, leading to major setbacks, particularly in Oaxaca.

The opening for consumer organizing spilled over into producer demands as well. More consolidated community food councils led efforts to use the program's warehouses, trucks, and staff to buy inputs and sell crops at the regional level, greatly increasing producer bargaining power both in the marketplace and vis-à-vis government agencies.⁴¹ The CONASUPO-COPLAMAR village store program had a major impact because it permitted democratic, relatively autonomous

³⁹Program operations were handled by CONASUPO's distribution subsidiary, DICONSA. As DICONSA's general manager, Raúl Salinas de Gortari, described the implementation strategy: "Why not say it? There are some administrators who are not completely committed to the peasants and the benefits of this program. . . . You push from below, and we'll squeeze from above" (*El Día*, 31 August 1985).

⁴⁰The Oaxaca meeting brought together over 300 delegates, representing 106 community food councils and 4,162 communities in 18 states (approximately one-third of the food councils). Most of the delegates were democratically elected by their regional constituencies. For an account of the meeting, see *El Día*, 31 August 1984. For further analysis and case studies of the community food councils, see Fox 1986, 1988.

⁴¹CONASUPO's unexpected withdrawal of the councils' access to its trucks—combined with lack of managerial experience—led to the eventual collapse of the alternative distribution effort. The Oaxaca councils' early, if short-lived, success at distributing fertilizer more cheaply and efficiently than the government reportedly made the official fertilizer distributor more responsive to its clients, at least in the short run.

peasant organization at the regional (i.e., warehouse) level for the first time.⁴²

AUTONOMOUS PRODUCER ORGANIZATIONS

Those mobilized groups capable of shifting from the Echeverría period's emphasis on land redistribution to a focus on their identity as producers and/or consumers gained some room for maneuver during the oil-debt boom and ensuing crisis. This shift facilitated access to political legitimacy and government resources, although this access was usually achieved either through mass mobilization to defend a group's autonomy, or at the expense of that autonomy. This struggle for "autonomy within the system" led to the consolidation of a new genre of grassroots-based, peasant-managed economic organizations. Their political identifications range from those which are independent from the government in principle, to those which are not officially linked but are willing to trade their political support to reformist officials or candidates for concrete concessions, to those which are nominally official but reject government intervention in their internal affairs in an effort to represent their members' economic interests.

The shift during the SAM period (1980–82) toward more resources for agriculture in general, and increased tolerance for autonomous producer initiatives in particular, created a hospitable environment for the consolidating of Unions of Ejidos (UEs). A national DICONSA-sponsored survey found that, by 1981, 237 UEs were actually functioning, representing more than 4,700 ejido and agrarian communities, over 20 percent of the total (M.T. Fernández and Rello 1984).⁴³ Over a third of the UEs were formed through the initiative of their own members, without government promotion. In terms of political affiliation, 30 percent declared that they did *not* belong to any official peasant federation, indicating a qualitative shift toward greater producer autonomy from traditional government controls. Similarly, a minority of UEs surveyed reported relatively decentralized formal decision-making processes, with 36 percent making project decisions in general assem-

⁴²Remarkably, government rural food distribution grew in relative importance even before urban food subsidies were withdrawn in 1986, from 10.5 percent of DICONSA sales in 1978, to 20 percent in 1981 and 29 percent in 1985 (DICONSA 1986, 21). Even for technocrats, the program was relatively efficient; unlike most traditional urban food subsidies, it was clearly targeted to those in greatest need. The program's popularity, moreover, had generated a powerful constituency in potentially unstable areas, creating a limited implicit veto power. For one policymaker's view of the politics of rural spending, see Salinas de Gortari 1982, 1984.

⁴³According to the Agrarian Reform Ministry, 428 UEs had formed by 1984.

blies of member communities, 35 percent by assemblies of community delegates, 12 percent by an elected board, and 11 percent by narrower groups of leaders. These survey results strongly suggest that by the early 1980s the rural social sector included a minority of relatively autonomous, democratic economic organizations.

The growing consolidation of peasant-managed economic organizations was both cause and effect of the axial shift in peasant organizing from the "vertical" centralized federation to the more "horizontal" network. The most important new expression of this shift was the emergence of the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA) in the early 1980s. Like the CNPA, the UNORCA united distinct groups around common demands and actions, without compromising each group's autonomy.

The UNORCA network began to coalesce around the Coalition of Collective Ejidos of the Yaqui and Mayo Valleys (CECVYM), which represented the beneficiaries of Echeverría's last-minute redistribution of valuable irrigated land in Sonora. They received the land but quickly faced an array of government agencies allied with the former owners, leading to several years of struggle to build their own credit, crop insurance, and marketing capacity. By the end of the 1970s, the CECVYM showed that it was possible to combine political democracy, social equity, and economic efficiency on a large scale. Its ability to grow up to 5 percent of the nation's wheat crop collectively and more efficiently than the previous owners was a powerful challenge to the dominant view in the government and private sector that the agrarian reform was responsible for Mexico's food deficit.⁴⁴

The series of national peasant meetings which created the UNORCA first began with CECVYM's land redistribution anniversary celebrations. By the fifth National Meeting of Peasant Organizations in Oaxaca in August 1984, fifty-two regional organizations from twenty-three states had attended at least two such gatherings (*El Día*, 11, 18 July 1984). The agreements reached revolved around a strategy for increased producer bargaining power by combining mobilization with negotiation. Based on the CECVYM experience, the strategy concentrated on blocking the mechanisms which extract the peasant surplus. The three-pronged effort to change peasant producers' terms of trade with the market sought to increase autonomous control over key aspects of the production process: credit, technical assistance, and marketing. The key actor in this strategy was to be the democratized Union of Ejidos, and the fundamental question was whether the UE would save the ejido, or vice versa. While many UEs extracted resources from

⁴⁴For more on the coalition, see note 20, and CECVYM 1982.

producers to support new bureaucratic entities, the alternative was for mobilized unions of ejidos to use their bargaining power and economies of scale to capitalize their member ejidos (Gordillo 1980, 1986, 1987).

The most important new forms of mobilization concentrated on closing the widening gap between the government-regulated costs of production and official crop support prices. Beginning with the economic crisis in late 1982, UNORCA-related regional organizations played key roles in building horizontal coalitions which gathered independent and official organizations around common producer interests, often for the first time. The most important waves of price protests erupted between 1983 and 1987, primarily among wheat, corn, soybean, and sorghum producers, whose main tactics included non-violent mass takeovers of dozens of full government warehouses, as well as marches and highway blockades.⁴⁵

The early 1986 wave of corn price protests showed how actors operated within a regional context. The protests were launched in Chihuahua when the UNORCA-affiliated Northeastern [Chihuahua] Peasant Alliance (ACN) led two thousand peasants to block the movement of corn from CONASUPO warehouses. The movement quickly spread to the southern part of the state, as more than twenty thousand peasants from a wide range of largely official organizations joined the Democratic Peasant Movement of Chihuahua (MDC). The movement united peasants of left, right, and centrist party sympathies; together and without violence they occupied sixty-nine warehouses. The hotly contested upcoming gubernatorial election ruled out a coercive response, greatly increasing producer bargaining power and leading to federal intervention in the peasants' favor.⁴⁶

⁴⁵For overviews, see *El Día*, 18 May and 2 November 1985. Occupations of CONASUPO warehouses are relatively low-risk tactics. Since CONASUPO's institutional mission is to promote peasant interests, it is constrained from using force to dislodge protesters. As part of the reformist legacy of the Echeverría period, moreover, rural warehouse managers were elected by the community of agrarian reform beneficiaries, a policy which encouraged local accountability and provided training and employment opportunities for landless children of *ejidatarios*. These managers were therefore unlikely to oppose community-based occupations, despite being on CONASUPO's payroll. The role of the community-based manager in facilitating warehouse occupations shows how past reforms shape the terrain of present conflict.

⁴⁶For an account of the movement by one of its leaders, see *El Día*, 19 January 1985. For published details, see *La Jornada*, 12, 16 January 1986 and *Proceso*, 13 January 1986. Negotiators reported that the Ministry of Planning and Budget, together with the Interior Ministries, authorized a price increase from \$53,000 to \$65,000 for Chihuahua corn growers. The state CNC's maneuver to take credit for the concession provoked the movement leadership to continue to hold out, successfully, for \$70,000.

The Chihuahua movement quickly spread to other states, most notably Nayarit and Chiapas. The Nayarit movement was led by the UE "Lázaro Cárdenas," a UNORCA-affiliated regional federation which, like the ACN, combined direct action (more than three thousand peasants occupied twelve warehouses) with flexible negotiation tactics, including a willingness to accept nonprice concessions.⁴⁷ Nayarit was not awaiting elections, and producers settled for a smaller increase combining cash and in-kind investments.

The Chiapas corn price protest, in contrast, was led by a disaffected former federal legislator from the CNC. His long-standing rivalry with the governor, as well as his apparent "defection," aggravated the state authorities' well-known tendency to respond to virtually all social movements with brute force. When the occupation of fifty-four CONASUPO warehouses by more than thirty thousand peasants did not gain concessions, the movement escalated its tactics, and five thousand peasants blockaded the Pan-American Highway. Army soldiers and state police harshly repressed the action.⁴⁸ While the federal government professes that the official support price is based on strictly technical economic criteria, the heterogeneous range of outcomes of the 1986 corn price protests indicates that the regional political dynamic can be decisive.

Since both large and small producers share a common interest, producer price protests clearly lend themselves to multiclass alliances.⁴⁹ In at least three of the 1986-87 movements (growers of barley in Tlaxacala and Hidalgo, sorghum in the Bajío, and irrigated corn in Chihuahua), the presence of large- and medium-sized producers, as well as intermediaries, caused peasant movement leaders to look for policy alternatives.⁵⁰ The government had limited economic resources with which to make concessions, and large growers could easily end up consuming a disproportionate share if compensatory mechanisms were not created to target benefits to small producers. Politically the

⁴⁷For a history of the movement by one of its leaders, see *El Día*, 22 September 1984. For reports of the 1986 wave of mobilization, see *La Jornada*, 13, 21 January 1986.

⁴⁸See *La Jornada*, 18 January 1986. Leaders and supporters of this movement, including a journalist and activist teachers, were jailed until March 1988. They were considered prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. For the journalist's testimony, see Hernández Aguilar 1986.

⁴⁹Nationally, an estimated 56 percent of producers are "sub-subsistence," indicating that, as net consumers, they may have more in common with the landless than they do with larger producers (CEPAL 1982, 114). For many sub-subsistence peasants, however, their main goal may well be to become self-sufficient producers.

⁵⁰For background on the Tlaxcala barley producers' movement, see León and Steffen 1986.

peasant leadership risked losing the direction of the protests to large producer and speculative interests. The principal response thus far has been an attempt to reinforce horizontal linkages between smallholder groups across the political spectrum.

INNOVATIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Some price protests have evolved into movements to appropriate more control over the production process itself. The CNC-affiliated National Union of Barbasco Producers (UNPB) presents one of the most important cases, with over thirty-five thousand members in seven states. *Barbasco*, a forest plant, is collected and processed by a state enterprise into a pharmaceutical input (Gereffi 1983). The UNPB began to protest unrestricted imports from China, which depressed the price. After blocking further imports, the UNPB managed to take control of collection and initial processing away from the unresponsive state enterprise, beginning to bargain directly with the transnational corporate buyers. The UNPB then created the ARIC "Libertad" to manage the processing and marketing, quickly diversifying into livestock, citrus, coffee, and grains. The ARIC "Libertad," which has worked with the UNORCA network, shows how large-scale economic activity can create a base for relative autonomy within the official peasant movement (*El Día*, 16 and 23 November 1985).

The peasant movement's new priorities and forms of struggle have also included an effort to reorient government housing programs more toward rural needs. Sonora's CECVYM organized Mexico's first large-scale, self-managed rural housing project, building 7,500 units. For the first time, the government's low-income housing agency was persuaded to fund peasant-managed housing construction and/or improvement programs in several other states, most organized by UNORCA affiliates. In contrast to a welfare approach, UNORCA's housing strategy was distinctive because it focused on housing as a means to create jobs, to strengthen training, organizational, and managerial capacity, and to capitalize self-managed construction and materials firms that could survive beyond the life of the project.

Since the end of heavily subsidized official crop loans in the early 1980s, the high cost of credit, together with government inefficiency, has pushed organized peasants either out of agriculture or toward building their own alternative financing strategies.⁵¹ Linked to the

⁵¹For general discussions of government agricultural credit policy, see Fox 1986 and Pessah 1987. For important case studies of agricultural credit as an instrument of political control and bureaucratic abuse, see Aguilar and Araujo, 1984 and Rello 1986b.

post-1983 price protests, a movement to organize peasant-managed credit unions has gathered force.⁵²

ECOLOGICAL, INDIGENOUS, AND LOCAL DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

New expressions of struggle for local autonomy in rural Mexico transcend traditional peasant identities to include struggles for ecological rights, municipal democratization, and the legitimacy of autonomous forms of indigenous political expression.⁵³

Ecological rights movements developed in two related directions: for local control of natural resources—especially water, forestry resources, and fisheries—and against pollution, particularly from industries, often state owned. One of the most notable recent environmental defense movements was led by the UE "Felipe Angeles," when the Laguna region's drinking water was discovered to be contaminated with arsenic (*La Jornada*, 27 February and 8 April 1986). Few peasant movements have won ecological demands without allies, although the long-standing protests against the oil industry's contamination of the state of Tabasco is a partial exception (*El Día*, 7 July 1984; Barreto and Mota 1983). A nuclear reactor planned on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro was successfully blocked by an alliance between indigenous peasants, the tourist industry, and urban intellectuals in 1980. More recently, the movement against the Laguna Verde nuclear plant has united a wide range of social groups in Veracruz.⁵⁴

Municipal democratization movements have traditionally centered on defending the right to free and fair elections, as well as local political

⁵²In 1986, over forty UEs from eighteen states, with more than 100,000 members, signed an agreement with the Ministries of Agriculture and Budget, and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), to develop and fund UE-managed regional credit plans. Officially recognized credit unions could operate as banks, generating resources for locally controlled capitalization and technical assistance. The credit union organizing process developed gradually, in an effort to maximize grassroots representation in management.

⁵³Gender equality is low on most political agendas in rural Mexico. Few rural women have organized beyond the community level to form regional groups, in part because state-regulated agrarian reform structures exclude most women. The women of the Unión de Ejidos "Lázaro Cárdenas" of southern Nayarit are an important exception. Very few peasant organizations, regardless of ideology, confront women's oppression, although the Coalición de Ejidos de la Costa Grande de Guerrero has addressed this issue. Most peasant women who become leaders in the "public" sphere emerge from indigenous cultures which defend some degree of gender autonomy. For a discussion of state policy toward rural women, see Arizpe and Botey 1987. For a review of an unusual national conference of peasant women convened by CNPA, see "La lucha de la mujer campesina," in *Equipo Pueblo* 1987, no. 3.

⁵⁴On the ecological crisis linked to the oil industry in the southeast, see Toledo 1983. For an ecological overview of Mexico's food problems, see Toledo et al. 1985. On environmental policy-making, see also Barkin 1988; Mumme et al. 1988; and Redcliff 1981a.

autonomy (López Monjardín 1986; Martínez Assad 1985; Martínez Assad and Ziccardi 1987). The most intense and long-standing rural municipal democratization movements have been sustained in indigenous communities (Bailón 1984). The case of Juchitán, Oaxaca is the most well known (Rubin 1987). Local democratization efforts rarely develop alternative economic strategies, but several rural municipal democratization movements in the 1980s have been integrated with several innovative experiments in regional economic development.⁵⁵

Racial and class oppression consistently converge to frustrate indigenous goals of economic self-management. Public- and private-sector violence against indigenous people is more frequent than against the majority population; according to research in progress at the Autonomous University of Chapingo, an estimated 70 percent of recent political killings were in the majority indigenous states of Oaxaca and Chiapas.⁵⁶ Two recent political developments indicate possibilities for change, however. Alliances between relatively autonomous political forces within the official party in the state of Oaxaca and "modernizing" reformists at the national levels led to a dramatic change in direction of state government. A left-leaning, indigenous governor came to power with the clear support of the majority. His administration opened its doors to the state's many powerful democratic social movements. While limited in his capacity to control cacique violence, the governor created a hospitable climate for self-managed, indigenous economic development efforts (see *La Jornada*, 10 January 1988). A second notable shift is that a dramatic hunger strike in front of the National Palace obliged President de la Madrid to acknowl-

⁵⁵Perhaps the most important case was in Cuctzalan, Puebla, where CARTI, the Regional Agricultural Cooperative "Iosepan Titataniske" ("We Shall Overcome," in Nahuatl), represents over eight thousand indigenous families. CARTI, one of the most successful and participatory grassroots economic development organizations in Mexico, took advantage of divisions within the official party to elect the first peasant representative ever to the municipal presidency in 1987 (*La Jornada*, 20-21 February 1987). For background on CARTI, see *El Día*, 1 September 1984; León and Steffen 1986; Masferrer Kan 1986a, 1986b. Most local democratization efforts in Oaxaca were similarly ethnically based and politically independent parties. See, for example, the case of the Coalition of Municipalities of Cuicatán (*El Día*, 25 August 1984). In the indigenous community of Alcozauca, Guerrero, a three-term Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM) municipal administration organized innovative ecological/economic development projects (*La Jornada*, 5 June 1987). In the north, a PSUM administration in Ignacio Zaragoza, Chihuahua (1984-86) worked with the ACN (see above) and a new democratic UE which led price protests and organized housing and credit projects (*El Día*, 19 January 1985).

⁵⁶For detailed case studies, see Amnesty International 1986. For the most comprehensive overview of indigenous politics in Mexico, see Mejía Piñeros and Sarmiento Silva 1987. See also the journals *México Indígena* and *Nueva Antropología*; Avila and Cervantes 1986; Bonfil 1982; Fuentes and Rossel 1982; Sarmiento Silva 1981; Stavenhagen 1975; and Wasserstrom 1983.

edge for the first time the legitimacy of indigenous struggles against cacique violence and dispossession (*La Jornada*, 5 May 1987).

CONCLUSIONS

The future of the emerging democratic social sector is uncertain. The path toward consolidating regional democratic "counterweights" is fraught with risk. The relative autonomy of a rural enterprise from the state cannot be assumed to involve participatory democracy. Relatively autonomous social institutions, enterprises, and interest groups may, however, create more political space for democratic mobilization than exists in traditional corporatist forms of organization. Leadership accountability to the rank and file is never guaranteed, however; it depends on a process of rank and file mobilization rather than leadership intentions. Where movements are driven by primarily economic demands, the state often retains the capacity to demobilize movements through selective concessions. In particularly violent regions, peasant movements are especially dependent on external allies—both inside and outside the state—to limit repression.

Even though the official peasant organizations are in an ongoing crisis of representation and can no longer handle continuing demands for land, and even though independent organizations are often more dynamic, most organized peasants are still members of official federations.⁵⁷ Yet the advances of the first half of the 1980s, both because and in spite of the economic crisis, show that possibilities for change exist, at least for those peasants who are able to sustain regional democratic organizations. While the ongoing economic crisis appears to exclude any prospect of improving the living conditions for the majority of the rural population in the foreseeable future, political struggle can affect the distribution of the burden among regions and social groups. In this context, three key factors are gradually changing the peasant movement panorama.

First, grassroots democratic movements have shown their capacity to shift the role of the ejido from its identity as an organ of political control toward its potential character as a representative politico-economic institution. This process has revolved primarily around democratic local and regional rural development initiatives, undermining the traditional link between economic and political control by the state. These efforts at self-managed capitalization have created the beginnings of a democratic social sector in the countryside. The

⁵⁷The CNC declared, for example, that it would deliver 8–10 million votes for the PRI's candidate in the July presidential elections (*La Jornada*, 2 February 1988).

outcomes of these efforts depend both on the flexible combination of grassroots mobilization and negotiation, and on the strength of alliances between government agencies and private-sector elites at the regional level.⁵⁸

Second, the most important democratic forces within the peasant movement are shifting their organizational strategy from the traditional effort to build a competing, centralized federation, to broadening loose regional and national networks. In contrast to the traditional efforts by urban political parties at vertical control, both UNORCA and most elements within the CNPA stress their respect for the political autonomy of each member group, and each emphasizes horizontal networks between democratic forces within and across regions.

Third, the democratic forces in the peasant movement have largely moved beyond the "official vs. independent" dichotomy, as experience has shown that a rigid approach can sometimes marginalize independent forces, leaving them vulnerable to repression and limiting prospects for tactical alliances with relatively autonomous elements within the official federations. As a result, a new "political grey area" has emerged, which facilitates the convergence of both nominally official and independent groups, as in the cases of the broad producer price and rural consumer rights movements.

This new grey area brings with it at least two possibilities. Perhaps autonomous forces will become increasingly drawn into a government-managed process of "*concertación social*," winning political or economic changes limited to a few well-endowed and/or well-organized producers. Alternatively, the prospects for political and economic "multiplier" or "spillover" effects which would benefit the less mobilized majority remain open, largely dependent on the political direction of the peasant movement. Will surplus-producing smallholders push for demands which would also benefit land-poor or landless producers? The peasant movement is at a turning point, and its future direction depends largely on strategic choices made by grassroots movement leaders maneuvering within a new political grey area. If these new regional actors mobilize to defend the interests of the rural majority and to hold the political system accountable, it is possible that increasingly autonomous forces within the official federations will ally with independent movements to create a revitalized national peasant movement for jobs, land, and democratization.

⁵⁸For a study which stresses the variable of government links with local elites vs. peasants, see INCA Rural 1984.

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6

Comment

Kathleen Logan

In this session of the conference on Mexico's alternative political futures we have heard analyses of contemporary popular movements from regional and class perspectives. We have also learned about the activities of various kinds of labor unions as they relate to political transformation in Mexico.

In keeping with this examination of popular movements, I would like to introduce for discussion another kind of movement that will also affect the political future of Mexico, whatever that future may be. I am referring here to the popular movements mounted by the urban poor to meet their survival needs. Arising from family and community concerns, these mobilizations by the poor represent a resurgence of civil society into the public domain.

The urban poor have organized an impressive array of diverse groups to advance their causes: squatter settlement associations, housewives committees, independent labor unions, consumer cooperatives, Roman Catholic reflection groups, worker-owned businesses, credit associations, political action committees, and self-improvement groups. They range from large, complex movements, such as the citywide alliance of the poor that arose to deal with the devastation of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, to the small and simple, such as the housewives committee in Mérida that successfully petitioned the state government for land for garden plots. Never before in Mexico's history have the urban poor been as well or as intricately organized.