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Democratic Rural Development: Leadership Accountability in Regional Peasant Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Many development analysts assert the importance of democratic social organizations, but few either document or analyse the actual processes of internal democracy. This study examines part of the broader problem of the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' — the ebbs and flows of leadership accountability over time. Drawing on the history of a Mexican regional peasant organization since 1974, the analysis suggests that different kinds of organizational structures encourage or discourage membership action, but moments of mass direct action in turn shape the ways in which organizational structures actually distribute power. The case analysis shows how the interaction of internal and external factors shaped the balance of power between leaders and members at each critical turning point. Participatory subgroups turn out to be the crucial counterweight to concentrated leadership power, mediating relations with the membership and providing alternative sources of leadership. Whether formal or informal, multiple vertical channels and alternative horizontal linkages between membership groups are crucial complements, and sometimes substitutes, to conventional organizational structures.

INTRODUCTION

Local participation has increasingly become an article of faith in the development community. Poor people's organizations are 'scaling up' as they attempt to participate in the development policy process in the many developing countries with increasingly open political systems.[1] Our frameworks for analysing the consolidation of representative organizations, however, remain weak. For those who contend that Third World development depends on the emergence

and consolidation of a dense web of local development institutions, organizational democracy is a problem of special concern.

. Without representative organizations, the rural poor lack their own voice in the development process. Their capacity to build representative organizations depends on multiple channels for participation, as well as relatively autonomous, diversified linkages with external allies, as Esman and Uphoff (1984) have shown.[2] But where do these internal and external linkages come from, and why exactly do they matter so much?

To understand the 'thickening' of civil society, the burst of research interest in democratization might seem promising. But most analyses of national regime transitions do not incorporate systematic analyses of power relations within civil society. Now that researchers are focusing more on the consolidation of political democracy, hopefully the issue of the democratization of the representative organizations of civil society will begin to receive more attention.[3] As one turns for guidance to the vast literature on social movements and community development, however, one finds that they tend to assume rather than to demonstrate that the organizations under study are actually democratic.[4] The discourse of anti-dictatorship movements in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s generally referred to mass mobilizations as 'democratic' by definition, but such movements challenged regimes to open up without necessarily being internally democratic themselves.

This study examines a particular aspect of the broader problem of internal democracy: accountability, analysed in terms of the changing relations between leaders and members in a regional peasant organization in Mexico. The case analysis suggests that different kinds of organizational structures encourage or discourage particular kinds of membership action, but waves of active rank and file participation in turn shape the ways in which organizational structures actually distribute power. To understand the complex determinants of organizational democracy, we need to develop analytical tools which clarify the relationship between the formal mechanisms of representation and the parallel channels for participation that often distribute power in practice.

THE 'IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY'

Some social scientists have long contended that an 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' inevitably makes large membership organizations abandon

their democratic ideals and become bureaucratized, elitist instruments of the leadership. Organizations take on their own dynamics, as leaders and staff develop interests which differ from those of the members. Opportunities to pursue political power, to benefit economically or to pursue hidden agendas draw the leadership and staff away from representing membership concerns. In this view, new élites always manage to entrench themselves.[5]

The emphasis on transitions from democratic to oligarchic rule within organizations is two-edged; it adds a dynamic element by highlighting change over time, but it is also highly deterministic, leaving one unable to explain change in the other direction. In practice, social organizations move in both directions, but analysis of this dynamic immediately plunges one into the murky waters of less than fully democratic forms of representation, as leadership trajectories travel between clearly democratic and authoritarian 'poles'. Freely elected leaders can become authoritarian, and vice versa. Leaders may defend some member interests but not others. Clientelistic social and political organizations have long been known to deliver concrete benefits to poor people — usually, though not always, in ways which discourage collective action.[6]

Leaders who act in ways which represent member interests without actually being democratic, challenge the maximalist application of normative democratic ideals to organizational dynamics. Wide-ranging research on co-operatives and trade unions shows that not very democratic leaders can find themselves under diverse pressures which lead them to deliver broad benefits to members.[7] Democratic values and rules, then, are not the only possible explanations for accountable leadership. One also needs to look at the ways in which the state, formal organizations and social movements together structure the opportunities, risks and benefits for action — for leaders to get away with betraying member interests on the one hand, and for members to hold leaders accountable on the other.[8]

The case analysis suggests that what was posed as an all-powerful 'law' turns out instead to be a strong, but far from invincible *tendency*. Larger grassroots groups often undergo a series of swings towards and away from democracy, with degrees of leadership accountability changing at different points in their history. The problem for the analysis of organizational democracy is that we lack general analytical frameworks to account for such shifts in the balance of power between leaders and members.

This study shows that participatory subgroups are crucial

complements to formal representative democracy in large membership organizations. The idea that participatory subgroups are necessary to keep larger groups democratic is not new. Political theorists have long held that national democracy depends on the checks and balances in society as well as in government; power must be decentralized among autonomous interest groups for democracy to work fairly.[9] But relatively few researchers have analysed the inner workings of these social counterweights in terms of the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy'. Lipset et al. (1956) are a notable exception. They explained a successful case of trade union democracy by analysing the countervailing tendencies that offset the otherwise powerful and ever present oligarchical pressures. This study goes further by highlighting the rise and fall of alternative channels for mass participation as a key determinant of the ebb and flow of countervailing democratic tendencies within large membership organizations.

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL DIMENSIONS OF DEMOCRACY

The issue is not whether organizations 'should' have leaders. Leadership is crucial for mass mobilization, helping to articulate interests, to project a vision that change is possible and to bring isolated people together who do not share 'free spaces' within which to interact on their own.[10] Because the skills of public speaking, tolerance and consensus building associated with democratic leadership are learned forms of behaviour, the social and organizational context which makes such learning possible requires special attention. Examination of this process is crucial for understanding the conditions under which direct democratic processes can actually work.[11]

Leadership and external allies can play an important role in forming group identities and articulating interests, but within constraints shaped by the political moment and the structurally possible, as the case analysis will show. But leaders can also discourage or divert mobilization, weakening their members' leverage. Poor people's movements have leverage only during unusual historical moments, and rare opportunities may be lost if organizations put formal institution building ahead of mobilization (Piven and Cloward, 1977: 36).

There are many possible angles from which to approach the issue of internal democracy. Democracy has both horizontal and vertical

dimensions. From a horizontal approach, one would look at the construction of an empowered 'citizenry' within an organization of civil society. Discussions of grassroots participation in the development literature, however, often conflate active membership with passive followership.[12] Conventional indicators do not necessarily tell us much about this distinction, since large turnouts at public events or occasions calling for voluntary labour can be composed of either active members or passive followers. Mobilization does not necessarily involve participation in decision-making; it may be driven by economic incentives or coercive political pressures.

A focus on the vertical dimension of democracy highlights the relationship between the leadership and the membership. The procedures for leadership selection can be important, but formal electoral processes do not necessarily involve effective competition for leadership or an active or informed membership, nor do they guarantee accountability in between elections. The texture of informal social relations between leaders and members can be very revealing, as hierarchies are reproduced through ordinary daily activity. One could also highlight the social origins, charismatic mobilizing capacity or political ideologies of the leaders themselves. Given the importance of both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of democracy, it is not surprising that Esman and Uphoff (1984) found that representative organizations were closely associated with multiple channels for voice and representation.

Does the degree to which leaders and members value democracy in and of itself matter? In practice, it is difficult to disentangle instrumental means from normative ends. Political cultures of participation offer important resources for those who want to open up their organizations, but many examples exist of movements for democratization that do not rely on fully developed ideologies of participation. Similarly, movements which self-consciously cultivate ideologies of participation and collective identity have certainly been vulnerable to the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy'. For those who see the 'Iron Law' as immutable, both institutional and political cultural factors are irrelevant, but those who see oligarchy as a tendency which can sometimes be outweighed face the challenge of integrating institutional and political cultural factors.

This study focuses on interactive patterns of leadership accountability to the membership. The emphasis here is institutional, highlighting actions, both informal and formal, which encourage or

discourage leadership accountability. This study could not answer the empirical question of how much the members actually fought for democratic process as an end in itself. Whether or not they were inspired by abstract, normative ideals -- and few probably were -- the rank and file certainly wanted their representatives to defend their interests. They repeatedly, though not consistently, called them to account.

It is important to recognize that membership participation is only one possible form of action which can influence leadership accountability. If members are dissatisfied with their leaders, they may simply leave (or threaten to). The 'exit option' is certainly a crucial indirect means of exercising membership power, or at least for withdrawing power delegated to leaders. But under what circumstances will this lead to increased accountability, rather than to the collapse of the group?[13] For those organizations that survive, the 'exit option' is most likely to promote accountability if it acts to increase the leverage of 'voice'. This study stresses the ways in which 'voice' can be modulated and heard (Hirschman, 1981).[14]

One might hypothesize that most members of an organization under 'oligarchic' pressure will consider putting energy into the 'democratic reform from within' strategy in so far as the array of allies, enemies and opportunities make the exercise of 'voice' a plausibly effective approach. Otherwise the 'free rider' problem will tempt most people to opt out and pursue other strategies in defence of their interests, even if people share some sense of group solidarity. Collective action in defence of democracy, like collective action more generally, only makes sense to most people under certain circumstances.

In an effort to understand better why democracy defeats 'oligarchy' at some points and not at others, this study analyses the key turning points in the conflictive history of a well-established regional peasant organization. This study is based on the premise that institutional features of democracy do not guarantee accountable leadership, but it matters a great deal whether or not the contours of the organization are sufficiently permeable for members to exercise some power over their leaders if and when they decide to try. The availability of opportunities for direct membership participation in decision-making can encourage people to try to hold their leaders accountable.

REGIONAL RURAL MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

While the issue of leadership accountability is problematic in membership groups of all kinds, this study focuses on regional peasant organizations for three principal reasons. First, regional organizations are crucial for democratizing the rural development process. In much of Latin America, the principal obstacle to rural development is the entrenched power of allied public and private sector regional élites. They often monopolize key markets, preventing peasants from retaining and investing the fruits of their labour. Regional organizations are often the only actors able to open up these markets and to push for more equitable and accountable development policy. Regional peasant organizations are also crucial for defending freedom of assembly, creating a hospitable environment for further community organizing — an important 'spillover effect'.[15]

The second reason for focusing on regional peasant organizations is that they have the potential to combine the clout of a larger group with the responsiveness of smaller associations. Village-level groups are easily isolated by their enemies, while national peasant organizations are usually democratic only in so far as they are made up of representative regional building blocks. 'Regional' is used here to describe a membership organization that develops a second level of decision-making above the village (i.e. regional executives, delegate assemblies, etc.).

The third reason for focusing on regional groups is that accountability is especially *vulnerable* in larger peasant organizations. Within communities, informal means of consultation, reproach and decision-making can help to compensate for weaknesses in 'public' channels for participation (i.e. limited involvement in meetings, ethnic and gender bias, largely ceremonial assemblies, clientelistic government intervention or flawed electoral processes). Groups that bring many communities together, however, are too large to be run by village-level direct democracy alone, and informal, face-to-face accountability mechanisms are inherently weak. This means that often only the central leadership connects the many dispersed and diverse member communities. Region-wide channels for member participation are thus especially important, because without horizontal linkages across communities there is little to prevent domination by the central leadership. In remote rural areas, however, horizontal linkages *between* communities rarely develop

spontaneously, and require deliberate organizing efforts to be sustained.[16]

.The type of organization analysed below, a Mexican union of village-based agrarian reform communities, involves all three of these features: the broadening of the rural development process *vis-à-vis* both state and market, the creation of a 'second level' of regional leadership and the difficult problem of sustaining internal democracy across dispersed communities in the face of tendencies towards centralization of power.

MEXICAN UNIONS OF *EJIDOS*

Mexico's 'inclusionary' land reform left a complex organizational legacy which still structures peasant participation. Mexican agrarian reform communities (*ejidos*) are both political and economic institutions, to which the government cedes land use rights while retaining a 'tutelary' role. They are classic corporatist institutions; the state structures the opportunities for the articulation and expression of interests. *Ejidos* are legally run by the decisions of regular, ostensibly democratic mass membership assemblies, but government officials also supervise internal elections and often intervene. In practice, effective majority rule in *ejidos* depends on the balance of power between democratic forces within the community and political and economic élites both inside and outside the *ejido*.[17]

Ejidos can form regional unions to collaborate on agricultural development projects. If *ejido* assemblies decide to join a union, they elect delegates, who in turn choose the union's leadership and oversight committees. Rank and file members can participate in union meetings but cannot vote. Delegates to *ejido* unions are usually elected from outside the ranks of the existing *ejido* leadership, creating parallel authority structures that can serve as counterweights.

In practice, most *ejido* unions have been created on orders from government or ruling party officials. Most therefore either wither away or become tools of government bureaucracies.[18] For the better part of fifteen years, however, the 'Lázaro Cárdenas' Union of *Ejidos* (UELC) has been among the exceptions, vigorously defending a wide range of member interests. Its history offers not only relevant lessons for understanding the ebbs and flows of leadership accountability, it also illustrates key challenges facing the

Mexican rural development process more generally. The UELC is representative of a new generation of Mexican regional producer organizations which has united in a powerful national network to hold government rural development agencies accountable to the rural poor, the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA).[19]

The UELC brings together fifteen agrarian reform communities with over 4500 families in the southern part of the state of Nayarit, in west-central Mexico. About half of the members are indigenous people. The UELC is a long-standing political and economic actor in the region, representing about half of the peasants in its area of influence. Most members are subsistence maize producers, though some also grow other cash crops as well. The average family allotment is about 4 rain-fed ha, although actual access is unequal, ranging from 1 ha or less, up to 8–10 ha. Agrarian law limits membership to heads of households, leaving most women and landless young adults indirectly represented at best. Landless farm-workers who are not members of *ejido* families represent a significant share of the region's population, and the UELC rarely directly addresses their concerns. Most of the economically active population, with or without access to land, migrates seasonally to coastal agri-business and employment in the US, greatly complicating the sustainability of mass participation in UELC activities.

From its birth, much of the UELC's history can be seen as a series of creative responses by a new generation of peasant leaders to changing government rural development policies. The case study is organized around a series of turning points in the UELC's history, defined as moments which shaped later patterns of leadership–rank and file relations.

Turning Points in the 'Lázaro Cárdenas' Union
of Ejidos

Southern Nayarit had experienced four previous waves of peasant mobilization before the UELC emerged: the unsuccessful 1857–81 indigenous insurrection, the stalemated *cristero* uprising of the late 1920s, the victorious 1933–9 land reform movement and the largely successful 1960s *comunero* movement by indigenous communities for the restitution of lands that had been usurped by private farmers and ranchers.[20] This historical legacy left a strong imprint on the

local political culture, but not in the sense of a widely shared collective identity. Even though the class issue of land was often the key point of contention, peasants of the region remained deeply divided, with historic battles between villages over the relationship between church and state, strong ethnic differences and competing vertical patronage networks with the state. Even the broadest movement within memory, the land reform mobilization of the 1930s, was largely induced by conflict between political entrepreneurs *within* the state, leading to inequalities in the redistribution process which continue to interfere with peasant unity decades later.[21] Popular political memories were probably quite ambivalent, highlighting the importance of tactical alliances with élites at least as much as horizontal collective action in defence of class interests.

The UELC emerged in a period of growing social effervescence all over Mexico. After decades of neglect of peasant agriculture, the national government renewed its rural development efforts, including occasional support for increasingly autonomous peasant movements.[22] In 1974, under the auspices of the federal government's new Rural Development Investment Programme (PIDER), a dynamic team of community organizers brought leaders from several agrarian communities together for the first time.[23] The government also opened up a new branch of the official agricultural bank in the region; producers from isolated villages met one another for the first time in its waiting room.

Smallholders lacked bargaining power in the three markets which together shaped their terms of trade: credit, inputs and marketing of their harvests. A small group of intermediaries, operating region-wide, took advantage of peasants' lack of capital, transportation, storage facilities and market information. Monopoly control over inputs meant that producers were obliged to barter corn for fertilizer on highly unfavourable terms, unaware of the existence of official prices, while less than 5 per cent of the *ejidatarios* had access to government credit. Government agricultural bank officials collaborated with private fertilizer distributors, ignoring official price ceilings (Hernández, 1990b).

Until the arrival of the PIDER 'Brigade,' local peasant leaders reported that they were largely unaware of the loss of their surplus through tied markets and rent-seeking bureaucrats.[24] One reason was that local agents of the broader chain of intermediation leading up to large agro-industries and state enterprises were not so different from the smallholders themselves, and they were bound together in

fictive kinship and patron–client relations. One peasant recalled the story of a cat which lived in a village of mice. The cat was disguised as a mouse, so the mice did not realize that he was eating them one by one until another mouse came from afar to tell them 'don't be stupid, that's no mouse – it's a cat and he's eating you up'. This peasant told the PIDER team that they had come to 'unmask the cats' (Hernández, 1990b: 22).

The annual *ejido* evaluation and planning assemblies provided one of the first opportunities to apply pressure for more access to the government's rural development programmes. The peasants rejected the official bank's corrupt practices. When the bank cut them off in response, producers mobilized themselves to visit the branch manager and the governor. Upon arrival, they started by helping themselves to the soft drinks in the governor's office. When officials asked them who the leaders of the 'rabble' were, they answered 'we're people, not rabble'. The credit involved was not large, but their first victory showed that pressure can bring results (Hernández, 1990b).

When planting time came, fertilizer grew scarce. This was no accident; the bank was manœuvring because the *ejidos* had escaped its control. After meeting in the PIDER offices to analyse the situation and decide what to do, a delegation of 150 peasants went to meet with the governor again. When they arrived in the capital, they found moral support among the student movement, which had occupied the main square. Dividing into two groups, they simultaneously met with the governor and occupied the manager's office in the government fertilizer company. They refused to leave until the fertilizer was distributed. The governor's term was almost over, leaving him too weak to respond to the fertilizer company manager's pleas for help. Fertilizer was promised to the seventeen *ejidos* represented. The group then decided to take advantage of the trip to the city to resolve other long-standing problems of red tape and land rights. They visited the Agrarian Reform Ministry offices, leading to their second victory of the day (Hernández, 1990b: 29).

The PIDER team actively encouraged these mass protests, which were led by new young peasant leaders. The first generation of older *ejido* leaders had presided over an unequal distribution of land within the reform sector, inheriting power from the overseers of the old *haciendas* after the redistribution in the 1930s, but a new round of *ejido* elections began to bring a younger, more representative generation of community leaders to the fore. They won support

from the older *ejidatarios* who had gained little from the original land redistribution.

These first mobilizations were facilitated by the weakness of the government's National Peasant Confederation (CNC), which left a convenient vacuum in the region. On the other hand, the CNC's past track record also left peasants wary of joining organizations that seemed 'political'. The CNC had long neglected peasant concerns in favour of electoral patronage and corruption.[25] Joint teams of new *ejido* leaders and PIDER promoters convinced sceptical *campesinos* that the main purpose of the organization was economic development rather than party politics. The opinion of Doña Cuca, an indigenous *comunera*, was decisive in at least one community assembly: 'We're going to show the government that we can work hard and honorably' (interview, Jomulco, Nayarit, 1989). The quick successes of the credit and fertilizer movements showed that unity could mean strength, and the communities joined together to found a union in 1975. Fifteen hundred *campesinos* attended the founding ceremony.

The UELC combined mass protest at the state level with lobbying of federal reformists, winning the rights to the government's regional fertilizer distribution. The arrival of the first forty-one wagon-loads of fertilizer unleashed a wave of optimism and self-confidence. Broad participation continued, as the UELC built a huge new fertilizer warehouse with voluntary labour. At first, local speculators managed to take advantage of the fertilizer operation, buying up the supplies indirectly for resale, but the UELC assembly soon decided to limit sales to heads of households, at amounts sufficient for only 20 ha per sale.

From the very beginning, the UELC's bargaining power depended on new local and regional waves of participation. First, the *ejidos* themselves were revitalized, as participation by previously excluded rank and file brought new, more representative community-level leadership to power. Second, their first ad hoc meetings of local leaders laid the foundation for the formal delegate assemblies that would come to lead the first peasant-managed regional development organization in the area.

Government Intervention

The involvement of some community leaders and PIDER promoters in the popular opposition movement to the governor in 1976, led the UELC to be identified with the challengers in spite of its officially non-partisan position. The popular opposition movement was widely seen to have been denied the governorship because of fraud. Reformists then lost power at the national level when the presidency changed hands in late 1976. The UELC had grown into a regional political force, but the new leadership failed to call the regular monthly assemblies during the key political transition period of late 1976. The resulting gap between the regional and village-level leaders left the UELC highly vulnerable to the change in political climate. The new governor then expelled the PIDER organizers from the state. As one leader put it, 'we were left orphans' (Hernández, 1990b: 46). The UELC's loss of federal allies opened it up to intervention by the state government. This vulnerability was heightened by the leadership's overtly confrontational stance, which was not backed up by a consolidated base. The UELC's president even publicly refused to shake the new governor's out-stretched hand.

The tide turned against the UELC when an official audit was used to charge the leadership with fraud. Half the *ejido* delegates aligned with the official CNC and upheld the charges, while the rest defended the imprisoned president, largely as a point of principle against government intervention. The leadership's failure to account adequately for its management of UELC finances facilitated the government's divide-and-conquer strategy. The rank and file members were never able to come to their own conclusions about the charges, since the government confiscated the relevant records. In exchange for the release of the leaders, the government managed to use elections to impose its candidate on the union. Although fifty-seven delegates participated in the election, the Agrarian Reform Ministry official somehow declared a tied vote, followed by his deciding ballot.

The official winner, a pliable CNC supporter little known outside his community, promptly turned the UELC's principal asset, the fertilizer outlet, over to the government agricultural bank. At the same time, authorities cracked down on the two largest, poorest and most active communities in the UELC, reportedly imprisoning over fifty people and putting out arrest warrants for many more (mainly indigenous people), ostensibly because of conflicts about land boundaries with private farmers and ranchers.[26]

Many of the *ejido* members and authorities were unwilling to follow the union leadership's risky path of militant confrontation in

an unfavourable political climate. The defeat of the independent UELC leadership resulted from its inability to build sufficient member support to compensate for the loss of federal allies. The government's ability to divide and conquer suggests that the leadership had lost touch with the base, in part because of the weaknesses of countervailing powers, especially the *ejido* delegate assembly. In other words, the leaders' loss of accountability to the members contributed to the UELC's loss of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the government.

Reform from Above Promotes Redemocratization

The state government tried to reinforce its control over the UELC with huge infusions of resources for development projects, but without grassroots participation in their design or implementation, they quickly failed. After a wave of demoralization, suspended assemblies and the government takeover of the UELC's fertilizer outlet, a new federal food distribution programme brought fresh external allies to the region in 1980. Reformists had regained influence over food policy at the national level.[27]

Community organizers came to form democratic, autonomous village-store management committees, which would in turn form a new, region-wide Community Food Council to oversee the government's rural food distribution efforts. Organizers also inspired fifteen *ejido* leaders by bringing them to visit the most dramatic success story of peasant-managed regional development in Mexico at that time, the Coalition of Collective *Ejidos* of the Yaqui and Mayo Valleys of Sonora (CECVYM).[28]

The new national food distribution programme gave dissenters access to trucks, organizers and political legitimacy. Inchoate dissatisfaction crystallized into discreetly organized opposition, as communities regrouped and prepared to redemocratize the union. Representative leadership regained lost ground in the next round of community-level *ejido* elections, waging a non-ideological campaign to revitalize the UELC's peasant-managed economic development efforts. The key issue was to recover the fertilizer distributorship. The rising parallel leadership was able to use the Food Council as a springboard from which to confront the government-installed authorities, informally relieve them of power, ratify the change through elections and begin the process of reviving the UELC's autonomous economic development project. This leadership transition was a key turning point for the UELC, setting a pattern it would follow for years to come. The rising community-based network that gained power included both new and more experienced leaders. They achieved a high level of unity and co-ordination in the process of organizing the food stores, the Community Food Council and recovering control of the UELC itself.[29]

The UELC seemed back on track by 1981, but the alternative leadership had not agreed in advance on who should lead the organization. Two candidates emerged: one from Uzeta, a small, relatively well-endowed *ejido* that had always played a key role in the UELC leadership, and the other, a venerable leader of the much poorer, indigenous community of Jomulco (which by itself accounted for the majority of the union's membership). Union delegate voting power is by agrarian reform community (*ejido* or indigenous community), not weighted by population. Jomulco's leader still won by a small margin, ushering in an extended period of broadened participation in decision-making. The new president's moral authority and low-key, consensus-building style created an open and accessible atmosphere. For him, the union was important beyond its material contribution. 'Besides [the low fertilizer prices] the Union has helped a lot because we've shared experiences with folks we didn't even know. When we used to go to other *ejidos* we barely said hello to each other, at best. Through the organization we've all become brothers now; whenever we drop in on any *ejido* we know that we're with our own *compañeros*' (*El Día*, 22 September 1984). After a long and difficult period, the UELC revived the uneven process of creating a collective peasant identity in the region.

In sum, the Food Council programme created new community-level and region-wide instances of participation from above that were effectively appropriated from below. The opportunity to organize around one issue unleashed 'social energy' which spilled over into other development efforts. After the new round of *ejido* elections, the village-store committees and the regional Community Food Council created autonomous free spaces which allowed peasants to come together in a democratic counterweight that served as the springboard from which to launch the revitalization of the UELC. The autonomous peasant movement won an important 'war of position'.

National Networking: Independent or Autonomous?

In 1984, the UELC hosted the Sixth National Meeting of Regional Peasant Organizations, a network which then represented several hundred thousand peasants, with more than twenty-five groups from nineteen states. They campaigned for greater peasant control over the government's top-down rural development programmes, higher crop prices and greater access to inputs, marketing and processing. The network had emerged in the early 1980s, inspired in part by the CECVYM experience, to form a new political 'grey area' in Mexico, distinct from both the traditional official groups and the vertical, political opposition-oriented organizations. The new network pushed for 'winnable' demands, combining autonomous mobilization with pragmatic bargaining and concrete policy alternatives.

The UELC played a central role in this new network, proposing its formalization as the National Network of Independent Regional Peasant Organizations at the 1984 meeting. For the president, the union's independence meant that 'it doesn't get involved in politics. . . . Here in the Union we're united as one single man. Outside our doors each one follows their own path, whether it's the PRI [the government party], the PSUM [the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico], whatever party they want. But we don't deal with that here because this is *campesino* struggle, and as *campesinos* we should be united' (*El Día*, 22 September 1984). The whole group agreed with this spirit, but some activists were concerned about the confrontational associations of the word 'independent', and did not want to foreclose possible alliances with regional groups which might be nominally official but relatively autonomous in practice. Some pointed out the existence of peasant groups which were independent of the government but vertically controlled by opposition political parties.

The network was formally constituted six months later as the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA). Profound differences in interests and outlook among the member groups posed potential problems for the UNORCA, but since the UELC included both *mestizo* surplus corn producers and land-poor indigenous net consumers, then under indigenous leadership, it played a key role in weaving the UNORCA into a decentralized but cohesive network. UNORCA soon gained national stature, increasing the opportunities for co-ordinated regional actions,

national lobbying, and exchanging lessons among diverse development groups.[30]

The UELC's mobilization for the meeting certainly involved a high level of member participation; hundreds of participants from all over Mexico were housed and fed, exchanging experiences with rank and file members. For the president, one of the important reasons for the event was that 'the Union is going to get stronger, and get more organized in the *ejidos*. It's not just the *ejidos* from the Union who are participating, we're inviting folks from other *ejidos* around here so that they see what goes on in these meetings, because there are folks who don't even know what a workshop is, or why it's important. . . . Lots of folks should be here so that they can learn more about how the Union's been working for the peasant class' (*El Día*, 22 September 1984).

The meeting was a turning point for the UNORCA as a national process, involving the 'scaling up' of its own regional members. The UELC, along with other leading member groups, was very wary of creating yet another traditional national organization with a vertical pyramidal structure and centralized leadership. Instead, they chose to form a decentralized network, reinforcing accountability by keeping national authority and leadership in the hands of the regional organizations.[31]

Village-managed Housing

UELC launched its rural community housing project in 1985, with government loans and the lessons learned from the CECVYM's prior experience. Two of the UELC's team of four advisers were veterans of the CECVYM. The advisers had settled in the region and co-managed the housing project with peasant leadership. The close working relations between the advisers and the UELC deepened, reinforcing a power relationship in which the advisers were clearly working for the organization, rather than vice versa. The peasant leadership was quite open to the advisers' non-partisan political views, however, supporting both direct and representative forms of democratic management of development projects.

Ejido assemblies decided who would receive construction loans and, together with the individual participants, decided how to manage the construction process.[32] The design of the housing project encouraged direct beneficiary participation and trained

intermediate level *campesino* activists to forge stronger links between the communities and the UELC leadership. Most prior UELC activities had been production oriented, helping landed heads of households, but the housing programme, like the Food Council, benefited landless members of the community, especially grown children of *ejidatarios*. Equitable and efficient project implementation was reinforced by the systematic decentralization of decision-making. Activists who had played key roles in the housing project won unanimous election to the UELC leadership in 1986.

When Juan Franques stepped down in 1986 he had served since 1981 — an unusually long period. First he had completed the time remaining from his predecessor's term, and then the delegate assembly extended his own term of office by a year to ensure continuity in the implementation of the housing project. His leadership saw the UELC through the transition from political opposition to economic project management, which required the decentralization of power to a more technically oriented, younger generation of community leaders and advisers. His leadership was unusual because of his capacity to delegate economic management decisions effectively without provoking any questioning of his political authority.

Corn Producers Mobilize

Squeezed between rising inflation and falling government input subsidies, corn production became less and less profitable. Across the country, coalitions of small and medium-sized grain producers, many led by UNORCA groups, took peaceful protest actions to encourage agricultural policy-makers to give more attention to the soaring costs of production.[33] The UELC was one of the first, leading three dramatic waves of mass mobilization for higher corn prices beginning in 1982. Producers repeatedly took over dozens of government warehouses, especially in the 1986 mobilization. Originally called by the CNC, the UELC ended up participating actively in the protest. Broadly representative delegations travelled to meet with Mexico City policy-makers, who steered them towards promises of local development projects instead of price increases.[34] The actual implementation of the projects turned out to depend on the governor's consent. Promises were broken and the UELC responded by suspending payments on its housing loans.

The 'Corn Strike' movement peaked in a massive ten-day

blockade of the international highway in 1987. Organizers convinced the local radio station to broadcast the call to action. Participants closed bars, to prevent possible disorder. The decision to take over the highway was made in spontaneous mass *ejido* assemblies, and the one-hour-on, one-hour-off blockade involved over 3000 peasants. This UELC-led movement broadened into the Producers' Association of Southern Nayarit, including much of the base of the CNC. Vehicles with tourists, children and chemicals were allowed through, while organizers explained their cause and raised funds among the motorists. With the unionized truck drivers, they explained that the crop support price was like their minimum wage. The movement was protected from repression by a combination of its peaceful and moderate tone, its breadth and the support of the official party's candidate for governor.[35]

The UELC then organized *ejido* assemblies alongside the highway, followed by union delegate assemblies. While this form of organization probably limited input from the many non-members present, it also blocked reported government efforts to infiltrate and disrupt the action, guaranteeing an autonomous decision-making process. The *ejido* assemblies were the crucial arenas of participation in the crop price mobilization. These democratic spaces kept the leadership in touch with the base and maintained discipline, thereby protecting against possible external provocation.

Through negotiations with the Planning and Budget Ministry, the movement won an 8000 peso per ton price increase — a symbolic victory at best. To add to the symbolism, however, the government handed the distribution of this bonus to the CNC, effectively excluding the UELC. The corn price movement was remarkably broad, but resulted in the appearance of political clout rather than actual economic concessions for the UELC.

Peasant Women and the 'Self-defence Economy'

Most peasant organizations in Latin America exclude women, formally or informally, especially where agrarian laws exclude women from access to land. Mexican *ejidos* specifically exclude women from land rights, except for widows and some single mothers. In the UELC, however, *ejido* women managed to gain representation at the regional level for the first time in Mexico.

To qualify for low-interest loans, the government housing agency

had obliged the UELC to carry out an extensive survey of its members' economic situations. This participatory experience had highlighted the importance of the previously invisible, informal sector of the local economy. As corn production prospects dimmed, the UELC's advisers elaborated a development strategy known as the 'Self-defence Economy',[36] designed to increase regional self-sufficiency through household and community production of basic goods, especially food, in order to buffer the impact of inflation 'imported' from the rest of the economy.

Peasant women were major actors in the local informal economy, but they lacked organizing experience. At the urging of wives of active *ejido* members, women met in their communities to analyse the cost of living as part of the campaign for higher crop support prices. Together with two female UELC advisers, the women developed a series of community-based projects that revived the traditionally diversified 'backyard economy', thereby becoming part of the regional economic development effort.[37]

Creating space for women's representation in a male-dominated organization proved easier said than done. The organizers often depended on the wives of *ejido* officials for their initial support. They integrated themselves by preparing food for the *ejido* festivals, at the same time as they moved into the more ambitious income-generating projects. Rather than welcoming this participation, however, some union men put obstacles in their path. Some leaders blocked the women's access to development agency funds assigned to their projects, feeling threatened by the success of autonomous groups within the union. Official politicians from outside the UELC also attempted to co-opt the movement. With the help of two veteran advisers, the women still managed to form a regional network of their fifteen community-based groups, known in official parlance as Women's Agro-Industrial Units (UAIMs).[38]

In spite of their traditional male distrust of women's empowerment, the UELC leadership soon realized that they could gain both economic resources and valuable political capital from the movement. The Women's Network of UAIMs was granted official representation at the assembly of union delegates, the first case ever in Mexico. As federal funds then became available, the UELC leadership allied with past rivals from the CNC to win over most of the UAIM leadership from their original, more independently-minded organizers. The resulting politicization of the UAIMs constrained the progress of their economic projects. In sum, formal representation did not translate automatically into increased power *vis-à-vis* the central leadership, but the more active UAIMs continued to defend their autonomy within the UELC.

Electoral Politics: Citizenship or Clientelism?

While gender constraints to accountability were primarily internal, the UELC's next turning point highlights the impact of national politics on leadership–base relations. The UELC's demands had always been more economic than political. Electoral politics were widely seen as corrupting. But the rise of the centre-left nationalist opposition made the 1988 presidential race genuinely competitive in many regions for the first time. Previously unseen differences between the UELC leadership and rank and file membership emerged.

The official presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, made important concessions to peasant demands in his political canvassing, and personally visited the UELC to show his support for the UELC's approach to rural development.[39] He even called on the president of the UELC to speak in a public campaign event.[40] The UELC's leaders were greatly impressed, and moved to take advantage of this opportunity to bypass their conservative local rivals in the official CNC. The UELC's leaders supported Salinas's policy proposals, but many members sympathized with the principal opposition candidate, Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas, son of the UELC's namesake, Lázaro Cárdenas, who as Mexico's president had redistributed most of the land in the region in the 1930s.

As a development organization, the UELC was committed to defending its members' common economic interests, but leadership involvement in party politics tended to divide the membership, as had happened in 1976. The leadership put more energy into consolidating their alliances with politicians than into building a consensus among the membership. As one put it, 'the time has come to become politicians — we have to look for godfathers higher up' (interview, Ahuacatlán, Nayarit, 1989). Did the leadership's support for Salinas imply a loss of autonomy for the organization? Some real concessions to peasant organizations seemed in the offing, but personal ambition undoubtedly played a role as well. UELC leaders appeared to have chosen their political strategy autonomously, without significant external intervention, but they hardly consulted the membership either.

By election time in 1988, membership dissatisfaction with this political decision was still too dispersed to be expressed through the regional participation channels, such as the delegate assembly. In the short run, members combined 'exit' with 'voice', participating less in the union while electing new *ejido* commissioners who opposed the central UELC leadership. In the 1990 municipal elections, the former president of the UELC, Ignacio García Buneo, became mayor of the regional centre, Ahuacatlán. Preliminary reports indicate that he did not relinquish *de facto* control over the UELC, leaving it greatly weakened. By late 1990, according to estimates, total regular attendance at *ejido* and union meetings was outstripped by the revived participation of women in the UAIMs.

Leaders, Advisers and Membership Influence

The UELC leadership represented many key member interests during much of its history, whether as a resistance movement challenging the state, a productive economic enterprise, lobbying group or a citizenship training centre. But why? Most of the leaders were committed to regular elections, and their ongoing competition with the official peasant federation made them care about member interests and opinions. Yet when leaders strayed, the formal mechanisms of accountability did not operate 'automatically', and members dealt unevenly with their discontent. These lags may be due in part to the decentralized and seasonal rhythms of agricultural and migratory life — a fact often reiterated by local observers. But the inconsistent development of opportunities for direct membership participation in the UELC's ongoing activities is also part of the answer. In retrospect, much of what initially looked like active participation to outside observers may in fact have been more induced or instrumental mobilization than active involvement in decision-making.

The UELC's leaders and advisers shared many goals, but they tended to differ over the relative importance of membership empowerment. The leadership did not promote systematic political education in favour of participation for its own sake, but the leaders' non-ideological pragmatism did lead them to offer practical, instrumental incentives for collective action. It was the union's two generations of advisers, covering the periods 1974–6 and 1980–7, who consistently injected democratic principles into the

organizing process. They played crucial roles in most of the democratizing turning points, which involved repeated cycles of mass participation in campaigns for key member demands. For the leaders, direct democracy was sometimes an efficient means of mobilization, while for most of the advisers it was an end in itself. The advisers' room for manoeuvre was limited, however, by their overriding respect for the elected leadership's authority.

MAPPING LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY

The UELC's history shows that it is difficult to paint leadership accountability in dichotomous, black and white terms. Shades of grey are more appropriate for analysing change over time, but we are limited by the lack of graduated 'indicators' of *degrees* of accountability. The following 'map' of leadership accountability both describes its variation and suggests possible explanations.

Accountability has both internal and external dimensions. Leadership accountability refers to members' capacity to hold leaders responsible for their actions, but it also requires some degree of autonomy from external domination. Autonomy refers here to a group's control over setting its own goals and making its own decisions without external intervention, whether by governments, political parties, religious groups or development agencies. Autonomy is no guarantee of accountability, however; it is essential if leaders are to fend off external threats and remain responsive to membership concerns, but leaders can also build up their own sources of bureaucratic, economic, political or charismatic power, becoming autonomous from the membership as well — in other words, less accountable and more 'oligarchic'. With these two distinct dimensions of accountability in mind, one can begin to 'map' the power relations of social organization leaders. How much power do they exert over the membership, and vice versa, and how much power do external actors, in this case the government, exert over them?[41]

One can frame degrees of leadership autonomy from the government along a continuum that ranges from high to low. Similarly, one can plot leadership accountability to the membership in terms that range from high to low (conversely, low accountability to members can be seen as high leadership autonomy from the base). Along each dimension, one can see changes over time. Putting the

two dimensions together, one can chart the history of the leaders' changing internal and external power relations.

Figure 1 illustrates the political trajectory of the UELC leadership, from its founding in 1975 through the 1988 presidential elections. The UELC's trajectory began at point A, in 1974-5, as reform-minded rural development promoters began organizing with local leaders around pressing felt needs. Mass participation and accountability were high in the founding fertilizer and credit access movements. The mobilization was not independent of the government, however, even though important agencies were its main targets; one cannot understand the course of Mexican social movements with a monolithic view of the state. The whole process was unleashed in large measure because of the strength of reformists within certain parts of the state apparatus at that time.[42] By the

leadership accountability
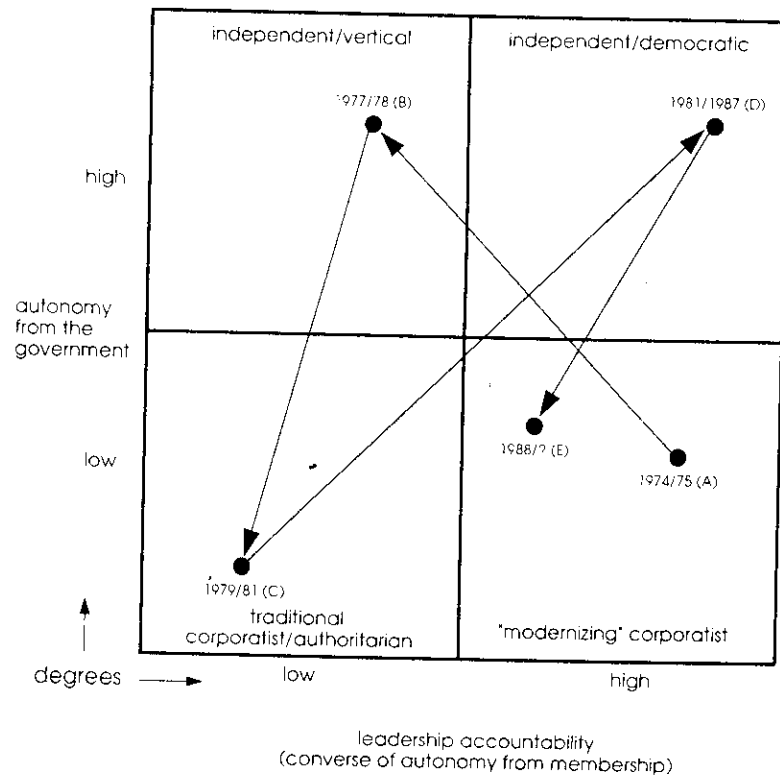(converse of autonomy from membership)

Figure 1. *Map of Power Relations of Social Organization Leadership (Case: Trajectory of the Union de Ejidos 'Lázaro Cárdenas')*

late 1980s, this type of 'post-populist' government reform effort came to be known as 'social dialogue' (*concertación social*).[43]

After the fraudulent 1976 state elections, with the change in presidency and the resulting expulsion of the UELC's reformist allies, the leadership began to confront the government more directly. The union leadership moved up on the autonomy scale, but as it lost touch with much of the base, it also moved down on the accountability scale, to point B. The government then moved in to 'divide and conquer' and imposed its own leaders on the union, pushing the UELC far down on both the autonomy and accountability scales to point C. Traditional corporatists within the Mexican government frequently combine co-optation with repression of social movements.

With the beginning of the redemocratization process, encouraged by the arrival of new external allies, the union began the long climb up to point D, high on both the autonomy and accountability scales. This shift inaugurated the most extended participatory phase in the union's history, beginning with the Community Food Council — a key parallel political counterweight — and continuing with the self-managed housing project, the campaigns for higher crop prices and the women's projects. All of these efforts decentralized the decision-making process, creating or reinforcing broadened opportunities for rank and file participation in addition to the regular union and *ejido* assemblies.

With the controversies generated by the 1988 presidential elections, however, the leadership began to make political alliances without full consultation of the base. Since the housing project, the new UELC leadership had devolved relatively little power to members and community leaders. They were very cautious, for example, about sharing crucial financial information, to prevent possible manipulation by political rivals. This fear may have been well founded, but also reflected limited communication between the leadership and the membership, which in turn was both cause and effect of the emergence of 'oligarchic' tendencies. The regular operations of the union began to be affected. For example, the fertilizer sales office only opened at 9 a.m. — rather late in the day for most peasant producers.

The growing distance between the leaders and the rank and file is shown by the slide down both the autonomy and accountability scales to point E. This movement is not definitive, nor is it as dramatic as the earlier period of direct government intervention.

The union had built up a rich internal political life, and multiple possibilities for future changes in leadership relations with the rank and file remained. One is reminded, however, of the repeated tendency for electoral politics to 'spill over' into the attempt to build a non-partisan organization to represent broader class interests.

The figure shows that accountability and autonomy are distinct but also related. For accountability to be high, autonomy must also go up (i.e. point D). But accountability can drop while autonomy either rises or falls (i.e. points B and E). Given the importance of democratically-minded outside allies, increased accountability is more consistently associated with an empowered, active membership than with very high degrees of autonomy from external actors.

CONCLUSIONS

Social science has yet to offer a general framework for explaining the ebbs and flows of organizational democracy. But one can take a genre of cases and work on particular dimensions of the problem. This study charted the process of leadership accountability and member participation in a regional organization typical of a growing trend in the Mexican peasant movement. The account showed how the interaction of internal and external factors shaped each turning point in its history. Leadership autonomy and accountability were then disentangled and mapped over time. But can one begin to draw more general conclusions about the process of democratic institution building?

Perhaps the most important conclusion is that organizations do not build internal democracy through a linear process. Rather, the development of internal democracy is inherently an uneven and vulnerable process which depends on the presence of countervailing forces capable of offsetting the ever present dangers posed by the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy'. But what do these countervailing forces look like? They reveal themselves with greatest clarity during dramatic turning points in an organization's history. But to understand the origins of these determinants of the rise or fall of leadership accountability, one needs to analyse how power relations are expressed *in between* those moments when they are expressed through overt conflict. In this context, the most important counterweights for promoting leadership accountability were participatory subgroups within the peasant organization, often led by middle-level leaders.

The case analysis reinforces a point which is quite familiar to most anthropologists: only rarely do peasant organizations actually make major decisions in mass meetings or through voting. More often, such formal procedures ratify decisions made previously, through subtle informal debates and pressures, as shown by the way in which the Community Food Council created the space from which the UELC could be redemocratized — first *de facto*, and only then formally. The relations between regional leaders and the rank and file were largely mediated by community-level leaders. The single most important kind of subgroup within the union was the member *ejidos*, but their formal operation alone was insufficient to ensure the democratization of the UELC — perhaps because they were so diverse, and were rarely all vibrant and participatory at the same time.

Ejido commissioners, union delegates, local and regional assemblies and project-specific committees created alternative channels for the direct expression of membership power within the union. The village-store committees, the housing project task forces and the *ejido* assemblies that met while occupying the highway are all important examples of both formal and informal counterweights to centralized leadership power.

Alternative channels consist of the effective linkages between the base of a large membership organization and its formal pinnacle which *add* to the conventional pyramidal election of union delegates and leaders. Such parallel linkages include informal as well as formal opportunities for members to make, carry out or oversee important group decisions.[44] As in the case of the housing project, when active rank and file members and community-level leaders were able to 'scale up' and play *regional* leadership roles, the boundaries between central leaders and the rank and file began to blur. The Community Food Council was formally a parallel regional group made up of village representatives, which in turn became the springboard for reopening political space within the UELC.

Participatory subgroups are crucial for leadership accountability. In their absence, leaders of large organizations only need to deal with atomized individuals who lack systematic opportunities to share information and to generate alternative opinions, counterproposals and contenders for leadership. In contrast, subgroups increase member bargaining power because they can broker leaders' access to resources they want, such as votes, mobilization capacity, money and information.[45] But the existence of subgroups alone

does not necessarily imply that members will gain power. Subgroups may also only represent small minorities, and are therefore necessary but not sufficient to encourage leadership accountability to the majority. Furthermore, the lags which separate the waves of membership pressure for accountable leadership show that if members are disconnected or divided among themselves, leaders can maintain control by appearing to mediate, to represent the general interest, or through conventional divide and conquer tactics.

It is important to recognize that 'scaling up' grassroots development organizations puts internal democracy at risk, but cycles of participation can offset tendencies towards centralization. In large organizations, formal and informal opportunities for participation mediate these cycles because they encourage or discourage different kinds of action. Inherited institutions thus condition mass participation, yet collective action (or inaction) can in turn open or close future opportunities for participation. Regular elections are not enough: organizational democracy depends on the emergence and consolidation of internal checks and balances as well. Multiple, alternative channels for both direct and representative democracy shape the balance of power between central leaders and the base.

NOTES

1. On grassroots development and local initiative, see, among others, Annis (1988), Annis and Hakim (1988), Durning (1989), Korten (1990), Leonard (1982), Nash et al. (1976), Ralston et al. (1982) and Uphoff (1986).

2. Esman and Uphoff (1984) highlight these organizational features based on a very convincing comparison of 150 different local organizations, but they do not

account for, where these characteristics come from, nor do they focus on change over time.

3. As O'Donnéll (1988: 283) put it, 'if political democracy is to be consolidated, democratic practice needs to be spread throughout society, creating a rich fabric of democratic institutions and authorities'.

4. See Boschi (1984) for a provocative discussion of this point, based on the Brazilian experience. For suggestive discussions of leadership–community relations during the anti-Pinochet mobilizations in Chile, see Oxhorn (1991) and Schneider (1991).

5. Summarizing Roberto Michels's classic formulation, 'democracy is inconceivable without organization, . . . the weapon of the weak in their struggle with the strong. . . . From a means, organization becomes an end. . . . Who says organization, says oligarchy' (Michels, 1959: 21, 373, 401). Zald and Ash (1966) discuss the intellectual history of this approach, and suggest possible countertendencies.

6. The literature on clientelism is rich and nuanced. See Schmidt et al. (1977) for one of the most comprehensive surveys. Ostensibly traditional patterns of dependent vertical linkages manage to find many 'modern' guises within which to reproduce themselves, yet few analysts focus on the countertendency — the transition from clientelism to citizenship among the peasantry. See Fox (1990a) for further discussion of this problem.

7. See, for example, the innovative work on co-operatives by Attwood and Baviskar (1988) and Tendler et al. (1983), as well as Sabel (1981) on corporatist trade unions. The tension between control and representation is especially pronounced in authoritarian corporatist systems. Official union leaders, in Mexico or Brazil, must represent some member interests some of the time, or they will lose their legitimacy and eventually fail in their task of controlling the workforce and blocking competing alternatives. Such systems are characterized by complex and variable combinations of carrots and sticks — but for one to work, the other is usually needed.

8. The 'political opportunity structure' approach has been increasingly applied to the analysis of the rise and fall of social movements. Tarrow (1989) offers a very useful survey; see, especially, Piven and Cloward (1977). To my knowledge, however, this approach has not been applied to leadership–base relations *within* social organizations.

9. See, for example, Dahl (1982).

10. Democratic mobilization is facilitated in those free spaces where distinct forms of self-identification overlap and can therefore reinforce one another (i.e. interests of class, gender, ethnicity, neighbourhood, religious faith, locality, workplace, etc.). See Evans and Boyte (1986).

11. Advocates of direct democracy as a dichotomous alternative to the oligarchical tendencies of delegated, representative forms generally fail to acknowledge the facility with which mass assemblies can be manipulated. The larger the organization, the more difficult it is for direct democratic forms to live up to their promise.

12. This problem was particularly pronounced in much of the literature on the issue of popular participation in the Nicaraguan revolution (i.e. Ruchwarger, 1987). For especially sensitive exceptions, see Gould (1990a, 1990b).

13. If the group's problems are beyond repair, its collapse may be quite appropriate, especially if the 'social energy' unleashed by the frustrated mobilization effort were to re-emerge and find greater success at a different time and place (see

Hirschman, 1984). This study does not focus on these 'lose-lose' scenarios, frequent as they may be in practice.

14. For a careful analysis of village-level protest which highlights hidden 'voices', see Scott (1986).

15. On the dynamics specific to rural democratization, see Fox (1990a).

16. Regional peasant organizations face inherent contradictions. Since rural élites often centralize power at the regional level, rural membership organizations must also concentrate power regionally in order to become effective counterweights. Yet to remain internally democratic and to reduce vulnerability to external intervention, regional organizations must decentralize power internally as well. These twin challenges therefore pose a dilemma: *how can a grassroots organization both centralize and decentralize power at the same time?*

17. Until 1983, runner-up slates in elections became official oversight committees, charged with monitoring the activities of the winning leadership team (*consejos de vigilancia*). For further discussion of *ejido* politics, see Esteva (1983) and Gordillo (1988a, 1988b).

18. A national survey found that 237 UEs were actually functioning by 1981, representing more than 4700 *ejido* and agrarian communities, over 20 per cent of the total (Fernández and Rello, 1984: 12).

19. Since its founding in the mid-1980s, the UNORCA and its various members have won important victories in a wide range of policy areas, pursuing the common goal of increasing organized peasant participation in the formulation and implementation of rural development policy. For analyses of the UNORCA, see Fox and Gordillo (1989), Bartra (1989a, 1989b), Fernández (1991), García (1989), Hernández (1989a, 1989b, 1990a, 1991), Harvey (1990) and Martínez Borrego (1991).

20. Distinct from *ejidatarios, comuneros* are members of the less well-known officially recognized indigenous form of land tenure, the 'agrarian community' (*comunidad agraria*).

21. For detailed historical analysis of peasant movements in the region, see Hernández (1988).

22. For more on the government's contradictory reform efforts during this period, see Esteva (1983), Grindle (1977) and Sanderson (1981), among others.

23. For background on PIDER, see Cernea (1979, 1983), Lindheim (1986) and Page (1989).

24. Local leaders called the PIDER team a 'brigade'. Not only did the organizers travel in a jeep, but some armed themselves because of threats of violence from local élites.

25. On the CNC in the 1970s, see Hardy (1984).

26. A national study of newspaper reports of human rights violations found that Nayarit suffered to a degree far out of proportion to its share of the population during 1978 and 1979, with 20 per cent of the arbitrary detentions in the country (Concha, 1988).

27. COPLAMAR, a special anti-poverty agency, launched the rural food programme in 1979, and the Mexican Food System strategy for revitalizing peasant grain production was announced in 1980 (see Fox, 1986, 1990b, 1991, 1992).

28. Founded after a series of massive land invasions in 1975-6, the CECVYM grew to national political and economic importance, showing that the *ejido* sector could produce efficiently if organized democratically. The coalition was also unusual in Mexico because it was the only large 'second-level' organization to have direct

membership elections for regional leadership (rather than indirectly through *ejido* delegates). On the formation and consolidation of the CECVYM, see Gordillo (1988a, 1988b) and Otero (1989).

29. After the 1981 elections, the new governor, an old-time populist, turned most of the community stores in the region over to his political operatives. Only those in the union's *ejidos* remained community managed (Hernández, 1990b).

30. For detailed regional case studies and oral histories of UNORCA member groups during this key growth phase, see the weekly page in *El Día*, 'Del Campo y del Campesino', published from 1984 to 1986. For further discussion of UNORCA, see Fox and Gordillo (1989) and Hernández (1989a, 1989b, 1990a, 1991).

31. The leaders understood that the process of building autonomous national forms of representation independent of political parties was going to be a gradual one. As the president of the UELC put it, 'these gatherings are part of a struggle which has begun. These struggles do not get resolved right away, in one push, they come with time, as the wheel goes around, as they say' (*El Día*, 22 September 1984).

32. New community-managed construction enterprises generated four months of employment for approximately 1700 people, saving them from having to migrate for a season. The project was also the first to convince the government low-income housing agency to adapt its procedures to rural realities. For further details, see UELC (1985).

33. On the crisis of Mexico's corn economy in the 1980s, see Hewitt de Alcántara (1992).

34. UELC representatives insisted on travelling to the capital separately from the CNC officials 'because of the flies' (cited in Hernández, 1990b).

35. As Mexico's ruling official party continued to lose ground in the cities in the 1980s, rural votes became increasingly contested. Electoral dynamics are crucial for determining the outcome of regional producer price movements, particularly if one compares the partial victories won in Nayarit with two other 1986 corn price movements. During Chihuahua's most contested election ever, a broad, non-partisan peasant movement won significant price increases, while in Chiapas, where opposition has long been stifled, the governor (a general) responded with repression (Fox and Gordillo, 1989).

36. A more literal translation of the 'economía de trincheras' would be the 'trench economy'.

37. Ironically, the traditional backyard economy had been greatly undermined by government agricultural officials. Corrupt functionaries, especially the notorious crop insurance agents, grew accustomed to taking their bribes in kind, by loading their trucks up with family barnyard animals (Hernández, 1990b).

38. For more on UAIMs, see Arizpe and Botey (1987). For further discussion of the women's organizing experience in the UELC in a comparative context, see Stephen (1991).

39. The government's new rural development policy promised to offer substantive reforms without requiring traditional 'corporatist' political subordination, in a policy known as 'social dialogue' (*concertación social*). For the Mexican president's earlier academic analyses of the politics of rural development, see Salinas de Gortari (1982, 1984). For further analysis of the first two years of Salinas's actual implementation of *concertación*, see Bartra (1990), Dresser (1992), Hernández (1989a) and Moguel (1991).

40. As one local observer quipped, 'since Salinas said "Let's hear Nacho speak",

his*feet haven't touched the ground' (interview with Pilar López, Ahuacatlán, Nayarit, 1989).

41. The role of external actors is not necessarily negative, since they can ally with concerned members to *increase* leadership accountability, as they did in 1980. External funding of mass membership organizations, for example, necessarily affects the balance of power between leaders and members; the actual impact depends on the nature of the aid and how it is delivered.

42. More generally, the prospects for internal democracy in Mexican peasant organizations also depend significantly on the role of the state. The state has often blocked the consolidation of democratic challenges through multiple combinations of repression and 'divide and conquer' tactics, yet it is not monolithic. Precisely because the Mexican state plays such a major role in structuring the limits and possibilities for organization, the role of reformists within the state turns out to be a crucial determinant of grassroots mobilization. Not only does their rise and fall within the state condition degrees of freedom of organization, but both the UELC's founding and its later redemocratization indicate that the availability of state allies willing and able to support autonomy and internal democracy within social organizations can be decisive. For a more theoretical discussion of this point, see Fox (1986, 1992).

43. By 1990, the policy of social dialogue appeared to create new, more pluralistic relations with autonomous social organizations in some cases, while in others, it simply 'modernized' the Mexican government's traditional corporatist political controls.

44. This concept was introduced in Fox and Hernández (1989) as 'intermediate instances of participation'. The term 'intermediate' referred to the space 'in between' the central leadership and the rank and file. 'Instance' referred to the varied range of opportunities for alternative forms of participation. The result of combining these terms, however, was overly vague, and 'alternative channels' is more precise.

45. Moe (1980) offers a useful discussion of leadership-subgroup interaction in the context of a sophisticated analysis of the determinants of participation in economic interest groups.

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Reforming Peasant Production in Africa: Power and Technological Change in Two Nigerian Villages

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ABSTRACT

Differential access to state-allocated incentives, based on socio-economic inequalities in rural society, is commonly assumed to be a key determinant of change in rural Africa. This article argues that, given the spatial diversity of Africa's rural political economies, analysis of the politics of rural change needs to be premised on an appreciation of the multiplicity of social relations through which rural power structures are configured. Data from a field study of a World Bank assisted agricultural development project in Lafia, Nigeria, are used to illustrate the manner in which spatial and inter-community variations in responses to commercialization, cultural divisions and the reorganization of political relations during the colonial era combine to sustain regional power structures which are defined by such differences. A comparative analysis of two village communities at opposite ends of the regional spectrum of commercialization is employed to demonstrate how such power structures provide a framework within which the political conditions of access operate to the advantage of both dominant socio-economic strata and members of particular cultural communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

A widely shared consensus now exists that state domination of economies has been the root cause of poor agricultural performance in sub-Saharan Africa. This has encouraged the view that the promotion of macro-economic frameworks within which resource allocation and producer decision-making are governed by market signals is essential to improving productivity in peasant-dominated agricultural systems (see Crook, 1988).