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Additional titles in preparation

Searching for Agrarian Reform in Latin America

EDITED BY

William C. Thiesenhusen

1989

Boston

UNWIN HYMAN

London Sydney Wellington

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Chapter 10

Agrarian Reform in Mexico: Capitalism and the State

Gerardo Otero*

The Mexican agrarian reform is often touted by government officials as the product of a "peasant" revolution which brought justice to the rural masses. In contrast to this view, the critical history presented here argues that land redistribution in Mexico was the way chosen to develop and entrench capitalism in Mexico. The end result of Mexican agrarian reform has been a pauperization of rural people that has brought both peasant and capitalist agriculture to a crisis. Because redistribution has stopped recently, land reform has ceased to strengthen the relationship between the government and the peasantry. As a direct result, the viability of the state has become open to question.

SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE AGRARIAN REFORM

The origins of the agrarian reform may be traced to Articles 27 and 123 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. These two articles embody the policy essence of the revolution vis-à-vis the peasantry and the working class, respectively. They represent advanced social thought when seen in relation to postrevolutionary Mexican society. Indeed, they became the basis for future peasants' and workers' struggles, and the resulting organizations were folded into the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI), presently the dominant political party.

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More specifically, Article 27 was a negotiated settlement between two predominant political factions—one led by Alvaro Obregón and the other by Venustiano Carranza—in order to deprive the more radical revolutionary peasant factions—led by Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa—of their original demands. With the completion of this move, the radicals lost a final political battle against the reformist constitutionalists, coupled, as it was, with the military defeat of both Zapata's and Villa's armies. Thus, the Constitution of 1917 marked the rise of a new and reformist regime from a bloody revolution.

The Mexican revolution was a costly social process in which one million persons died. Those who gained from it were not the ones who sacrificed the most. The revolution primarily helped the agrarian bourgeoisie of the North, not the peasantry who had been the primary revolutionary force. On the other hand, the reformist leadership managed to form an alliance between the working class and the constitutionalist movement. Thus, some Mexican political scientists conceptualize the revolution as a political rather than a social revolution because it did away with a highly exclusionary political regime, one in which political power was based on landownership. Nonetheless, the main trajectory of the new society was capitalist development, which reformed property relations in the countryside but stopped far short of abolishing private ownership. Thus, while the revolution eliminated the barrier to capitalist development in agriculture that had been erected by the large and inefficient landholders, it did not modify property relations fundamentally (Córdova 1972).

The Reform Laws of the Porfirio Díaz Regime

The histories of the various regions that make up the Mexican republic are sufficiently distinct that the agricultural population of Mexico today is quite heterogeneous. The rural people of central Mexico had an important precolonial cultural heritage, while the North was significantly settled only in the last century.

Before the revolution, the Roman Catholic Church was the largest landowner, representing a type of feudal ownership which markedly contrasted with the liberal ideology that had emerged in other sectors. A clash resulted from the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie which demanded the development of agriculture so that its own growth would not be stunted by increased wage demands and falling profits. Meanwhile, the Church continued to maintain large acreages of uncultivated land and represented a major fetter to development.

The liberal reforms of 1857 provided the legal instruments to expropriate the Church's landholdings. But the same law, aided by further legislation passed during the *Porfiriato* (the prerevolutionary period, 1876-1910, during which Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico), was applied as

well to Indian community land. Thus, after the liberal reform laws and during the *Porfiriato*, the Indian communities were deprived of 90 percent of their land.

Land monopolization continued at a brisk pace during the *Porfiriato*, abetted by the *baldo* laws of 1883 and 1884, which provided for the surveying and sale of "vacant" lands. For these purposes, surveying companies (*compañías deslindadoras*) were created. These companies were given the right to keep one-third of the surveyed land as payment for their work; the rest was sold by the government. The surveying companies eventually owned 49 million hectares, or one-fourth of Mexico's territory; once surveyed, the companies purchased much of the land sold by the state. They also surveyed the Indian and peasant towns and communities, arbitrarily deeming the land to be "vacant" or eligible for surveying as they went. When Indian communities lost their land, their members were converted into laborers or peons, working for the resultant haciendas or the surveying companies; many became unemployed.

The immediate outcome of the liberal reforms was thus a transfer in landownership from the Church and the Indian communities to existing and new *latifundistas*. Large holders in the private sector of Mexican agriculture saw that they could enlarge their farms at little cost. For decades that followed, they satisfied their voracious appetites for land by putting their fences around Indian communal land. They also devised ways of attaching newly landless Indian peasants to the land, for example, through various debts the workers would incur with the landowner (credits for wedding feasts, goods advanced at *tiendas de raya* or hacienda stores, and so on). These debts were inherited by the peons' children, who were not able to give up their "jobs" until they had completely paid any past-due accounts to the landlord (López Cámara 1967; Hansen 1974).

During the *Porfiriato*, the infrastructure for the development of industry was being established (for example, a large railroad network). But, paradoxically, the *Porfiriato* also maintained and reinforced feudal, and even slave, forms of labor in farming. It was only through a ruthlessly repressive dictatorship that these contradictions in economic structure were maintained for so long. In the end, the inconsistencies between capitalist development and the archaic land-tenure pattern became so antagonistic that a revolution was fought to alter the entire system.

Industry was still a nascent sector during the *Porfiriato*. As of 1910, the main capital investments were concentrated in railroads (40 percent of the total) and mining (17 percent), followed by industry (6 percent) and oil (5.9 percent). The greatest part of this investment—77 percent—was made up of foreign capital (Gilly 1974, 21).

The *Porfiriato* promoted a massive flow of North American investments into Mexico; this was a decisive step for Mexican integration into the world economy. Indeed, this occurrence, along with two others, is seen by Friederich Katz (1982) as a prime mover of the revolution. The second motivating factor was the expropriation of Indian communities; the third was the pacification of nomadic Indians on the northern frontier that transformed the area into a peaceful and permeable border with the United States. The flow of North American capital into the Mexican economy followed soon thereafter, and the downturn of the world economy in 1907 had dramatic effects in Mexico's northern states.

The revolutionary movement coalesced in different ways in the various regions of Mexico. In central Mexico, the main social rift was between the expropriated Indian communities and the *hacendados*. In the North, revolution was led by the *hacendados* who were excluded from political power during the *Porfiriato*. They formed a broad and unlikely alliance with their own peons, small farmers, ranchers, and urban middle classes. In central Mexico, specifically in Morelos, Indian peasants had been organized to oppose the *Porfiriato* since 1908, before Francisco I. Madero had even called for the revolution's first shot (Womack 1969). Unlike the broad alliance in the North which was represented by *hacendados* (like Madero), the Morelos peasantry named their leader from among their own community, Emiliano Zapata.¹ Followers of Zapata decided to ally themselves with Madero and the northern *hacendados* because an effort to air their grievances had been repulsed at the state level.

By the time of the Zapatista uprising, sharecroppers and poor farmers were ready to join with the revolutionary movement. *Peónes acasillados* (peasants resident on haciendas) preferred their current lives to the uncertainty of revolt: "Only rarely did they [the Zapatistas] recruit rebels among the *gente de casa* [resident peons], who anyway preferred their bonded security, and nowhere evidently did they excite these dependent peons to rise up and seize the plantations they worked on" (Womack 1969, 87). The most militant and combative of Zapatistas were poor peasant producers and share tenants. In 1911, once Zapatistas began to implement local land reform according to the Plan de San Luis Potosí, Madero's revolutionary manifesto, "armed parties of sharecroppers and poor farmers began invading fields.... The defenseless plantation managers and peons resident on the land the squatters claimed had no alternative but to meet the revolutionary demands" (Womack 1969, 87).

The prerevolutionary situation in the North was distinct. La Laguna, located in the north-central region, was settled only in the last century; it did not harbor an extant, sedentary Indian population as did so much

of the highlands of central Mexico. Among the difficulties faced by settlers were the repeated attacks by warrior and rootless Indian tribes of the North. These Apaches had always been outside of Aztec influence. Whereas the Laguneros had been the native settlers before 1750, their population was so decimated by the struggles against Spaniards and smallpox that, by the turn of this century, there was hardly a trace of Indian culture in La Laguna (Beals 1932).

In contrast to peons from central haciendas who tended to remain loyal to their patrons and spurn the revolution, peons and *hacendados* in the North rebelled together against the central government. Madero, a *hacendado* from the state of Coahuila, led the rebellion. This was partly due to the fact that, in the North, debt servitude had lost its sway since mid-nineteenth century because of the development of mining and even some industry which offered alternative employment opportunities (Katz 1982, 28-29). Even the *tiendas de raya* were different in the North. While in the center of the country they were the *hacendado's* instrument to keep peons indebted and thus attached to the hacienda, in the North peons were not forced to purchase goods at the *tienda de raya*. Indeed, *hacendados* generally sold products there at lower prices as an additional incentive to attract labor. Also in La Laguna, agricultural wages were the highest in the country (Katz 1982, 31).

Another group in addition to those involved in the resident peon-*hacendado* relationship in La Laguna were the "colonists." They usually held greater acreages of land and more livestock than free peasants of other regions (Landsberger and Hewitt de Alcántara 1970; Craig 1986). In the state of Chihuahua, communities of colonists were established specifically to defend the frontier against Apache incursions. They had a greater internal autonomy and felt that they had not only the right but also the duty to be armed to defend themselves against Apache attacks (Nugent 1985; Wasserman 1980). Although they were not a large percentage of the rural labor force, they did get land from President Benito Juárez in 1864 after helping him fight against the French invasion. Later on, during the *Porfiriato*, the La Laguna colonists struggled with livestock *hacendados* who had deprived them of water by altering the flow of the Nazas River (Eckstein 1966, 132). Considering that the colonists had lost their land under Porfirio Díaz, it was not surprising that they became combative in the revolution and were among the first land reform beneficiaries in 1917. In Chihuahua, compared to ordinary peasant communities, colonists had become accustomed to privileges usually accorded Spaniards and Creoles. While colonists, they were land proprietors and could sell their land. But, by 1910, they had been dispossessed of their land and deprived of municipal autonomy. These aggrieved colonists were easily organized for combat (Katz 1982, 24-26).

Another important revolutionary group developed in the northwest state of Sonora. Most of the leaders of the constitutionalist movement, in fact, came from Coahuila and Sonora (Cumberland 1975). Initially headed by Venustiano Carranza, a former governor of Coahuila, the Sonora group seized control of the revolutionary state by 1920 (Matute 1980). Generals Adolfo de la Huerta, Alvaro Obregón Salido, and Plutarco Elías Calles are closely associated with the triumph of this faction of the revolution; they helped to legitimize the emerging agrarian bourgeoisie of the North. These three generals held the presidency of Mexico between 1920 and 1928, and Calles extended his reign through "puppet" administrations from 1928 to 1935 (Loyola Díaz 1980; Medin 1982). At the time of the revolution, Obregón was a small farmer while Calles came from a family of well-off merchants. Nevertheless, they soon embodied the spirit and character of what today is the northern agrarian bourgeoisie (Aguilar Camín 1977, 1982; Sanderson 1981).

Revisionist historians have pointed out enormous regional differences in types of revolutionary leadership and involvement. Barry Carr (1973, 1980), for example, has challenged the assumed "popular" character of the first decade of the revolutionary period. He emphasizes "the hegemony exercised by bourgeois groupings over most of the revolutionary coalitions" (Carr 1980, 7). In the Sonoran case, argues Carr, "an exceptionally high percentage of the state's revolutionary leadership emerged from the ranks of the *hacendado* community or from the class of prosperous capitalist farmers and ranchers that occupied such an important place in northern society" (Carr 1980, 8). In sum, the social origins of the Mexican revolution were as varied as Mexican society itself.

ARTICLE 27: A REFORMIST COMPROMISE

Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution was designed to fulfill the demands of the many peasant farmers who had been dispossessed during the *Porfiriato* while preserving the possibility of private land-ownership. Indeed, the land reform article to the Constitution was a reformist compromise. One of its central features was that it declared all land to be owned by the nation. The nation, in turn, had the right to transmit this land to individuals and to constitute "private property." Also, the nation had the right and the obligation to expropriate any private property when the land was deemed necessary for "public use." This article provided the postrevolutionary state with the legal instrument to carry out land redistribution. The specific ways in which an agrarian reform was to be carried out were left to be determined

in a set of enabling laws which were to be designed by the national Congress (cf. Sanderson 1981, 67–69).

The *ejido* was the preferred postreform tenure for beneficiaries of land distribution after the revolution. The *ejidatario*, holder of such land title, is not a fee-simple proprietor as in English Common Law; this “owner” reaps the usufruct of the land and has the right to work the land individually. The *ejidatario*, however, is not legally enabled to transfer those rights to nonheirs (Gutelman 1974, 151). A recent modification of the Mexican Agrarian Code, however, provides for the renting of *ejidal* land by more capitalized farmers to those who lack the necessary capital (Bartra 1974, 142 fn.). Since de facto renting of *ejidal* land had become widespread anyhow, especially in the irrigation districts, the legislative modifications show how the legal apparatus follows and is adapted to real situations.

The *ejidatario* is a producer without dependency relations with large landowners. Like the *minifundista*, the *ejidatario* may transform himself into a capitalist or may become proletarianized, may accumulate or lose his means of production, and may maintain himself in the market or be eliminated. I will argue that the process of social differentiation of the peasantry in Mexico has resulted predominantly not in full proletarianization but in depeasantization. (“Depeasantization” is the process by which direct producers become separated from their means of production regardless of the land-tenure system. Thus, they are forced to rely on other economic activities, namely, wage labor, to supplement their incomes.)

STRUCTURAL REFORMS UNDER CÁRDENAS: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE *EJIDOS*

The 1917–1935 period saw some land being slowly redistributed. During Carranza’s mandate (1917–1920), much of the land that had been given out under the Zapatista laws was returned to its previous owners. Zapata himself was murdered by an officer of the Federal Army at a meeting in which the two were expected to negotiate terms for surrender of the peasant armies. Without its beloved leader, the peasant movement in Mexico gradually became impotent.

The 1920–1935 period was one of economic reconstruction and ruling group consolidation. Because the “revolutionary family” was becoming fragmented, especially after the assassination of Obregón in 1928, Calles, in 1929, sponsored the organization of all revolutionary forces into a political party called the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, PNR), a precursor of the PRI.

The outstanding features of the 1920–1935 period were a leadership based on caudillos, an ideological radicalism expressed in heavy anticlericalism, and a halt to land redistribution. Anticlericalism led to the Cristero rebellion in west-central Mexico, while the absence of significant land redistribution led to a radical agrarian movement in the state of Veracruz headed by Governor and General Adalberto Tejeda (Falcón 1977; Fowler Salamini 1979). These two threats, one from the right and the other from the left, explain the 1933 choice of Lázaro Cárdenas as its presidential candidate by the Congress of the dominant PNR (Medín 1982). Calles, the “Jefe Máximo” of the revolution, agreed to nominate Cárdenas for at least three reasons: Cárdenas’s proved loyalty to him, the fact that *political* factors predominated over *ideological* or economic factors (that is, the “revolutionary family” was becoming consolidated within the PNR), and his feeling that Cárdenas’s record as an agrarianist while governor of Michoacán would offset the pressures from radical Tejedismo in Veracruz.

In order to consolidate the power of his office against Calles, who attempted to retain his informal rule even after the election, Cárdenas organized the peasantry and the working class. Rather than allowing peasants and workers to organize independently, he incorporated their organizations into the official party, which became the Party of the Mexican Revolution (*Partido de la Revolución Mexicana*, PRM). This obviously required making several concessions. Cárdenas encouraged workers—within certain limits—to struggle with the other “factor of production” (that is, the capitalists) to attain an “equilibrium.” His intention was not to promote rifts between classes but to encourage a “class conciliation” in which the state was the “impartial” mediator.

Before Cárdenas’s administration, most land in the agrarian reform had been distributed to *ejidatarios*, with *individual* plots to each *ejido* member. But Cárdenas confronted, for the first time, the need to distribute the land of highly productive haciendas in irrigated regions where the agrarian movement was intense; he felt there were scale economies. In order to preserve the productivity of large units and to maintain an uninterrupted flow of agricultural raw materials and wage goods to industry, Cárdenas’s policy was to create “collective” *ejidos*, which appeared very similar to producer cooperatives. Ultimately, about 12 percent of all *ejidos* assumed this collective form of organization (Eckstein 1966).

Although Cárdenas obliged the large-acreage ex-owners to transform themselves into capitalist agriculturists, he also respected the principle of “small private property ownership.” Each time a farm was expropriated, the owner could retain the hacienda core, not to exceed 150 hectares of irrigated land; in land reform jargon, which often involves a euphemistic turn of phrase, this is a “small property”

or *pequeña propiedad* (sometimes called a rancho). An important number of *latifundistas*, frightened by the climate of violence in which agrarian reform was being carried out, divided their lands themselves and sold them as "small properties." In some cases, this was done through trusted *prestanombres* ("name lenders"). The *prestanombre* might be a family member or a former employee. These cases usually implied that the original owner retained control of land that was formally "sold."

At the end of his presidential mandate, Cárdenas had granted more land to the peasants than all of his predecessors together: 17,891,577 hectares were distributed among 814,537 peasants (Gutelman 1974, 109).

THE COLLECTIVE EJIDOS: LA LAGUNA, EL YAQUI VALLEY, AND ATENCINGO

The Cardenista plan for La Laguna's collective *ejidos* set the example for future collectivization in other regions of modern capitalist agriculture; it was imperative, via this demonstration, for the government to show both the political viability and the economic superiority of collective farming as compared to private property. Furthermore, enough popular strength had to be mobilized to offset the reaction of *hacendados* when their farms were threatened with expropriation. After land redistribution, beneficiary producers had to maintain a solid organization to both resist attacks from ex-*hacendados* and produce at an exemplary level.

The plan was aimed at achieving self-management by *ejidatarios*. In La Laguna, this goal was to be achieved through the organization of beneficiaries into fifteen regional unions, which would eventually substitute for the Ejidal Bank (*Banco Ejidal*, a state credit-granting agency). The fifteen unions would be coordinated by the Central Union of Collective Credit Societies, which was intended to perform the *ejido's* economic and marketing functions.

This plan was proposed and elaborated through the interaction of the *Ejidatarios'* Central Union and government technicians. The initial impetus for the fifteen regional unions and the Central Union came from beneficiary producers; Cárdenas not only approved the plan but helped to convert the organization into a legal entity. President Cárdenas was so impressed by the La Laguna organization that he thought all future collectives should adopt a similar pattern (Rello 1984).

After months of preparation and labor mobilization, La Laguna agricultural workers finally were awarded *ejido* land grants on 6 October 1936. The total grants consisted of 468,386 hectares, of which 147,710 were irrigated. This meant that 31.2 percent of total cropland, which

included 77 percent of total irrigated land in La Laguna region, was granted to *ejidatarios*. The number of beneficiaries totaled 38,101 *ejidatarios*, who were organized into 311 *ejidos* (Whetten 1948, 216-217). (For a more detailed exposition of the La Laguna experience, see Otero 1986, 167-228).

In the first few years, the La Laguna collectives were well supported by government agencies. Thus, their productivity was comparable and, in many cases, superior to that of former capitalist haciendas. This tendency lasted only through 1947 in La Laguna (Restrepo and Eckstein 1975, 93-96).

As in La Laguna, the collectives organized in the Yaqui Valley of southern Sonora also illustrate that production in the initial period was satisfactory. Established later than in La Laguna, agricultural workers at El Yaqui got 17,000 hectares of irrigated land in 1937, on which they cultivated rice, beans, wheat, corn, cantaloupe, and some vegetables. About 2,000 landless workers obtained land in the process. Private holders kept the remaining 27,638 hectares of irrigated land in the valley. This meant that productivity in both sectors could easily be compared.

Productivity tendencies in the Yaqui Valley were similar to those in La Laguna. Availability of credit, technical assistance, and water resources in the first few postreform years was reflected in superior yield per hectare in collective *ejidos* when compared to private farms.

When the state withdrew its support from collectives, a dramatic reversal in production performance occurred. Hewitt de Alcántara (1978) and Silos-Alvarado (1968) present similar figures, which show deteriorating production yields for the post-Cárdenas period. In 1951-1955, the private sector began to show superior yields when compared with those on *ejidos* financed by the *Banco Ejidal*. For 1956-1960, the advantage of the private sector was accentuated, and this trend continued until at least the mid-1960s (Silos-Alvarado 1968, 27-44). After Cárdenas, state policies toward *ejidos* turned adverse, as succeeding governments came to favor the private sector. In the 1938-1943 period, therefore, *ejidos* showed an advantage of 9 percent in production per hectare when compared to private farms. By 1960, private properties had a 25 percent yield advantage over *ejidos* (Hewitt de Alcántara 1978, 191).

A collective *ejido* was also organized in Atencingo, Puebla. But here the story differs from that in the North. Those pressuring for land were not landless agricultural workers who lived as resident peons on haciendas; they were peasants like those who had rebelled in Morelos under Zapata. In Atencingo, peasants were still demanding redress for the dispossession of communal lands which occurred in the late 1800s.

Not by accident, irrigation was chosen as a primary vehicle for modernizing agriculture: it was the infrastructure most needed by the strongest agricultural pressure group in the country, the entrepreneurs of northwestern Mexico.

Alemán's policies consolidated the private-sector orientation which still prevails in Mexico, though there was a brief hiatus (1970-1976) during the administration of Luis Echeverría. In addition to providing heavy investment in large-scale irrigation projects which would benefit large farms, Alemán's presidency shifted much rural credit from the ejidal to the private sector, gave strong impetus to the seed- and yield-improvement centers which would eventually be the linchpin of the green revolution, and emphasized production for export by downplaying the provision of ample foodstuffs for the domestic market (Sanderson 1981, 145). All of these policies were consistent with the consolidation of the industrial bourgeoisie and the formation of a tight alliance with its agrarian counterpart.

The ejidal policy treated thus far has referred predominantly to those *ejidos* organized originally as "collectives" during Cardenismo. However, this type of organization was implemented only in those places where modern haciendas had been expropriated. By 1970, collectives constituted only 12 percent of all *ejidos*. What happened to the vast majority of *ejidos* which was organized on an individual basis from the outset?

A few *ejidatarios* managed to become wealthy from their individual *ejido* plots, often renting in land belonging to their peers. But these were exceptions. Because most individual *ejidos* were in areas of rain-fed agriculture, they did more poorly economically, in general, than the collectives. Individual *ejidos*, in fact, constituted a *minifundio* sector.

Ann Craig (1983) has documented the agrarian history of Los Altos de Jalisco as a case in point. She argues that the *ejidos* in this region are representative of most in the country. As Craig notes, Los Altos de Jalisco is a region "characterized by poor soil and highly variable rainfall, an overwhelmingly *mestizo* population, a pattern of small landholdings, devout Catholicism, conservative politics, and an economy based on dairy farming and small-scale cultivation of maize, beans, and chiles" (Craig 1983:13).

Unemployment in Los Altos is still a major problem, and today there are more landless young men and families than *ejidatarios* in most municipalities of the region (Craig 1983, 245). Agriculture has provided so few rewards and so much hardship that young men now speak more about the need for sources of nonagricultural employment in the countryside than about land. Such perceptions are reinforced by short-term work experiences in Mexican urban centers and in the United States. Thus, in this type of agricultural region, wage labor is

highly valued by rural people, but not enough is offered. The region's hacienda class, in contrast, adapted quickly to new conditions after land reform; today, its members are still wealthy.

Several economists have defended the Mexican agrarian reform, arguing that the "social productivity" of small holdings was greater than that of large landholdings (Barchfield 1979; Dovring 1969). They assume that family labor costs can be calculated at zero for the *ejido* sector and for private holdings of 5 hectares or less, where family members provide the bulk of the required labor power. Thus, they calculate an inverse relationship between size of farm and land productivity. "Social productivity" labor costs are acknowledged only for the case of capitalist enterprises where wages are monetary and an actual operating cost to the operator. Their justification for this assumption is that, in societies such as Mexico, where there is an unlimited supply of labor, opportunity costs are virtually nil. Dovring acknowledges that the greater production per hectare in *ejidos* and *minifundios* is due to greater labor intensiveness. This approach disregards the economic consequences for the individual economic unit, focusing only on the macroeconomic or "social" productivity aspects. As recent Mexican experience can attest, such an approach has proved myopic, even at the macroeconomic level. In the long run, what appeared to be macroeconomically productive ended up as agrarian crisis. For the peasant economy, providing free labor to society has had its limit. This was militantly demonstrated by the agrarian movement of the early 1970s, and signs of it are again being manifested in the mid-1980s [for an extended critique of this position, see Bartra (1974) and Bartra and Otero (1987)].

Thus, the agrarian reform has not been able to solve the problems of the rural poor in Mexico. Capitalist development in agriculture expelled a large number of workers, while industrial growth was not sufficient to absorb them. In fact, the optimistic expectations that politicians had in the 1940s about industry and employment never materialized at the required levels. Large numbers in the countryside have been forced to confront counterreform and an industrialization process incapable of absorbing their labor power productively. The net result has been social polarization.

THE RESULT: AGRARIAN CRISIS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

The crises of Mexico's rural economy, with capitalist agriculture on the one hand and peasant farming on the other, have resulted in social differentiation among the peasantry within a capitalism that

has not expanded the proletarian class proportionately. Instead, an extensive semiproletariat, torn between peasant production on small plots and wage labor for capitalist enterprises, became the largest group in rural society. As the peasant economy continues to deteriorate, depeasantization occurs: increasing numbers of peasants are separated from their means of production and pushed onto a wage-labor market that is incapable of productively absorbing them (cf. Coello 1981).

The first problem is with increased commercialization of agricultural production. From 1940 to 1970, the proportion of output sold by all production units in the country rose from 53.6 to 87.1 percent. If this jump seems impressive, it is all the more so considering that most of the change took place during the first decade of the period. In fact, the percentage of production sold in the market increased from 53.6 percent in 1940 to 82.1 percent in 1950. After the Cardenista agrarian reform, most agricultural production passed through the national market.

Of course, there are differences in the proportion of total output sold by the various land-tenure types (see Table 2). In general, private production units with more than 5 hectares always sold a greater percentage of their output than any other type of producer; performance on these private farms was closely followed by ejidal units. Private operations with 5 hectares or less, the vast majority of them being peasant units, have a more erratic behavior. In 1950 they sold a greater proportion of output than *ejidos* (78.7 versus 72.4 percent), but in 1960 the percentage fell to 67.0, only to increase again in 1970 to 81.0 percent.

The decade of the 1970s began with decreases in production in most crops. Corn production (which stagnated in the mid-1960s) collapsed in 1972, and crop output was not really satisfactory again until the early 1980s—and then, only briefly. A similar pattern occurred with beans (Bartra and Otero 1987).

Table 2
Percentage of production sold, by land tenure type, 1940–1970^a

Tenure Type	1940	1950	1960	1970
Total	53.6	82.1	82.0	87.0
> 5 hectares	55.7	89.4	87.0	88.2
≤ 5 hectares	40.0	78.7	67.0	81.0
Ejidos	54.2	72.4	77.0	86.2

^a Source: Elaborated from Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo agrícola-ganadero y ejidal*, 1940; 1950; 1960; 1970 (Mexico: DGE, n.d.).

Commercial crops such as cotton, sesame, sugarcane, and tomatoes also were in crisis in the early 1970s. For cotton and sesame, there was no recovery during the early 1980s. The cash crops that did best are those directly linked to agribusiness with export interests, namely, citrus, pineapples, and strawberries: "All these commodities grew rapidly, while the basic foodstuffs sector barely grew at all" (Sanderson 1986, 279). The growth of these cash crops, which might be referred to as "luxury foodstuffs," along with the growth of grain production for feeding livestock, expresses the internationalization of Mexican agriculture (Sanderson 1986).

Mexican cities absorb major quantities of corn, making it possible for peasants to purchase industrial products indispensable for sustenance in the countryside. On farms, corn is usually stored as insurance against bad times. Thus, when corn prices rise, a lower quantity is required to achieve a balance between work and consumption (Chayanov 1974). Given capital scarcity and low land quality, peasants cannot shift their production to other crops easily. And since access to land is usually restricted, peasants can rely only on extending the use of the single resource over which they have control: domestic labor power.²

In a few years, Mexico's agriculture went from providing ample foreign exchange necessary for industrialization to not even being able to feed its own population (Sanderson 1986). For this reason, the José López Portillo administration (1976–1982) implemented the Mexican Food System (*Sistema Alimentario Mexicano*, SAM) in 1980, a strategy to gain self-sufficiency in basic grain production (*Nueva Antropología* 1981). Although the official declarations presumed that self-sufficiency would follow from strengthening the peasant economy in rain-fed agricultural zones, most production increases really took place in irrigation districts. This indicates that government prices were so high that members of the agrarian bourgeoisie seized the opportunity to profit from basic grains. In fact, production rose markedly for both beans and corn in 1980 (Redclift 1981).

Mexicans were paying dearly for these production increases, it turned out, for they involved massive subsidies. And, while there was some progress, it was transitory—the results in 1982 were disappointing, due in part to lower than normal rainfall. When Miguel de la Madrid took office, in December 1982, SAM was abandoned.

Despite the fact that the 1960s witnessed a large redistribution of land, the erosion of the peasant economy was considerable. Part of the reason was that poor land was distributed during the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz presidency (1964–1970). While 25 million hectares were distributed, a larger quantity than under Cárdenas, only about 10 percent of it was arable (Gutelman 1974).

In 1970, a large proportion of small agricultural producers were no longer able to sustain themselves by relying only on their farmland. The process of semiproletarianization was already under way: an increasing number of rural producers were caught between a situation of insufficient peasant production and a wage-labor market offering few alternative employment opportunities.

As such, the 1970s saw the beginning of a simultaneous explosion of two crises: an accelerated retrogression in the living standards of small peasants and a fall in export prices which profoundly affected the commercial sector. Politically, this resulted in a renewed tendency of peasant producers to struggle for land (Otero 1981, 1983).

AGRICULTURE-INDUSTRY RELATIONS AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF PRODUCTION

What changes have been introduced into the production structure by the Mexican agrarian reform process? Specifically, what has happened in terms of agriculture-industry relations, the relative importance of the subsectors in agriculture, the polarization between entrepreneurial and peasant agricultural regions in the countryside, and, finally, the growing internationalization of production?

During the 1970s, the chemical industry increased its participation in manufacturing to become the second most important subsector, closely followed by the metal-mechanics subsector (Montes de Oca and Zamorano Ulloa 1983, 78). The food-and-textiles industry accounted for the largest percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) contributed by the manufacturing industry in Mexico, ranging from 24.5 to 27.9 percent of manufacturing output in the 1970-1978 period. However, its high point appeared in 1970, with slow decreases until it reached its lowest point in 1978. While the food-and-textiles industry once accounted for the largest proportion of manufactured exports (60 percent in 1970/71), and despite the fact that Mexican-American trade relations increased by a factor of eleven in the last decade, this industry's exports decreased to 15 percent of total manufactured exports by 1983. In contrast, the manufacturing subsectors producing metals, equipment, and machinery increased their exports from 11 percent of that total to 33 percent in the 1970-1983 period; this would probably reach 45 percent by the end of 1986 (Dehesa 1986, 33-34). Thus agricultural products and their industrial derivatives lost their traditional role of producing foreign exchange for the Mexican economy.

Furthermore, there has been an increasing "disarticulation" between industry and agriculture over the past two decades. The two sectors were "articulated" in 1945-1955 in that there was a tendency for

technological homogeneity, both across and between sectors, and industry had an encouraging effect upon agricultural production by absorbing much of its raw material output. Disarticulation has been the result partly of green revolution technologies and partly of state price policies. The introduction of high-yielding varieties and chemical fertilizers effected a deepening technological heterogeneity between and within the two sectors: the green revolution technologies were biased toward irrigated zones and better off farmers who could afford purchased inputs. The other major factors contributing to the deterioration of agriculture and its links with industry were the state's price policies combined with the lack of dynamism in the tortilla industry itself. "Guaranteed prices," supposedly designed by the state to support farmers, actually functioned to lower agricultural prices for industry. For example, the guaranteed price for corn remained fixed from 1963 to 1972, while that for wheat was constant from 1960 to 1972 (Appendini and Almeida Salles 1980). In 1972, when prices were finally raised, the new prices were inadequate to restore profitability to corn and wheat production. By 1979, as a result of their insufficient output, 69 percent of the national wheat supply had to be imported to meet internal demand, although this figure diminished to 30 percent by 1983. The tortilla and *nixtamal* subsectors, partly due to large subsidies through guaranteed prices, have maintained typically artisan forms of production. Thus, industry has not encouraged expanded corn production.

In contrast, the growth of oleaginous crops, particularly soybeans and safflower, along with sorghum, has been impressive, although their combined weight in agricultural production is still less than 8 percent (Rodríguez Gigena 1983, 10). The expansion of these crops has taken place mostly in the northern regions where irrigation predominates. Soybean farmers use improved seeds on 100 percent of their acreage, while the proportion is 80 percent for safflower producers. Although there is some articulation with industry in these two crops, in the 1977-1979 period, 45 percent of national production had to be imported because agriculture did not produce enough to supply local industry. Sorghum was controlled by transnational corporations (TNCs) located in the livestock-feed industry. These transnationals control sorghum production through contract farming and through the feed, hog, and poultry industries. Such control is partly guaranteed by the TNCs' monopoly over genetic lines of poultry (Montes de Oca and Zamorano Ulloa 1983).

Regional polarization tendencies have gone hand in hand with the expansion of irrigation infrastructure and the increased use of high-yielding varieties introduced with the green revolution. With increased investment in irrigation works, beginning in the 1940s,

commercial producers came to be very concentrated in a small area: almost 50 percent of agricultural production comes from 23 percent of the total cropland and is produced by 19 percent of the rural work force. By contrast, the vast peasant and semiproletarian regions account for half of the total cropland, for more than half of the total rural work force, and for only one-third of the total agricultural production (Appendini 1983, 192).

Irrigation districts in the North have been the real locus of the green revolution. Countrywide, 80 percent of the irrigated acreage with alfalfa, sorghum, soybeans, rice, corn, beans, or wheat is planted with improved or hybrid seeds. Moreover, the production of seeds increasingly has been by private firms, mostly by TNCs. Whereas the National Seed Producer (*Productora Nacional de Semillas*, PRONASE), the government's seed-producing firm, sold 41.1 percent of the high-yielding seeds and private firms sold 58.9 percent in 1970, these figures were 26.9 and 73.1 percent, respectively, in 1977. TNCs not only control the market but often have to import seeds from the United States to complement their supply.

Apart from wheat, half of the improved seeds imported by industries with dynamic growth rates in the 1970s were related to livestock and feed (Suárez 1983). The increased importance of livestock production and its associated crops has brought internationalization to Mexican agriculture. Whether it is importing seeds, producing feed, importing genetic material (for both plants and animals), or selling the final product, most of these activities are carried out by TNCs (Barkin and Suárez 1983). Much of this meat is being exported. Domestically, increased demand for meat comes from the middle- and high-income social classes. By the increased internationalization of agriculture, the Mexican nation is losing control of its agriculture at the same time that it is losing the capacity to produce basic grains to feed its population [for an extensive treatment of these issues, see Sanderson (1986)].

SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS

Data on peasant differentiation in Mexico have been provided by the Economic Commission for Latin America of the United Nations (*Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe*, CEPAL), which analyzed the 1970 Mexican population and agricultural censuses (CEPAL 1982). CEPAL's study resulted in a typology of agricultural producers in Mexico.³ Its goal was to distinguish between peasant and entrepreneurial farms. CEPAL's assumption was that small-farm units worked by campesinos have different "rules of the game" from capitalistic agricultural enterprises. While the latter seek to maximize profits,

peasant units seek to maximize the returns to family labor, since subsistence is the *minifundio* family's prime objective. Therefore, peasant farming operations are usually much more labor intensive than those of capitalist enterprises.

Table 3 shows the distribution of agricultural production units in Mexico according to CEPAL's typology. The figures for the ejidal and private land-tenure sectors have been merged, because the pattern of social differentiation is similar under both tenure systems (CEPAL 1982, 278-281). Entrepreneurial producers are concentrated in the private sector. Merging the data for the two systems gives the best overall picture of social structure differentiation in rural Mexico, but, when the two are combined, the proportion of "entrepreneurs" declines.

CEPAL used two central criteria to distinguish between peasant and entrepreneurial categories in its typology. (1) Did the farm unit hire wage labor? (2) Did the farm attain or exceed subsistence production levels? "Peasant units" were those worked with family labor that occasionally hired wage labor. "Hiring" was measured by wage payments, which were not to exceed the equivalent of twenty-five hired workdays per year (calculated by yearly expenditures for wages divided by the daily legal minimum wage in each region or state). Most peasant units do hire some workers beyond the family during a few days at harvest. And members of such *minifundio* farms usually worked as wage laborers

Table 3
Mexico: Distribution of agricultural producers in CEPAL's 1970 typology^a

Type of Production Unit ^b	Percentage
Peasant	
I (infrasubsistence)	55.6
II (subsistence)	16.2
III (stationary)	6.5
IV (surplus-producing)	8.2
Transitional	
V (transitional)	11.6
Entrepreneurial	
VI (small)	1.2
VII (medium)	0.4
VIII (large)	0.3

^a Source: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, *Economía campesina y agricultura empresarial (tipología de productores del agro mexicano)*, by Alejandro Schejtman (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1982), pp. 118-119.

^b Total number of production units = 2,557,070.

laborers on other peasant farms for a few days a year. (This exchange of labor is, in many cases, the monetized form of previous reciprocity relations in peasant communities.)

By CEPAL's criteria, infrasubistence production units do not meet household food requirements. I would prefer to call this group of families "semiproletarian"—their livelihood is predicated on an increased level of off-farm economic activity by those members of the family who hire out. The expansion of this category expresses the crisis in the peasant economy, which is losing its capacity to provide the rural masses with a livelihood. This is "depeasantization without full proletarianization."⁴

To find out whether peasant producers are becoming more viable or are failing, the proportion of agricultural producers in the various land-tenure categories between 1960 and 1970 can be compared by utilizing the Center of Agrarian Research (*Centro de Investigaciones Agrarias*, CDIA) study of the 1960 census (CDIA 1974). While the CDIA study classifies rural producers into only five categories (infrasubistence, sub-family, family, medium-sized multifamily, and large-sized multifamily), the CEPAL study defines eight types of production unit. To achieve some comparability, I have merged CEPAL's three entrepreneurial types into one to form six categories: infrasubistence, subsistence, stationary, surplus-producing, transitional, and entrepreneurial. A graphic comparison is presented in Figure 1.

These data show the decline of the peasant economy between 1960 and 1970. Specifically, the middle units appear to be going bankrupt, thus reinforcing the polarization of agriculture: both the semiproletarian and the bourgeois sectors are increasing while there is a "disappearing middle" group. Moreover, a large proportion of former peasants or semiproletarians simply fall out of the analysis: they are ex-peasants who cannot hold onto at least a semiproletarian position and have become day laborers or have moved to the cities.

Table 4 categorizes the economically active rural population, using census terminology.⁴

The absolute numbers of the agricultural work force decreased from 1960 to 1970, continuing a several-decades-old trend. Similarly, it is not surprising that "workers" have decreased in absolute numbers. This decrease reflects the secular decline of the agricultural sector as the economy develops; rural-to-urban migration brings it about, and agricultural mechanization hastens it along. However, it should be noted that the "peasant" category decreased more drastically than "workers," from 2.5 to 2 million people. The relative number of workers in the labor force increased from 57.4 to 59.3 percent, whereas that of peasants decreased from 42.3 to 38.2 percent.

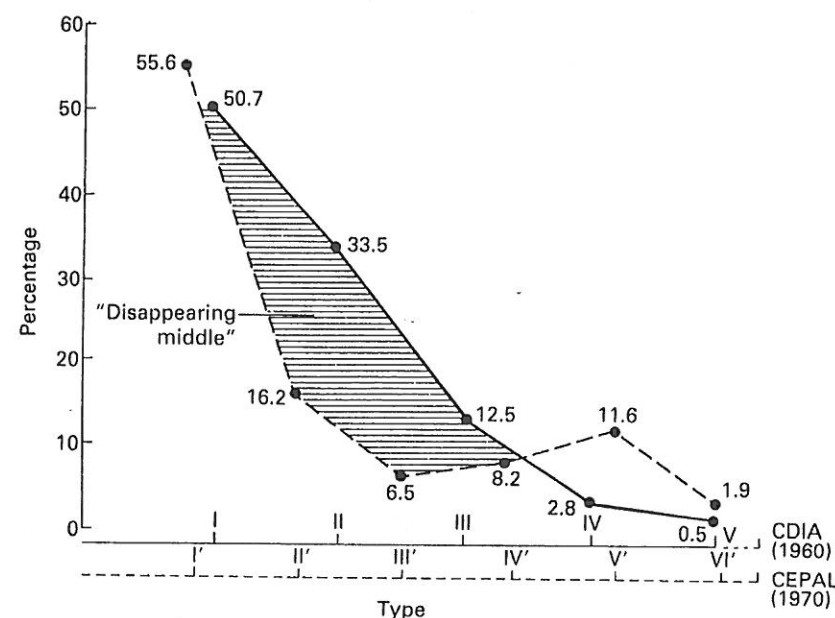


Figure 1
Changes in Mexican agrarian structure, 1960-1970.

CDIA typology (—), 1960: I, Infrasubistence; II, subfamily; III, family; IV, medium-sized multifamily; V, large-sized multifamily. CEPAL typology (-----), 1970: I', Infrasubistence; II', subsistence; III', stationary; IV', surplus producing; V', transitional; VI', entrepreneurial. Elaborated with data from Centro de Investigaciones Agrarias, *Estructura agraria y desarrollo agrícola en México* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974), and Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, *Economía campesina y agricultura empresarial (tipología de productores del agro mexicano)*, by Alejandro Schejtman (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1982).

Table 4
Economically active rural population (rural workforce), 1960 and 1970^a

Sector	1960		1970	
	Millions	Percentage	Millions	Percentage
Workers	3.4	57.4	3.0	59.3
Peasants	2.5	42.2	2.0	38.2
Employers	0.02	0.3	0.13	2.5

^a Source: Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo general de población, 1960; 1970* (Mexico City: DGE, n.d.).

CONCLUSIONS

Mexico is currently undergoing the most severe economic crisis of its postrevolutionary history. After agriculture had become unable to provide foreign exchange by the mid-1960s, the Mexican economy turned increasingly to foreign indebtedness to sustain industrial growth. During Echeverría's term in office, the foreign debt grew by a factor of five. A short break followed when large oil reserves were discovered in 1977. And, from 1978 to 1981, Mexico experienced growth rates of about 8 percent on the basis of its "oil boom." Unfortunately, this boom was short lived, and it was the basis for further foreign indebtedness. In mid-1981, oil prices began to fall at a time that oil constituted close to 75 percent of Mexico's exports. February 1982 was the beginning of a series of major devaluations in Mexican currency.

The agrarian policy of the Mexican government since López Portillo's administration has again come almost militantly to favor the private sector. De la Madrid has officially ruled out land distribution as a solution to Mexico's agricultural problems. Government rhetoric now talks of a "higher stage" of agrarian reform, referring to the need for increasing productivity on the land currently available to *ejidatarios*. Meanwhile, the right wing is exerting pressure to do away with the legal barriers which *ejidos* impose for investment. Some barely disguise their antipathy to reform. For instance, the Mexican Confederation of Employers (*Confederación Patronal Mexicana*, COPARMEX) recently advocated giving the *ejido* land to those who work on it in private ownership (COPARMEX 1985, 6). COPARMEX proposes that the only way to generate food self-sufficiency and foreign exchange from agriculture is by privatizing all land. The true solution, says COPARMEX, "consists in giving peasants the land in private ownership...to avoid the *latifundio*" (COPARMEX 1985).

In fact, however, the brief experiences of *ejidatarios* with self-management and democratic institutions showed them to be capable of greater production per hectare than private agricultural enterprises when aided by state institutions. The all-out development of state-sponsored capitalistic agriculture is what decimated the *ejido* sector. Only a postcapitalist global outlook and development strategy, predicated on self-management and democratic production and concerned with expanding employment opportunities for direct producers, will solve the problems of the agricultural semiproletariat and provide for the food self-sufficiency of the country (Otero 1986, 1987).

In the Mexican context, distributing titles of private landownership to *ejidatarios* would only further aggravate the polarizing tendencies of social differentiation. Even if *ejidos* are to be organized on an individual basis, depending on the specific preference of direct producers, the

ejido as an institution cannot be eliminated in Mexico without causing a greater social upset than has already occurred.

It is clear that Mexico's peasant economy is not advancing satisfactorily. *Minifundistas* continually become more semiproletarianized, and the capitalist sector is incapable of providing full employment or self-sufficiency in food production.

The semiproletariat is the most rapidly growing group in numbers in rural Mexico. The character of new agrarian struggles and the organizations that emerge will depend greatly on the political direction taken by this semiproletariat, which, in turn, will depend on the sociocultural specificities of the region where each has developed. In the North, direct producers may be ready for cooperative arrangements of a self-managing and democratic nature, whereas in central and southern Mexico, producers are probably more inclined to individual production. In either case, it is clear that other sources of employment in addition to agriculture will be badly needed in order to absorb the large proportion of workers without adequate and secure sources of income.

NOTES

1. Zapata earned his livelihood from training horses on a hacienda in exchange for a wage. Thus, strictly speaking, he was not a peasant. Yet, he was a respected member of the community.

2. Use of this resource also has a limit, however, when its productivity drops below zero. When hired labor is used, such a limit is reached when labor's marginal product equals the wage. Those who assume the value of labor power to be zero in the peasant unit are actually looking at its lower limit, below which agricultural production makes no sense to peasant farmers. Whereas peasants usually sacrifice their ground rent and often part of their self-imputed "wage," assuming the latter to be zero from the outset actually places the analysis at the point of peasant bankruptcy.

3. For a discussion and critique of the criteria for devising each category, see Otero (1986) and Bartra and Otero (1987).

4. For an extended discussion of CEPAL's typology, see Bartra and Otero (1987).

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