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# Farewell to the Peasantry?

Political Class Formation in  
Rural Mexico

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Gerardo Otero

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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*This book is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my son and great friend Rodrigo Otero-Ordóñez (1979–1997). His company during and after his seventeen years of life has been warm and inspiring. Even now, with the deep pain of his loss, I feel his presence as a strong, invigorating force that has been essential to my completion of this project, which I dedicate to his life and surviving spirit.*

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## Preface

This book is about the agrarian question in Mexico, the social class structure, agrarian struggles, and agricultural state policy. In different ways—as a student, as a teacher, as a researcher, as a person—I have been concerned with this topic for over two decades. Curiously, however, what originally sparked my interest in this topic was the urban question.

As an undergraduate student in Monterrey, Mexico, during the early 1970s, I was very impressed with the squatter settlers' movement, then at its peak. Not only did I think of it as a highly explosive social movement, but I was also appalled by the unimaginable conditions of misery under which people in the slums lived. I had never seen such poverty, not even in the countryside of La Laguna in north-central Mexico, the region in which I grew up. I wondered why large numbers of people would migrate to the second-largest industrial city in Mexico when employment opportunities there were scarce. Soon I realized that the vast majority of these migrants actually came from central and southern Mexico, where the agrarian crisis was taking its toll much more severely than in the north. I finally began to understand that both the urban and the agrarian questions were, in fact, two sides of the process of capitalist development in my country.

Research for this book has been supported by many institutions since the early 1980s. In particular, I received grants for field work from the University of Guadalajara and Simon Fraser University (the President's Research Grant). The Center for U.S.-Mexican studies gave me a grant to pursue research as part of the Ejido Reform Research Project, coordinated by Wayne Cornelius and David Myhre. Finally, I have received two generous grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, one for 1994-97 and another for 1997-2000. The first was critical in allowing me to finish the necessary updates for this book. I gratefully acknowledge all of these funding sources.

Because the field work that undergirds the theoretical framework of this study took place in the state of Puebla, I would first of all like to thank my students and colleagues in the Department of Social Anthropology at the Autonomous University of Puebla in the early 1980s. It was in discussion with them that I began to incorporate the concept of culture into my analysis of agrarian problems. I also became indebted to the people of Xochimilco, in the municipality of Tecamachalco, Puebla, for opening their hearts and minds to me and for providing a place to stay while I was doing field work.

Before my Ph.D. studies at the University of Wisconsin (from which this book originated), I took an M.A. at the University of Texas at Austin. There, four visiting professors had a strong theoretical influence on my work: Bernardo Berdichewsky, Juarez Rubens Brandão Lopes, Norman Long, and Bryan Roberts. As my thesis supervisor, Norman was warm, inspiring, and quite generous with his time.

While I was in Madison, the Department of Rural Sociology provided me with a very pleasant working environment and abundant material support. The Department chair, Gene Summers, was always kind and ready to help.

Of the many intellectually exciting experiences in Madison, one stands out: the Andean Seminar organized by Gene Havens in the fall of 1978. I will always be grateful for the stimulating exchanges I had with Gene, Manuel Chiriboga, Jaime Crispi, Jorge Dandler, Fernando Rojas, Carlos Samaniego, and Bernardo Sorj.

There were many people who read and commented on parts of this manuscript as it became a dissertation. I wish explicitly to acknowledge the help of Brett Brown, Tomás Duplá, Jonathan Fox, Jess Gilbert, Robert Jenkins, Cassio Luisseli, Pat Mooney, Keith Moore, Max Pfeffer, Joey Sprague, William Thiesenhusen, Norberto Valdéz, and Gene Wilkening. Bill Canak and Mike Rogers are friends whose incisive and detailed critiques helped me reorganize and develop many of my ideas. David Kaimowitz was a virtual fourth member of my reading committee.

I am indebted to Jack Kloppenburg and Florencia Mallon for reading the entire manuscript and providing me with valuable comments. Special thanks go to Jack, who gave me time off from my duties as a research assistant to complete my writing. For timely support and encouragement, Marta Tienda merits particular recognition. Also, in discussing with me parts of this book, Marta was helpful in reorganizing the arguments, clarifying a number of points and, generally, in making them more compelling.

Erik Wright provided me with reliable and responsible support from the very beginning of my doctoral studies. As one of my three reading advisors, Erik's incisive and radical class-reductionist critiques saved me from my own culturalist excesses. Roger Bartra was also a reader in my committee. Despite the fact that much of my project represents a critique of his early work, he has always been open to and supportive of my point of view. In any case, I must acknowledge that Roger's work has had a profound influence on my thinking. In fact, Roger's now-classic *Estructura Agraria y Clases Sociales en México* (1974a) (*Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico*, 1993) laid the very foundations for future research and discussion on the agrarian question in Mexico.

I can hardly find words to describe how highly I value my academic and personal relationship with my major professor, Ivan Szelényi, and how fortunate I am to have worked with him. I can only hope that Ivan's example and influence has been reflected in my own development as a person and a scholar.

The ideas and materials now in Chapters 3 and 4 were first presented at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego, where I enjoyed a postdoctoral visiting fellowship in 1986-87. Its challenging public was highly stimulating and inspiring, and then-director Wayne Cornelius always sup-

portive. Several colleagues at the center provided helpful input. In particular, I remember very fondly my conversations with Pablo Arredondo, Vivianne Bennet, Wayne Cornelius, Ann Craig, Joe Foweraker, the late Daniel Nugent, Victoria Rodríguez, Jeff Rubins, and León Zamosc in the Sociology Department. Marilyn Gates, my colleague at Simon Fraser University, read parts of this book and gave me thoughtful and useful comments on short notice. As external reviewers for Westview Press, Michael Kearney and Peter Singelmann read the entire manuscript and made useful suggestions for revision of Chapters 1 and 8.

Westview's editorial team, lead by Karl Yambert, was kind and efficient in keeping this project on schedule. The copy editor, William Kaufman, went beyond the call of duty: not only did he correct grammar and style, but he also raised intelligent and knowledgeable queries that forced me to clarify some important points and concepts.

Kurt Oosterhuis provided able technical assistance for the data analysis for Chapters 4 and 6. Francisco Javier Gómez Carpineiro's help in coordinating the application of a survey questionnaire for sugarcane growers in the region of Atlixingo, Puebla, was crucial for Chapter 6. He kindly opened his house in Atlixco, where I stayed for several weeks while testing, refining, and applying the questionnaire in 1995. A fine anthropologist, he was a most helpful interlocutor during this process. Daniel García, a sugarcane grower in Izúcar de Matamoros, has been a keen supporter of my research in the region since 1988. I fully credit all this help, but responsibility for any remaining limitations is mine alone.

My parents, in Torreón, were always interested in the progress of my work and encouraged me to carry on. In occasional discussions my father provided me with perceptive insights into the rural scene in La Laguna, and his connections of a lifetime in the region enabled me to arrange important interviews on short notice. He was a field geologist with the sensitivity of a good anthropologist. I owe much of my understanding of rural Mexico to the long conversations and field trips with my father. He left us in 1989 and now rests in peace.

If any factor has been indispensable to my completion of this book, it has been the joy and fulfillment of having had the company of my immediate family: Paty, Alex, and until recently, Rodrigo. My younger boy Rodrigo left us at age seventeen, after a tragic car accident that took his physical life. In his own way, Rodrigo too was greatly concerned about the effects of Mexico's agrarian crisis, particularly its urban expressions. When we returned to Mexico after my postgraduate work, he was very saddened to see the many kids at traffic light intersections in Guadalajara, juggling or acting like clowns in order to make a few pesos. At one point he earned his first pay ever by imitating those kids and using his considerable gymnastic abilities. The most heartening thing was that, rather than spending his first pay, he approached an elderly poor woman and gave it to her. He had great compassion. I know that my son touched all of us who knew him in beautiful ways and that the love he inspired in all of us will make him live in our hearts and actions forever. This book is lovingly dedicated to his memory.

## Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico

*The struggle for democracy must have as one of its primary goals the establishment of a viable and democratic political society [or state] ... but democracy also requires the construction of a vibrant, vigorous and pluralistic civil society (Diamond 1992, 7).*

Mexico's countryside has been one of its most explosive political sectors in the twentieth century. In 1910 Mexico was convulsed by the century's first major revolution, and then, in the century's waning years, the uprising of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Zapatista National Liberation Army, or EZLN) on New Year's eve of 1994 reaffirmed the volatility of rural Mexico. These two critical junctures in Mexican history attest to the peasantry's tenacity as a social actor.

The central issue in both political conflicts was land (Wolf 1969; Otero 1989a; Collier 1994; Harvey 1996, 1998; Gilly 1998). During the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship (1876–1910) peasant communities were deprived of most of their lands by a small class of land proprietors. This action eventually helped to trigger the 1910 revolution (Katz 1982). At the end of the twentieth century, the Chiapas revolt was in large part a response to the changes made in 1992 to Article 27 of the Constitution, according to which the state is no longer responsible for carrying out land redistribution (Cornelius 1992; Cornelius and Myhre 1998; DeWalt, Rees, and Murphy 1994; Otero, Singelmann, and Preibisch 1995). I will show, however, that in the past two decades the demand for land has been augmented by new dimensions of struggle that center on issues of production, self-management, autonomy, and democracy (Baitenmann 1998; Harvey 1998; Gordillo 1988; Otero 1989b; Moguel, Botey, and Hernández 1992; Rubin 1997).

The peasantry has been the subject of major debates among the forces of the political left in most developing countries. At issue has been its role in a transition from capitalism to socialism, a dynamic that first arose in Russia at the turn of the century (Edelman 1987). As in Russia, two main camps have developed an interpretation of this problem. Populists, on one hand, have regarded the peasants as having a progressive role within socialism and have held that peasant communities would have no special difficulties in such a transition. This was also the view of most observers inspired by the Chinese revolution and the writings of Mao Ze-

ding. On the other side of the polemic are those who have stressed the "petit bourgeois" side of the peasants based on their role as owners of their means of production. Presumably, this fact renders peasants more likely to ally with the bourgeoisie. Lenin himself thought that the peasantry was undergoing a rapid social differentiation that was impelling its members toward either of the two main classes of capitalism: On the one hand the majority was becoming a rural proletariat, and on the other a small minority was becoming part of the agrarian bourgeoisie. In his view, then, poor peasants would do best to ally with the rural and industrial proletariat in the struggle for socialism (Lenin 1967).

With Mexico's 1910 revolution having prolonged the existence of the peasantry for several decades, a heated polemic has arisen since the 1970s concerning agrarian structure, peasant differentiation, and the character of struggles in the countryside. This polemic has been the cutting edge of discussions of the agrarian question in Latin America (de Janvry 1981; Harris 1978; Hewitt de Alcántara 1984; Foley 1989; Barry 1995; Veltmeyer 1997). Scholars from other countries have generally turned to the Mexican debate for theoretical inspiration in analyzing the agrarian classes and political processes in their own homelands.

The empirical puzzle that ignited the Mexican polemic consists of the following: In some regions rural workers seem to behave like peasants, while in others peasants seem to behave like workers.<sup>1</sup> According to Leninist theory, workers were supposed to be struggling for wages, better working conditions, unionization, and, ultimately, socialism. Authors in this tradition have insisted on the need for a "vanguard party" to correct the "false consciousness" of workers, thus enabling them to act on their true class interests in the relations of production. Others, inspired by the Russian economist Alexander Chayanov (1974), emphasize the rural workers' access to land and thus their status as peasants rather than proletarians.

Starting from this polemic, but also seeking to transcend it, I will present and contrast the history of three Mexican agricultural regions, highlighting my own interpretation of the process of political class formation. Unlike the two dominant positions in the Mexican polemic, which stress either access to wages or access to land as the main determinants of the character of struggles—proletarian or peasant—I argue that the process of political class formation is mediated not only by the position of class agents in production relations, but also by state intervention, the prevailing forms of regional cultures, and the varieties of leadership. Moreover, the structural position of most of these social agents is that of an agricultural semiproletariat rather than that of a proletariat or a peasantry. For it is the semiproletariat that finds itself in the most unstable condition in relation to its material basis of reproduction, torn as it is between occasional wage labor and access to land that is an insufficient basis for subsistence farming. This semiproletariat makes up the largest proportion of the rural population in Mexico (Bartra and Otero 1987). I contend that the account of class structural determinants has been misconstrued and incorrectly specified. Furthermore, even when cor-

rectly specified, class positions do not directly determine political class formation (Laclau, 1976; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

In contrast to the Mexican polemic, which assumes that peasant and proletarian struggles take place in the context of a struggle for the transition to socialism, I view things more modestly, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War. At this point, the socialist alternative is hardly on the political agendas of any significant political forces in Latin America (Castañeda 1993; Carr and Ellner 1993; Harris 1992). In my view, political struggles in the countryside take place within the confines of capitalism. If anything, they help define what kind of capitalism and what kind of democracy Mexico will have in the coming decades.

It is not surprising, then, that some of the key terms in the current political debate are *transparency*, *community participation*, *autonomy*, *independence*, *accountability*, *self-management*, *appropriation of the production process*, and *control of territory*. It may well be argued that the EZLN is the organization that has pushed most radically and decisively for reforms that include such demands, which lead toward a societal democracy rooted in civil society rather than limited to the state. This shift has been implicitly suggested by the political practice of the EZLN: Rather than focus on a "revolutionary" political party whose goal is to take over the state, the EZLN proposes to concentrate on the theme of several key social movements in Mexico since the 1980s, namely, the construction of civil society (Cook 1996; Fowleraker and Craig 1990; Fox 1996a).

While capitalism may be quite compatible with liberal democracy insofar as it is confined to the electoral dimension of politics and completely separated from the market and the economy (Meiksins Wood 1996), a societal democracy centered on civil society may pose some problems for capitalism. At the very least, a societal democracy may lead capitalism in an economically more equitable direction (Semo 1996; Otero 1996a).

My analysis of agricultural direct producers and their political class formation, then, is related to the construction of civil society within an authoritarian context. Civil society can be defined broadly or narrowly. Broadly defined, it is the sphere of interaction between the economy and the state, and includes social movements and the intimate sphere of the family. Narrowly defined, civil society consists of

voluntary political association oriented by its relation to the state, but self-limiting in not seeking a share of state power . . . a realm of freedom in which individuals are not forced to act in strategic pursuit of material reward (as required in the economy) or constrained by the power relationships embodied in the bureaucratic state (Dryzek 1996, 47).

Three scholars of democratic theory coincide in observing that the political realm per se cannot offer the citizenry substantial power (Dryzek 1996; Meiksins, Wood 1995; Touraine 1997). John Dryzek also sees globalized capitalism as a

major obstacle to deepening democracy. In his view the prospects for democracy "in capitalist times are better . . . in civil society than in the formal institutions of government, across rather than within national boundaries, and in realms of life not always recognized as political. Thus, democratization is more readily sought against the state, apart from the state, and across states, rather than by or in the state" (Dryzek 1996, 3-4). In these terms, the focus of my analysis in this book is the construction of civil society as a condition for democratization against the state and apart from the state.

The purpose of this book is thus to question class-reductionist assumptions in certain variants of Marxism and populism about political struggles and movements. The main boundaries of the Mexican debate and my own conceptual approach are presented in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 show that the agrarian structure in Mexico has been largely misconstrued and that the bulk of agricultural direct producers are semiproletarians, neither fully peasants nor proletarians. Then, on the basis of the three regional case studies in Chapters 5 through 7, I show that in regions in which peasant social relations prevail, semiproletarians are mainly involved in peasant-style struggles. Where the process of depeasantization is recent (up to one generation), even proletarians have largely struggled to regain a peasant condition. When a peasant culture has been severely undermined by capitalist development and the commodification of social relations, however, semiproletarians might still engage in struggles for land, but with a new, postcapitalist thrust: The demand for land is accompanied with the demand for other means of production and the democratic control of the production process. I call this a "postcapitalist" demand because it involves a "bottom-up" approach in decision-making within the labor process, and the fruits of production are to be distributed equitably among direct producers.

The term *postcapitalist* describes a situation in which semiproletarians successfully resist proletarianization by organizing a cooperative production purposefully, aiming at gaining substantial degrees of independence from both the state and private capital. Such an undertaking must deal with the capitalist market, but its organization contains the seed of a postcapitalist organization of all economic activities: bottom-up self-management and democratic control of production.<sup>2</sup>

I also intend to show that, independently of whether conflicts center on peasant, proletarian, or postcapitalist demands, they do not have a predefined character as either bourgeois-hegemonic, oppositional, or popular-democratic. Instead, the character of state intervention affects people's capacity to defend their interests and influences the character of their class organizations established for such struggles. When interventions are favorable to the direct producers (peasants, semiproletarians, or proletarians) but the initiative lies with the state itself, the people's organizations are usually coopted and integrated into bourgeois-hegemonic discourse and politics; when the state threatens the basis of the reproduction of the direct producers, their organizations assume an overtly oppositional character. Furthermore, when the state intervenes on behalf of the

direct producers because of their pressure, strength, and mobilization, their class organizations might assume both an oppositional and popular-democratic character.

Finally, a third critical variable is leadership type. Leadership influences the kinds of alliances that are established once class organizations are already formed and whether such organizations retain their independence from the state and/or the ruling class and their autonomy from other political organizations. Three basic types of agrarian leadership are explored: charismatic-authoritarian, corrupt-opportunistic, and democratic. In the Mexican case, charismatic-authoritarian and corrupt-opportunistic leaders are clearly associated with bourgeois-hegemonic political outcomes where organizations lose their independence and/or autonomy. With a democratic leadership, in contrast, class organizations have the best chance of constructing popular-democratic alliances with other organizations at the regional and/or national level and retaining their independence and autonomy.

The three regions under study in Chapters 5 through 7 share a number of characteristics that warrant comparison. Their contrasts, of course, also help to demonstrate the pertinence of my hypotheses. The most important commonality is that a capitalist organization of agriculture was installed in the production units, which were the original focus of agrarian struggles in the 1930s. All were modern agricultural enterprises hiring wage labor and producing profitable cash crops. Also, the three regions are in the most fertile valleys of their respective states, and agriculture is based on irrigation systems. Typically, commercial crops are produced in all three regions: sugarcane in Atencingo, cotton in La Laguna, and wheat in El Yaqui Valley.

Another common element is that each region is part of states marked by the regional inequalities common to Mexico as a whole, particularly with regard to types and quality of land. All three states have fertile valleys as well as marginal and depressed areas. The latter are referred to as *la sierra* (highlands). One significant difference is demographic density and the relative importance of valleys and *sierras* in each state. The state of Puebla, where Atencingo is located, has one of the highest demographic densities in Mexico; while Sonora, the state that houses El Yaqui Valley, has one of the lowest. Coahuila and Durango, the states that share part of their territory to make up La Laguna, are somewhere in the middle in population density, but closer to Sonora's.

Furthermore, most of the rural population in Puebla lives in the *sierra* regions rather than in the fertile valleys, while in Coahuila, Durango, and Sonora it is the other way around. Consequently, Puebla has a larger proportion of pauperized peasants and semiproletarians who are immersed in a less commodified economy. In contrast, partly because the northern *sierras* are too desertlike and infertile to provide even a meager subsistence for a peasant family, northern semiproletarians are immersed in a much more commodified economy and are

dependent on wage incomes. These intrastate differences apply, of course, for the peasantry in all three regions.

The histories of El Yaqui and La Laguna show important parallels in the extent of capitalist development by the time of agrarian reform. One crucial difference, however, is the presence of Yaqui and Mayo Indians in Sonora as opposed to the predominantly *mestizo* labor force in La Laguna. The cultural impact of this contrast was manifested mostly in the periods right after the revolution (the 1920s) and during the *Cardenista* agrarian reform (1934–38), when the Yaqui demanded land primarily to restore the territorial basis of their independent culture (Hu-DeHart 1984; Spicer 1980). In La Laguna, *mestizo* hacienda peons were waging typically proletarian struggles around unions and collective bargaining against capitalist cultivators.

The contrast between the Yaqui region and Atencingo is also quite important. Although an Indian population was likewise present in Atencingo's surroundings, their culture and history was very different from that of El Yaqui Valley. They had already endured centuries of subjection, first under colonial rule and later under the dominant forms of development in independent Mexico (Carasco 1969). Furthermore, the precolonial history of ethnic groups in central Mexico is linked to the domination of the Aztec state, a "despotic-tributary" form of exploitation and domination of Indian communities (R. Bartra 1974b). The Yaquis and Mayos, in contrast, were agricultural peoples with a tribal form of social organization that featured decentralized authority structures based on villages, like most of the North American tribes (Spicer 1969a, 1969b, 1980; Hu-DeHart 1981, 1984).

Such commonalities and differences are crucial to understanding the significance of yet another common element: Collective *ejidos* were created through agrarian reform during the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40).

The *ejido* was the preferred postreform tenure for beneficiaries of land distribution after the revolution. The *ejidatario*, the 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, was not legally enabled to transfer those rights to nonheirs until 1992. During the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, collective *ejidos* were promoted more than individual ones, but both forms of organization were contemplated in the law. A modification of the Mexican Agrarian Code in 1971, though, provided for the renting of *ejidal* land by more capitalized farmers from those who lacked the necessary capital (R. Bartra 1974a, 142 fn.). Renting of *ejido* plots had become fairly generalized by 1992, especially in irrigated agricultural areas. The new Agrarian Law of that year thus further legalizes rental to non-*ejidatarios* and even allows for the sale of *ejido* plots, provided that two-thirds of the *ejido* assembly approves (Cornelius 1992; DeWalt, Murphy, and Rees 1994).

The avowed purpose of promoting a collective organization was to preserve the economies of scale of large capitalist haciendas after expropriation. Given the di-

verse cultural backgrounds of direct producers in each region, however, their struggles eventually displayed marked differences in the process of political class formation, despite the fact that they all occupied a similar position in production relations: that of agricultural wage workers. Political class trajectories and destinations were thus determined not so much by economic class position as by the predominant regional cultures, state intervention, and the prevailing types of leadership.

#### Methodological Note

My exploration of the construction of civil society in rural Mexico, then, focuses on the effects of state intervention, regional cultures, leadership, and production relations at the community and regional levels. These levels, along with the family, are considered as different units of analysis, and I intend to move back and forth among them, depending on the issues to be dealt with. The focus will be the family when I am dealing with the structural class variables in the relations of production; but it will be the village or region when I am dealing with the agrarian movements.

The national level is of course preserved, for it is the level at which state policies are intended to have an impact. Depending on the relative strengths of contending groups and classes at the regional level, though, the state might practice exceptions from its general, national policies. Mexico's relations with the world economy are important but not explicitly discussed here because they are internalized for the social formation as a whole. Therefore, the impact that Mexico's dependent insertion into the world capitalist economy has on political class formation will be expressed in the country's internal dynamics of class struggle.

The reasons for moving about several units of analysis are straightforward. First, most of the literature on agrarian classes takes the family as the unit of analysis for establishing class boundaries in production relations. Furthermore, I choose the family over the individual because I believe that this is a more adequate unit for understanding structural class processes in a country where kinship has a heavy specific weight in social relations. Second, agrarian struggles are thought of fundamentally as collective actions. Therefore, the village or region is a more pertinent unit of analysis for the study of collective actions and social movements. Finally, this is predominantly a qualitative study, based on comparing the histories of agrarian struggles and the ethnography of three regions of Mexico.

Even though the following analysis is limited to one country, it is framed in the tradition of "comparative historical macroanalysis" (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979, 1984; Katznelson and Zolberg 1986). Rather than contrasting the social histories of various countries in terms of certain variables, my contrasts are among regions within a vastly heterogeneous country. As Aristede Zolberg has written about this method, it bears a family resemblance to quantitative multivariate analysis, but it is hardly identical with it: "The process of abstracting configurations from historical

reality and their treatment as variables entails a certain degree of intellectual make-believe, which is justified only to the extent that we remain aware that it is make-believe." (1986, 401) It is also important to keep in mind that such a perspective does not achieve generalizations in the statistical sense, but it does attempt to enhance our general understanding of the process of political class formation by systematizing the observation of cross-regional commonalities and variations. Only with systematization can we eliminate interpretations founded on a mistaken attribution of uniqueness to certain aspects of regional configurations and identify the combination of factors that best accounts for the variation that is found. (The last sentence is a paraphrase of Zolberg [1986, 401] in which I basically substituted the word "region" for "nation.")

#### Organization of This Book

The next three chapters of this book are dedicated to theoretical, historical, and structural issues of agrarian development in Mexico. Chapter 2 delineates the main contours of the Mexican polemic and presents the alternative theoretical approach proposed in this book. It offers an exposition of the book's research agenda and a definition of its hypotheses and concepts.

Chapter 3 presents a critical history of agrarian reform in Mexico. The official view of government ideologues often portrays this process as the product of a peasant revolution that brought justice to the rural masses. In contrast to this view, I argue that land redistribution in Mexico was the way chosen to develop and entrench capitalism in Mexico while building a basis of support for the modern Mexican state. Changes made to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution in 1992, however, along with new agricultural policies, represent a major overhaul of the original agrarian reform program, and they are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 evaluates the main socioeconomic result of the Mexican agrarian reform from the 1930s to the 1990s: the pauperization of rural people, which has brought both peasant and capitalist agriculture to a crisis. It provides an account of the global agrarian transitions and the social differentiation process in the Mexican countryside. The double crisis of Mexican agriculture, one referring to the capitalist sector, the other to the peasant economy, is explored. Looking at the roots of this double crisis, an analysis of cash crops in contrast with subsistence crops is provided using data on production and prices from 1940 through 1995. Then, based on the 1970 census, I present a spectrum of social differentiation of agrarian producers in Mexico that reflects the extent to which the peasant economy had been eroded by that year. Next, by contrasting these data with those of 1960, I show that the middle peasantry tends to disappear in the midst of a polarizing agrarian structure. Data from surveys conducted in 1990 and 1994 on the *ejido* sector alone tend to confirm these results, although some land reconcentration is beginning to take place among middle peasants, at least within this sector (De Janvry, Gordillo, and Sadoulet 1997).

The main conclusions of Chapter 4 are as follows: (1) There has been a profound process of social differentiation among the peasantry because of the double crisis of capitalist agriculture and the peasant economy; (2) the vast majority of agricultural direct producers were already in a semiproletarian class position by 1970; and (3) the uneven development of capitalism in Mexican agriculture has created a vast regional heterogeneity in class structures.

Thus, the central feature of the process of dissolution of peasant economy is depeasantization without full proletarianization. The result is that the vast majority of agricultural direct producers are in semiproletarian positions, torn between wage-labor and peasant production. Nevertheless, the cultural and socioeconomic contents of semiproletarian positions vary regionally. The question then becomes, In which direction do semiproletarians struggle in agrarian class conflict?

Chapters 5 through 7 address this question by focusing on each of the three regions specified above in order to study in detail how direct producers entered the process of political class formation. Even though the Mexican agrarian structure is highly heterogeneous, I chose to focus on direct producers who shared a very similar structural position in production relations in each of the three regions by the time of the agrarian reform in the 1930s: They were all agricultural workers selling their labor power to capitalist *haciendas*. Despite this similarity in positions within production relations, the struggles and class organizations pursued in each region were different from one another; the political class trajectories were diverse. The result is that agricultural workers ended up in different political class destinations in each case. Thus, because the initial structural class position by itself may not explain differences in political class formation, I provide an explanation based on regional cultures, state intervention, and leadership styles.

Chapter 5, which discusses La Laguna (in Coahuila and Durango), tells the story of an agricultural proletariat whose political class history followed a complex trajectory. The agricultural workers of the 1930s, dubbed "peasants" by contemporary observers, posed typically proletarian demands: higher wages, unionization rights, and collective bargaining. Rather than satisfying these demands, the state responded with a massive land redistribution in the region, where agrarian capitalism was most developed in Mexico. After obtaining land, for over a decade the new *ejidatarios* went through a phase of successful postcapitalist production based on self-management and democratic production in the newly created collective *ejidos*. But the state and the agrarian bourgeoisie could not tolerate such economic and political strength in a subordinate class. Through years of official boycott the *ejidatarios* became an impoverished and divided semiproletariat that now produces mostly for the state-controlled bank. Although the class destinations in La Laguna are more diverse than those in the other two regions, most direct producers are clearly subordinate to the economic and political apparatuses of the state, having evolved into semiproletarian state workers with quite fragmented class organizations.

In contrast, chapter 6 deals with the region of Atencingo, Puebla, where the agrarian struggles throughout the period considered (1930s to 1990s) have had a peasant character. After bitter struggles against the owner of a capitalist sugar mill, which the new *ejidatarios* had to supply with sugarcane by law, they finally succeeded in dismantling the collective *ejido*. The resulting form of productive organization relied on individual *ejido* members. An internal process of social differentiation set in by which a minority of *ejidatarios* hired significant amounts of labor power. These new, relatively prosperous peasants diversified production to include nonsugarcane crops. Thus, the class destination of a sizable minority was what I have called "peasant-entrepreneurs." At the other end of the spectrum, the majority of Atencingo peasants evolved further into a semiproletarian condition, with increasing numbers of household members having to migrate to become proletarians in Mexican cities or in the United States. The proletarianization of such family members, though, has been external to the regional rural economy.

The Yaqui valley region of southern Sonora is the topic of Chapter 7. The Yaqui Indians were the original inhabitants of its fertile lands. Although these direct producers also occupied salaried positions in production relations long before the 1930s, their struggles centered on regaining the territorial basis for their nation and culture. But the aggressiveness and violence of capitalist penetration converted their national struggles and those of the large *mestizo* population that eventually migrated to the region—a semiproletarianized labor force—into a form of postcapitalist struggle: The new demands involved not only land but also the rest of the means of production and the democratic self-management of the productive process.

Finally, the concluding chapter summarizes the central arguments and draws systematic comparisons and contrasts among the three regions. It establishes how state intervention, regional culture, and leadership types are the mediating determinations that best explain political class formation in each region, even when the starting economic class position was the same in all these regions. Drawing on recent literature on rural Mexico, this chapter then addresses the political implications of changes brought about by the neoliberal reform that has swept Mexico since the mid-1980s.

#### Notes

1. Juan Martínez-Alier (1977) noted this seeming paradox for the Peruvian peasants and agricultural laborers. The former struggled for unions and the latter for land.
2. I use the term *postcapitalism* as an ideal type. In some concrete cases we might find collective *ejidos* that tend to hire significant amounts of wage labor, beyond the labor power of their members. In these cases the *ejido* might be closer to a capitalist cooperative than to a postcapitalist one.

## 2

### The Mexican Debate and Beyond: Class, State, and Culture

The "agrarian question" in Mexico was the focus of a protracted debate in the 1970s and was reenacted in the 1980s. In this chapter I discuss each side's characterization of the agrarian social structure and the resulting political conclusions. I then propose alternative questions and hypotheses that reframe the agrarian question. I present the empirical evidence for my hypotheses in the subsequent chapters. Here I challenge class-reductionist assumptions in the two main stances of the debate, arguing that regional cultures, state intervention, and leadership types are also crucial in determining political class formation.

#### Structural Differentiation and Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico: Profiles of the Debate

Two of the central issues in debate have been (1) the character of Mexico's agrarian structure and (2) the nature of class actors and their political strategies. In other words, what is the character of the political class formation of agricultural direct producers (peasants, semiproletarians, and proletarians)?

The central question that seems to have guided this controversy is as follows: Are peasants on a unilinear trajectory towards a proletarian status, dependent on wage labor, or can they remain peasant producers as capitalism develops? This question clearly refers to the structural dimension of agrarian class dynamics, i.e., to the position of class agents in the process of production and circulation. A key characteristic of the debate is that, regardless of the stance taken, *campesinista* or *proletarista*, most authors have assumed that there is a necessary correspondence between the position occupied in production relations and political class formation. Indeed, the problematic of both *campesinistas* and *proletaristas* is implicitly the same: "Tell me what is the class position of direct producers (defined by the relations of production), and I'll tell you how they are supposed to behave politically." This theoretical phenomenon can be labeled "class reductionism" as