

Conflictividad Social y Política en el capitalismo contemporáneo.  
Antagonismos y resistencias (II)



número 36 (tercer trimestre 2017) - number 36 (third trimester 2017)

*La conflictividad contemporánea y sus problemáticas*

*Revista THEOMAI / THEOMAI Journal*  
*Estudios críticos sobre Sociedad y Desarrollo / Critical Studies about Society and Development*

## Capitalism, contradictions and social movements in rural Mexico<sup>1</sup>

Sonia Puricelli<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Mexico is a distinctly interesting case study for analysing social-political problems. The countryside in particular has historically cradled social change. Rural antagonism continues this century, redefined in a new cycle that is based on struggle experiences of the last century.

This article addresses the following question: how is the relationship between conflictivity and countryside expressed in Mexico? It outlines sectoral economic policies first, with reference to capital. It then explores the background of rural conflicts in recent history, aiming to highlight their ongoing importance. Finally, it interprets cutting-edge struggles. As

---

<sup>1</sup> This article draws on a previous version in Spanish "Contradicciones y confrontaciones en el campo mexicano", in Guido Galafassi and Sonia Puricelli (comp.), *Perspectivas críticas sobre la conflictividad social*, Ranelagh, Extramuros Ediciones, 2017, pp. 95-111. All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> GEACH-UNQ, Argentina.

a whole, this discussion emphasises the organised responses of actors that challenge the contradictions between capital and rural labour.

### **Structures, dynamics and antagonisms**

The so-called agrarian miracle that took place in the Mexican import substitution model during the 1940s to 1960s included urban and rural workers as producers and also as consumers. Within this endogenous growth, rural workers served a strategic productive role by providing industrial supplies and cheap food for the domestic market, and also national food self-sufficiency. Likewise, small and middle-scale rural production contributed to nationalist industrialisation, the creation of value and reproduction and distribution of national capital. This phase was inclusive and redistributive capitalist exploitation.

Since the 1960s, the rate of surplus value significantly fell, real wages began to rise faster than work productivity, and agricultural surplus value extraction without adequate counterbalancing investments culminated in an unsustainable contradiction between industry and agriculture. The effects of industrialisation at the expense of agriculture caused the latter to technologically and productively lag, and the sector lost its drive (Rubio, 2003: 63). The national economic model stagnated in a context of capitalist crisis and national debts. The import substitution model, however, was prolonged into the 1970s.

The combination of an effervescent countryside and a certain interest in recovering peasant productivity induced rural populist policies towards the end of 1973 that also sought social peace. The State took part in land expropriation, investment, and processes of commercialisation for peasants for the last time. The last stage of land distribution for rural workers resulted in increased peasant production and relative State legitimacy during the first half of the 70s, although blood was spilt during the struggle. After 1977, economic interests shifted: the State ceased to serve as a mediator between classes. As the State door closed, the struggle for land began to break up and the social organisations themselves began to lose political strength.

During the following decade capitalism reorganised itself all over the world in order to recuperate its profitability. In a context of a food crisis; falling prices; critical national debt; and a shrinking world market, neoliberal policies began in Mexico after severing its import substitution model in 1982. Sectoral economic changes became more noticeable in the 90s. The agrarian sector's productive recuperation was based on trade deregulation and privatisation, meaning a shift from endogenous to exogenous growth which was favourable for an elite. The neoliberal policies that withdrew State intervention and investment from the productive process, deregulated the agro-food market, pushed food prices up without raising salaries, and quashed its domestic market and social pact. The Mexican State severely reduced credit policies, public spending for rural development, and State purchasing and distribution agencies. Agricultural subsidies were reduced and, in a number of cases, were channelled to large producers or agroindustrial companies. Internal price guarantees were eliminated and products are currently sold in the domestic market with international price references that do not take local production costs into consideration. Between 1989 and 1994 Mexico went from being one of the most protected economies to one of the most open economies in the world (Ana de Ita, 2004: 35). Small and middle-scale agriculture has found itself in a structural crisis since the 90s. New forms of exploitation and subordination of peasant labour are underpinned by exclusionary domination because it is unable to reproduce subaltern classes in their exploited condition, rather it tends to exclude them (Rubio, 2003: 102).

Real salary structurally fell (to compensate the industrial loss of surplus value) and was not compensated with lower supplies prices; this was a drastic measure. Since salaries were reduced by coercive means –unemployment lowered salaries politically– instead of through cheaper food prices, workers' purchase power diminished in general and food prices were separated from salary levels. This dynamic means that industry excludes peasants as producers of inexpensive foods that maximise working class purchase power (Rubio, 2003: 103, 104, 114). While minimum salaries lost 69.9% of their purchase power in the neoliberal model (Calva, 2003: 5), food prices did not drop proportionately; instead, they became more expensive. "Large companies have the possibility to produce food at elevated prices that do not hinder the reproduction of global capital." (Rubio, 2003: 131) On the other hand, excluding peasants from taking part in national industrialisation caused rural decapitalisation since funding and investment were abandoned. In this context, the agro-export phase was consolidated in Mexico. Agricultural production was laid in the dominion of depredatory agroindustry instead of in more distributive, smaller-scale farming. These conditions have allowed large food and agricultural industries to subordinate rural farmers and dismantle national production, not only peasantry, but also small and medium-scale industry. There are three capital sectors that drive this subordination and lead the new development model: the speculative financial sector, the transnational industrial sector and the multinational agro-alimentary sector. (Rubio, 2003: 103).

One of the most efficient instruments for institutionally decapitalising the countryside was the 1992 reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution that aimed to place rural communal lands, *ejidos*, on the market in order to attract private capital. The reform eliminated the patrimonial, inalienable, imprescriptible and inembargable character of *ejidos*, and enabled peasant plots of land to be sold or rented. It thus broke the Mexican Revolution's agrarian social contract (Calva, 1999: 47) and strangled agrarian land distribution.

Meanwhile, asymmetrical international trade policies have impaired the sector in general. The United States farming policy regulates its profitability through investments, subsidies, technification, biotechnology and monopolistic production. Mexico competes with the USA, a country that subsidises its agriculture in order to set politically artificial prices that can even be below the price of production. This dumping has strangled the Mexican domestic market, among others.

The U.S. Farm Bill that was approved in 2002 aggravated the distortions in the global agriculture markets and Mexican agricultural imports. This legislation meant an increase of up to 118 thousand million dollars each year between 2002 and 2011 (Calva, 2003: 23) and represented a U.S. agricultural subsidy increase of over 80% regarding the budget approved by the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996. In a nutshell, this Act is a social welfare policy for transnational corporations (Mittal and Rosset, 2003: 112, 115, 121).

Furthermore, the 1986 GATT and 1994 NAFTA initiatives have deepened and consolidated the structural crisis because they institutionalised distorted trade advantages that dismantled small and middle-scale national production. Eliminated tariffs and asymmetrical competition with the USA means that Mexico imports large volumes of foods instead of growing them since it is more cost-effective in economic terms. Before long, the NAFTA meant that food imports soared from 1,790 million dollars in 1982 to 7,274.4 million in 1994 and 11,077.4 million in 2001 (Calva, 2003: 25). The prolific purchasing of foods include some that are particularly basic and sensitive for the national staple diet. At the beginning of this century, for example, 95% of soy was imported, and also 58.5% of rice, 49% of wheat, 40% of meat that is consumed and –even more strategic– 25% of corn (Quintana, 2002: 7).

Market deregulation and trade opening –that substituted planned State intervention– made it impossible not only for peasants to produce a surplus, but also for them to reproduce themselves as a social class, and interfered with sustainable and sovereign agricultural development. The withdrawal of trade subsidies for peasants makes the countryside unprofitable for them while, in contrast, other subsidies are channelled towards national and international agroindustry. This means that it is not cost-effective to work the land on a small and medium scale, and peasants are economically, politically and socially devalued. Mexico, in turn, loses its food self-sufficiency, while it gains sectoral deficit and subordination to international capital.

Mexican peasantry is no longer nationally strategic for the generation of domestic wealth by means of industrial products, affordable foodstuffs and wage determination. Peasants are indeed separated from the reproduction of capital through the following contradictions: a) the domination of financial and speculative capital over productive capital, b) the domination of industrial capital that marginalizes peasants as producers of cheap goods, and c) the domination of low prices of and subsidies to multinational agroindustrial capital over peasants and small and middle-scale agricultural entrepreneurs (Rubio, 2003: 148, 149).

### **Contemporary peasant struggles in the 20th century**

Recent peasant struggles have their roots in a synergy of contemporary history. In the 70s there were massive protests for land; a decade later efforts concentrated on productive peasant inclusion; in the 90s *El Barzón* movement challenged sectoral debts, and the *neozapatista* movement rose up to defend indigenism in the face of capitalism. The wide range of demands and strategies address an array of grievances of small and middle-scale producers concerning their exclusion.

During the 1970s the struggle for land as a means of production prevailed and, to a lesser extent, for prices, salaries, credit, productivity, commercialisation and economic surplus. The State's interest in stimulating domestic capitalism and also agricultural productivity enabled land distribution during this stage of recent history. The State acted as a mediator between classes and controlled conflicts of interests. The social effervescence in the countryside at the time was mainly due to accumulated unrest: peasant pauperisation, the legitimacy crisis of traditional rural organisations (especially the massive, State-linked, central umbrella organisations *Confederación Nacional Campesina* and *Central Campesina Independiente*) and the neopopulist government policy that relaunched agricultural production in order to confront the sectoral crisis (Paré, 1985: 93).

By means of intense mobilisation, peasants achieved their first claim: land, which had been demanded since the 1950s. They also pushed for credit, productivity, commercialisation and economic surplus. However, the main struggle of the 60s was undoubtedly by rural landless workers to secure a livelihood – in other words, land. This demand had been hampered for decades by bureaucracy or corruption. There were “three million peasant applicants, grouped around more than 60 thousand executive, special committees whose files [were held up], curbed by negative ruling or simply lost.” (Bartra, 1985: 105) The disputes were regionally scattered at first, but with an array of strategies: as well as marches to the capital city, there were occupations in large estates, seizures of public offices, convoys, hunger strikes and road blockades.

In 1973 the peasant movement became national; it spread to practically all of the states and began to structure itself, network and coordinate in regional organisations. There were

four fronts of action: small-scale, regional producers for prices; regional, agricultural day labourers for salaries; democracy against political imposition; and, above all, those who could not wait any longer for land endowment (Bartra, 1985: 103, 110). Before long, the peasant movement achieved considerable organicity and independence from the State. Almost 80% of the organisations that fought for land were formed before 1974 (Bartra, 1985: 111). The creation of the first large, independent central organisations with socialist overtones also marked the period, with their massive methods of struggle. The *Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos* organised itself as a peasant extension of the Communist Party for the transformation of socioeconomic structures and, in particular, unionisation, land for agricultural day labourers, their wages and production. The *Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala* also engaged in an offensive struggle in the face of the ruling class and the exploitation system; specifically in order to eradicate large estate *latifundista* property and agrarian capital in favour of communal and *ejido* land. As well as the proliferation of organisations, alliances and coalitions also prospered among peasants and other sectors, mainly students, intellectuals and urban workers.

Strengthened by these alliances, peasants exerted considerably strong public pressure by means of numerous mobilisations. Furthermore, the president's interest in stimulating the reproduction of national capital and agrarian production lead to a temporary alliance with the popular classes, undermining the land-owning bourgeoisie, especially large-scale industrial farmers in the north-east of the country (although they were economically compensated). During the offensive struggle in the first six years of the seventies, between 1973 and 1976 the government was relatively tolerant regarding upheavals and legalised invaded land since peasant production was still useful for the interests of the State.

The new president in 1977, however, entailed a watershed. State interests changed and the peasant struggle became defensive in the face of new agrarian policies that dismantled land distribution. The new government reached out to the agrarian bourgeoisie and focused on the productivity and efficiency of private corporate farming. Since *ejido* communal lands were condemned as inefficient by the government, it expressed that they did not constitute an alternative to the agrarian crisis (Bartra, 1985: 131). Agricultural capitalists, especially livestock owners, called peasants into question about being landholders (Rubio, 1996: 119). A drastic overruling of land occupations was consequently applied; not only were invasions not allowed, but they also became a federal crime (Bartra, 1985: 132).

On a national scale, struggles continued for land and production prices and there were also marches and occupations of the Ministry of Agrarian Reform (SRA). However, mobilisations waned in the face of deadlock and repression, and the human cost of imprisonment and death increased. "In 1977 newspapers register 244 peasant arrests, slightly more than in 1976 which were 238, but the number of murders tripled as compared to the previous year going from 81 to 242 [.]" (Bartra, 1985: 140) This episode clearly and violently marked the beginning of the end of Mexican land distribution.

While the land struggle was restrained by political interests, the confrontation for productivity spread. The offensive 1970s strategy that sought to transform social-political structures changed into a defensive, more moderate, strategy in the following decade that aimed at productive peasant integration.

While neoliberalism began to expand globally during the 80s, the national endogenous growth and peasant inclusion models were exhausted. The State had no interest in encouraging peasant production for its domestic market, but instead stimulated agricultural entrepreneurs, and the export agroindustry for exotic products grew. Furthermore, the collapse of international prices boosted imports of basic foods, and land stopped being

profitable for peasant production. Small farms were no longer a means of livelihood and land claims dwindled: it simply did not pay to work the land on a small scale. In general, land struggles were weakened; physical repression was not necessary. The State only resorted to co-opting by including leaders into the government.

By contrast, a defensive struggle for productivity grew: economic surplus, improved working conditions (prices, public resources, financing, infrastructure, supplies, technical assistance, commercialisation) and especially peasant self-management in the productive process. The aim of was to transfer techniques and productive administration to peasant organisations as if they were microenterprises, in order to reintegrate peasants in the model of accumulation. A grouping of autonomous organisations emerged and considerable concessions were obtained for productive projects and financial initiatives, within the framework of an exclusionary model.

In particular, The *Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas* (UNORCA) emerged from a unification of organisations that nationally represented peasants and small landowners. It stood up for the appropriation of the productive process by producer organisations; surplus; and support instruments. Its goal mainly consisted in counteracting the negative effects of the new economic model through purposeful solutions for peasant self-management.

As an interlocutor with the government and with a non-confrontational method (therefore hardly repressed), the UNORCA tactic consisted in transforming peasants into social entrepreneurs. This was in order to make them efficient, modern and competitive according to neoliberal insertion requirements and thereby increase small-scale rural prosperity through productive activities, employment and profitability. Without changing the economic model, it pushed for converting basic foods production into an economic policy, national food self-sufficiency, a domestic market, State intervention in order to increase public and private sectoral investment, increasing price guarantees, rural income redistribution and capitalisation.

The UNORCA brought about significant concessions and numerous productive projects (including savings banks, credit unions, machinery, and founding peasant associations). It then began to decline when the *Congreso Agrario Permanente* (CAP) official organism was created in 1989 (in which the UNORCA was temporarily a member); the CAP organisations concentrated dialogues with the State and also resources. The reform of Article 27 of Mexico's Constitution (that caused a rift within UNORCA) and the NAFTA policies (that dismantled many peasant organisations) also contributed to eroding UNORCA. Its program for productively inserting peasants into neoliberal capitalism encountered the problem that there were not structural conditions for turning peasants into agricultural entrepreneurs since they had no place in the accumulation model.

Many peasant organisations were ruined. During the 1990s new national and offensive resistances appeared in this panorama of rural decomposition, as well as networks of specialised independent organisations. They tended to broaden peasant demands, particularly against the ideology, practices and consequences of the economic model. The detrimental impact of neoliberalism on the popular classes was explicitly expressed in the last decade of the century while the agricultural sector sank into a structural crisis. The reorganisation of corporativism in order to legitimise the fraudulently elected president strengthened the *Confederación Nacional Campesina*, an official organisation, as a State interlocutor, thus diverting dialogue away from other peasant organisations. Marginalisation and co-opting destructured the articulated resistance of organisations that were driving forces in the 1980s.

In 1993 a new protest erupted. Middle-scale and rich farmers that produced for the domestic market (and had initially benefitted from corporativism) were marginalised by neoliberal structural adjustments, indebted and embargoed. *El Barzón* was a national social movement that spectacularly demanded a moratorium and debt cancellation of expired portfolios. For the first time, the adversary was identified as private capital: banks, the domination of financial capital and the Ministry of Finance. The movement was antineoliberal in the sense that it demanded domestic market reactivation, food sovereignty and eliminating productive and commercial monopolies. Among its specific demands, it called for suspending judicial proceedings, restructuring overdue portfolios, changing judicial proceedings for administrative ones, exempting homes from judicial proceedings (Rubio, 1996: 143). It exerted striking public pressure by means of sit-ins with tractors, even elephants in marches, as well as employing traditional methods: seizing the national rural credit bank *Banrural* offices, road blockades and negotiating with the State. It significantly renegotiated debtors' past-due portfolios. Nevertheless, it did not transform the accumulation model's structures nor the hegemonic financial sector, and poor farmers (that are not creditworthy) did not directly benefit from the movement's scope.

The *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* surfaced the following year, deliberately coinciding with the NAFTA onset date. This peasant-based indigenous movement declared its adversaries as neoliberalism, the government and bourgeois corporate power, with a view to changing power relations and structures. It demanded recognition of indigenous rights to political, economic and cultural self-management. It included nationalist demands for health, housing, education, land, employment, food, and democracy; it also spoke up against the NAFTA and the reform of Article 27. In addition to its armed insurrection during the first phase of its struggle, the movement also carried out fasting; marches; and land seizures, characterised by ideological claims and internal cohesion among militants. It now carries out its revolution with peaceful methods, including autonomous self-management zones without the State.

Although *El Barzón* and *neozapatismo* detonated protests that were more offensive than the previous decade's ones and clearly against the regime of accumulation, demands for changing exploitation relations were not fulfilled on a national level. Nevertheless, they articulated a wider rural producer program and clearly identified structural causes.

In addition to anti-establishment eruptions, peasant organisation networks arose during the 90s: regional associations that were much smaller than the massive, vertical, central organisations. They focused on product specialisation services and management as independent coordinators. Their aim was to develop specific policies and survival strategies according to each particular sectoral interest. The *Asociación Mexicana de Uniones de Crédito del Sector Social* arose in 1992 as a network of services, credit unions and financing. The *Red Mexicana de Organizaciones Campesinas Forestales* emerged in 1994 offering services to forestry *ejido* communal unions and woodland property owning communities. The *Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo* formally appeared the following year. It was made up of regional grain organisations with the aim to administrate and promote corn and *tortilla* retailers, and provide training and advisory services. The *Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Cafelateras* was established in 1989 to defend the quality, production and commercialisation of national coffee, including organic crops, following the banner of peasant appropriation of the productive process. It won institutional policies during phases of State support. Although peasant organisations had to compete for resources and State recognition, there were moments of short-lived alliances among certain independent organisations in order to claim political inclusion.

### Peasant struggles this century

Peasant organisations were, in general, eroded at the beginning of this century. The historical Mexican peasant social movement, however, has been characterised by its ability to regenerate and reinvent itself in response to the historical moment. Towards the end of 2002, there were three circumstantial and imminent triggers. These were in addition to structural conflicts of exclusion and domination that had accumulated over decades and the immediate context of a new right-wing government that meant more exclusion in terms of funding and negotiation.<sup>3</sup> The three specific detonators were the plummeting rural budget for 2003, the penultimate phase of the NAFTA for the same year (that was going to deregulate nineteen branches of daily products) and, to a lesser extent, the discussion about the Farm Bill.

Twelve organisations (independent central organisations, autonomous ones and specialised networks) that represented peasants and small to middle-scale farmers united around mutual problems in a situational, plural and centre-left coalition front: *El Campo No Aguanta Más*, The Countryside Can't Take It Anymore (ECNAM).<sup>4</sup> Its organisations represented 500 thousand rural workers (Ramírez Cuevas, 2003: 4) and it carried out numerous protests during its surge of almost two years. The front erupted towards the end of 2002, it matured its platform during 2003 and received a favourable media and social response that benefitted an unexpected and impetuous rise. The *Movimiento El campo No Aguanta Más* (MECNAM) social movement as a whole consisted of the ECNAM front of 12 organisations together with another three allied blocs: the *Confederación Nacional Campesina*, the *Congreso Agrario Permanente* and *El Barzón*.<sup>5</sup> It was massive: one of the largest movements over the last decades.

The member organisations emerged in different historical contexts which determined their different demands, tactical experiences, political visions, and organisational approaches. In contrast to the relative dispersion and, consequently, disarticulated platforms of the peasant movement in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the spontaneous MECNAM convergence jointly constructed a defensive and offensive platform for the first time. It integrated, broadened and updated the heterogeneous, particular interests of rural organisations (veteran independent central organisations, autonomous ones and relatively new specialised independent networks) in a mutual project that reflected their accumulation of demands and experiences since the 1970s, thus unifying their individual backgrounds. The platform expressed a natural, although not automatic, evolution of contemporary struggles:

<sup>3</sup> After seven decades of idiosyncratic, centre-wing PRI social organisation, peasant organisations became notably politically marginalised when the PAN won the presidential elections in 2000. The latter was not interested at all in rural PRI corporatist structures at first, nor peasant organisations.

<sup>4</sup> The organisations that took part in The Countryside Can't Take It Anymore front were: *Asociación Mexicana de Uniones de Crédito del Sector Social* (AMUCSS); *Asociación Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo* (ANEC); *Central Campesina Cardenista* (CCC); *Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos* (CIOAC); *Coalición de Organizaciones Democráticas Urbanas y Campesinas* (CODUC); *Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Cafetaleras* (CNOC); *Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala* (CNPA); *Frente Democrático Campesino de Chihuahua* (FDCCh); *Red Mexicana de Organizaciones Campesinas Forestales* (Red MOCAF); *Unión General Obrero, Campesina y Popular-Coordinadora Nacional* (UGOCP-CN); *Unión Nacional de Organizaciones en Forestaría Comunitaria* (UNOFOC); *Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas* (UNORCA).

<sup>5</sup> The *Congreso Agrario Permanente* includes twelve member organisations (including CIOAC and CCC that were individual members of the ECAM front). The *Confederación Nacional Campesina* was also a member of the *Congreso Agrario Permanente*, although the latter considered itself a separate bloc due to its history and size. The EZLN notably did not support the MECNAM.

for land in the 1960s, for productive inclusion in the 1980s and against neoliberalism as of the 1990s.

In general it demanded the existence, subsistence and productivity of the peasantry by means of public policies and State intervention. In particular it called for specific reforms, mainly focusing on: the NAFTA agricultural chapter postponement and restructuring<sup>6</sup>, a growing sectoral budget, mechanisms for accomplishing food sovereignty and productive peasant inclusion for the domestic market.

The most meaningful and media-attracting demonstrations and tactics were the following: newspaper spreads; manifestos; symbolic or purposeful open letters; marches – including a megamarch of a hundred thousand people to the capital's main square–; legislative lobbying; rallies; road blockades; fasting; sit-ins; symbolic closure of the north border; symbolic seizures of airports, ports and government offices; press conferences; numerous statements of support and alliances; *Plan Campesino para el Siglo XXI* platform; papers in the questioned government forum *Mesas de Diálogo*; proposals for the controversial *Acuerdo Nacional para el Campo* government document that was signed by various politicians and rural leaders. At the same time, forums and academic discussion events spawned as well as support from the media and various sectors (researchers; trade unions; fronts; networks; artists; human rights, environmental and religious organisations). The megamarch, the government forum, the comprehensive peasant platform and the *Acuerdo Nacional* document were essentially innovations; the other dynamics have been part of peasant movement history.

The movement's role in social change became evident through transformations that took place in different national spheres. Economically, its initial demand of increasing sectoral public spending notably materialised, although not completely. Some productive, commercial and, above all, social programs were created and reoriented, and the importation of white corn significantly reduced. Although the NAFTA agricultural chapter was not renegotiated, there were some partial solutions for specific issues, especially immediate welfare measures and social development for the countryside.

Politically, the social movement engaged in dialogue with high levels of government. This was a new dynamic for some organisations and a regained one for others, meaning State acknowledgement as interlocutors. Likewise, peasant organisations were strengthened, and relations between the State and peasant organisations were slightly rearranged. Nonpartisan and left-wing PRD rural representation consequently grew which modified the historical, centrist PRI predominance in the countryside, and slightly changed rural resource distribution. The demonstrations massively condemned detrimental sectoral public policies. They also provoked public debates and analytical publications (proposals, questioning, and diagnoses); there was a renewed interest in the countryside. It has been argued that the most important and lasting mark the MECNAM movement made was its comprehensive, classist and programmatic platform.

Socially, on the one hand, the lengthy and institutionally signed *Acuerdo Nacional para el Campo* document could, if complied with, be a tool for reforming both immediate and long-term policies, and for founding new labour relations in the agrarian sector that could even generate national food sovereignty and a new social contract. Its 282 items (38 general statements and policies and 244 measures, criticised for only having 63 new commitments), in theory, reformulate agrarian policies, although the document's significance has been mainly

---

<sup>6</sup> It proposed re-establishing tariffs and import quotas that were in force in 1994 for basic farming products, particularly: corn; sugar cane; beans; wheat; rice; sorghum; coffee; eggs; milk; bovine, pork, fish and poultry meat. The demand to temporarily freeze tariff reductions aimed at regulating foreign trade and by doing so correct the harmful effects of artificial and unfair international trade.

symbolic. On the other hand, the movement's protests and the media's interest influenced public opinion and national debate that brought the peasant issue into the open, highlighting public questioning of the NAFTA.

Despite quantitative and qualitative achievements, problems of form and content persist. For example, structural padlocks such as budget underspending, inequality between commercial subsidies for large producers and welfare benefits for small and middle-scale producers, clientelist corporativism, and massive import of yellow and broken corn, among other nationally sensitive foods. Asymmetrical productive relations did not structurally and systematically transform, therefore rural contradictions were not solved, from peasant precariousness and productive market marginalisation to food sovereignty. The MECNAM movement did not achieve its core platform due to exogenous and endogenous contradictions: national and international political-economic conditions, and limitations within the movement itself that did not overcome its spontaneous and circumstantial nature.

Its relationship with the State proved to be corrosive and obstacles to the movement's negotiation power eroded internal cohesion. The following specific government strategies eroded the movement: bureaucratic instruments (both for filtering actions and for officially proving that government policies do not require modification); unequal resources among organisations; budget underspending; padlocks for delivering resources; a new right-wing PAN government corporativism and, above all, the *Acuerdo Nacional para el Campo* document was not complied. Inside the front of the twelve founding organisations, the heterogeneous alliance (independent central organisations, autonomous organisations and specialised independent networks) led to incompatibilities regarding the methods and interests of individual organisations which, in turn, also weakened their convergence.

After the front fractured, its organisations realigned in new allied poles. Fresh coalitions arose<sup>7</sup> that have resumed demands for sectoral policies, the NAFTA moratorium and the sectoral budget, and they have updated them with new resistances against, for example, transgenic corn, fracking, energy reform and land dispossession (Rubio, 2017: 29, 30, 35, 36).

These new constellations of rural clusters have not achieved their main demands either and, at this moment, the rural sector is relatively disarticulated. However, time will tell if a renewed cycle of contradictions and confrontations arise in the face of the controversial North American Republican president and NAFTA negotiations.

### A few final thoughts

The largest contemporary conflicts in the countryside have challenged different antagonisms and antagonists over half a century. The current peasant marginalisation contrasts with the inclusive exploitation of the 1970s during the prolongation of the import substitute model. The first independent, rural central organisations emerged in this phase. While severe contradictions between the State and the land-owning bourgeoisie manifested, land was the only survival option for rural workers. In the face of overwhelming public pressure and within the framework of nationalist development, the government confronted the agrarian bourgeoisie with expropriations, conceding one of the greatest land distributions in Mexican history with aims to legitimise the State and restrain the peasant movement.

---

<sup>7</sup> For example: *Movimiento de Resistencia Campesina Francisco Villa*; the national campaign *Sin Maíz No Hay País*; *Movimiento Rural Antineoliberal y Anticapitalista*; *Frente Indígena y Campesino de México*; *El Campo Es De Todos*; *El Frente Auténtico Del Campo*.

As from the following decade, the new neoliberal accumulation regime –based on exclusion and arisen from productive, capitalist restructuring– has exposed its own contradictions. An array of confrontations of different natures manifested during the last couple of decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: peasants engaged in defensive struggles for productive inclusion; afterwards, middle-scale and rich farmers against their indebtedness; and also (although separately) indigenous farmers in Chiapas organised in a renewed guerrilla. The struggles confronted exploitation relations, however, each one with different methods and specific demands. During these years, rural autonomous organisations and independent organisations of specialised networks emerged.

The persistent dismantling of the countryside this century has deepened the productive and economic exclusion that continues to expel rural workers from the domestic market and exacerbate the alienation of their livelihood. The accumulated discontent was illustrated by the largest rural confrontation in recent decades that was based on a coalition of organisations (mainly grassroots central organisations from the 1970s; autonomous organisations from the 1980s; and smaller, specialised networks from the 1990s) representing peasants and small and middle-scale producers, and amassed demands. The MECNAM movement questioned the economic model in general and demanded sectoral public policies regarding production and commercialisation conditions. It aimed to reproduce peasants socially and productively, and modify rural work relations within the reproduction of domestic capital.

Mexican peasants prove to be expendable in the neoliberal accumulation project since they do not reproduce capital and therefore cannot socioeconomically reproduce themselves as peasants. They are driven out of the production and expansion of capital, and are economically and politically devalued. Organised peasantry, indeed, tends to pursue its right to reproduce itself as a social class.

The most anti-systemic experiences, in the sense of swaying the inequalities of historical capitalism, developed in the 1970s when property relations shifted in the last phase of large mobilisations for land distribution and, in the 1990s, when national economic processes and structures were challenged. This century's rural struggles have been marked by their reformist nature and express a renewed, synergic phase of the historical peasant movement. The coalition at the beginning of the century was shaped by the evolution of three decades of struggles which –in turn– expressed different moments of the history of the contemporary peasant movement.

The varied struggles of Mexico's historical peasant movement achieved considerable concessions during the last century but it did not modify the structures of capitalist accumulation. The recent struggle at the beginning of this century was no exception: it did not eliminate exploitation and domination relations, but instead realised important reforms within the logic of the reproduction of neoliberal power.

Contradictions are expressed at different levels. The main contradiction between capital and rural labour conveys the economic and productive antagonism created by current peripheral capitalist accumulation. The latter favours private transnational capital over public State investment in a general world context of financial and speculative (non-productive) capital predominance over productive capital (from industry and agriculture that produce value). The destatisation of the countryside and the resulting rural decapitalisation leads to the depeasantisation of producers, which is a political project since the economic model decapitalises small and middle-scale production and disarticulates national agriculture whilst it dismantles the domestic market.

On a more specific sectoral level, this century's conflictivity has highlighted the contradictions in the current domination of depredatory, transnational agroexport and agroindustrial capital that expels rural workers and deteriorates State-countryside relations.

There are indeed contradictions of another kind. For example, at the beginning of the century, endogenous antagonism arose from the different forms of political culture the organisations have. Although this eventually thwarted negotiations with the government and the development of the ECNAM front, the convergence plurality initially constituted a political advantage.

There is also a contradictory relation between capital and indigenous-peasantry identity. The accumulation regime destroys identity-related traditions, values and rural practices; however, the indigenous-peasantry identity is culturally connected to a classist lifestyle that cannot be separated from their work. The identity contradiction can therefore be linked to the main one between capital and rural labour.

## Bibliography

BARTRA, Armando: **Los herederos de Zapata. Movimientos campesinos posrevolucionarios en México**. Mexico, Ediciones Era, 1985.

CALVA, José Luis: "El papel de la agricultura en el desarrollo económico de México: retrospectiva y prospectiva", in **Problemas del Desarrollo**, Mexico, UNAM-IIEc, July-September 1999, volume 30, number 118, pp. 35-56.

\_\_\_\_\_ "La agricultura mexicana frente a la nueva ley agrícola estadounidense y la ronda de liberalizaciones del TLCAN", in Schwentesius, Rita, Manuel Ángel Gómez, José Luis Calva Téllez and Luis Hernández Navarro (coord.): **¿El campo aguanta más?** Mexico, UACH, 2003.

\_\_\_\_\_ "La reforma estructural de la agricultura y la economía en México: resultados y alternativas a nueve años del TLCAN", in Schwentesius, Rita, Manuel Ángel Gómez, José Luis Calva Téllez and Luis Hernández Navarro (coord.): **¿El campo aguanta más?** Mexico, UACH, 2003.

DE ITA, Ana: "Soberanía alimentaria vs 'libre comercio'", in De Ita, Ana (ed.), **OMC, estación Cancún: el descarrilamiento**, Mexico, Centro de Estudios para el Cambio en el Campo Mexicano/UNORCA, 2004.

MITTAL, Anuradha and Peter ROSSET: "Perdiendo nuestra tierra: la Ley Agrícola de 2002", in Bartra, Armando: **Cosechas de ira. Economía política de la contrarreforma agraria**. Mexico, Editorial Itaca, 2003.

PARÉ, Luisa: "Movimiento campesino y política agraria en México 1976-1982", in **Revista Mexicana de Sociología**, Mexico, UNAM-IIS, October-December 1985, year XLVI, number 4, pp. 85-111.

QUINTANA, Víctor M.: "Guerra antipopular prolongada. El campo no aguanta más", in **Ojarasca**, supplement in *La Jornada*, number 68, 8th December 2002.

RAMIREZ CUEVAS, Jesús: "El campo, en el ojo del huracán", in **Masiosare**, supplement in *La Jornada*, number 264, 12th January 2003.

RUBIO, Blanca: "Las organizaciones independientes en México: Semblanza de las opciones campesinas ante el proyecto neoliberal", in C. de Grammont, Hubert (coord.): **Neoliberalismo y organización social en el campo mexicano**. Mexico, Plaza y Valdés/UNAM, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Explotados y excluidos. Los campesinos latinoamericanos en la fase agroexportadora neoliberal**. Mexico, Plaza y Valdés, second edition, 2003.

***Theomai 36***

tercer trimestre 2017 / third trimester 2017

\_\_\_\_\_ "*El movimiento campesino en América Latina durante la transición capitalista. 2008-2016*", in **Revista de Ciencias Sociales. Segunda Época**, Argentina, UNQ, year 9, number 31, April 2017, pp. 15-38.