

AGENDA FOR MOBILIZATION: The Agrarian Question and Popular Mobilization in Contemporary Mexico*

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Mexican politics has long been regarded as a closed system, with policy-making dominated by the reigning president and his circle and presidential succession (with all its possibilities for change of course) managed by an only slightly larger "Revolutionary Family" of top figures in the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). So intertwined are the Mexican state and the dominant party that scholars and opposition leaders alike have begun to speak of the "PRI state." E. E. Schattschneider observed that in the U.S. system, 90 percent of the population never has access to the "pressure system" that directs policy choice.¹ The percentage of the excluded is undoubtedly even larger in Mexico because the system is more decidedly "closed." Yet in both countries, policy innovation is not uncommon. Marked changes of course have occurred at times, and opposition forces external to the system have occasionally managed to block presidential decisions and force reevaluation and sometimes painful adjustments. This article will examine the "agrarian question" in Mexico and will argue that its persistence and the ways in which it has been framed have constrained policymakers while encouraging and sustaining the development of an independent peasant movement during the 1970s and 1980s.

Mexico is unique among Latin American nations in the persistence of the agrarian question on its national agenda. Perhaps nothing demonstrates so well the importance of distinctive national agendas as this long preoccupation with the fate of the Mexican rural population and the peasant form of agricultural production. Yet Mexican policymakers since the Revolution of 1910 have periodically attempted to shift attention and national resources away from the issue of peasant access to land and toward support for large-scale, commercial agriculture in private hands.

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1. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960).

National resources have indeed become concentrated in the commercial sector, at least since 1940. The deepening crisis of peasant agriculture, however, has only reinforced the persistent preoccupation of Mexican politics with the peasant question. When Mexican policymakers attempted in the 1970s to shift discussion away from questions of land reform and toward a rhetoric of production and social welfare, an independent peasant movement renewed the abandoned cry of "La tierra a los que la trabajan" ("Land to the tiller") and challenged governmental efforts to recast the issue in terms less threatening to established agricultural interests. The Mexican case, I will argue, underlines the significance of broad historical agendas in configuring national politics and suggests that even in relatively authoritarian societies, organized groups may successfully employ the ideological resources of the system against the state.

**AGENDA, INSTITUTION, AND ACTION:
EXPLAINING CHANGE IN POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

How can such "openings" be explained in otherwise closed systems of government? Certainly, shifts in the balance of power between state and society may bring significant openings or even the collapse of apparently formidable systems. Whether the shift is as devastating as the withdrawal of Soviet support from the hard-line communist regimes of Eastern Europe or as subtle and paradoxical as the reconstitution of an industrial and agricultural elite in northern Mexico in the wake of state-led development efforts,² the result is the possibility of challenge to a system that until that point appeared unchallengeable.

Less dramatic openings may have more to do with the ability of previously excluded actors to get their agenda heard than with shifts in relative power among groups in civil society and state actors. Attempts to manage agendas do not always succeed, nor does control of the agenda count for everything in political change. The dominant paradigm of political explanation insists that what matters is power and the distribution of power. Elites are able to manage the agenda of policy-making precisely because they have power, and attempts to alter agendas rarely succeed in its absence. This view is nevertheless seriously shortsighted in two respects. First, as Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones have argued, excluded parties may break down closed systems of policy-making by

2. Merilee Grindle, among others, has argued that the emergence of an agricultural bourgeoisie in the irrigated districts of the Northwest effectively ended the Mexican state's ability to steer the course of agricultural policy on its own initiative after the early 1970s. The prime example is the notorious "tractor strike" in Hermosillo, Sonora, in 1975—the elite's response to President Echeverría's renewal of the land reform. See Merilee S. Grindle, *State and Countryside: Development Policy and Agrarian Politics in Latin America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 61–67.

effectively altering the prevailing image of the policy problem and by seeking out alternative venues in which to press for change.³ For example, pesticides were once exclusively the concern of agricultural and chemical manufacturing interests and their patrons in government in Mexico, as in the United States. After they came to be considered health concerns over the course of the last quarter-century, the actors involved, the character of debate, and the venues in which it was carried out all shifted accordingly.⁴ Moreover, how an issue is understood may determine whether it will be placed on the agenda and what kinds of considerations will go into debate and resolution of the problem.⁵

Second, the power paradigm ignores the way that established understandings of what is and is not open to debate and public contestation in a given polity shape the behavior and circumscribe the power of policymakers. For example, scarcely anyone has suggested nationalizing the savings and loan industry in the United States, despite the enormity of the catastrophe and the private-sector failures evident in its genesis. Nor has the health care debate ever featured serious proposals for putting doctors in the employ of the U.S. government. Measures that might appear natural in England or Mexico remain outside the realm of debate in the United States because they are so far removed from the U.S. version of the liberal tradition.

In the Mexican context, most analysts continue to focus on the behavior of elites and the balance of power among social forces. They tend to view elite responsiveness as largely preemptive: elites respond to perceived public demands in an effort to head off more explicit discontent or to prevent further mobilization. Their means include co-opting existing opposition by marginal adjustments and generous side payments to move-

3. See Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, "Shifting Images and Venues of a Public Issue: Explaining the Demise of Nuclear Power in the United States." Paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, 31 Aug.-3 Sept. 1989. See also Frank R. Baumgartner, *Conflict and Rhetoric in French Policymaking* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989). Their observations may go a long way toward explaining policy innovation within the Mexican system, such as the development of the Sistema Alimentario Mexicano (SAM) in 1980 or the emergence of environmental issues in the early 1980s. In both cases, however, the initiatives involved struggles among elites within or close to the inner circle of power, and public input played a relatively small role in creating the new policy or sustaining it. On the development of the SAM experiment and its successors, see Mario Montanari, "The Conception of SAM," and James E. Austin and Gustavo Esteva, "Final Reflections," both in *Food Policy in Mexico: The Search for Self-Sufficiency*, edited by James E. Austin and Gustavo Esteva (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987). On environmental policy, see Stephen P. Mumme, C. Richard Bath, and Valerie J. Assetto, "Political Development and Environmental Policy in Mexico," *LARR* 23, no. 1 (1988):7-34.

4. See Christopher J. Bosso, *Pesticides and Politics: The Life Cycle of a Public Issue* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987); and Iván Restrepo, *Naturaleza muerta: los plaguicidas en México* (Mexico City: Ediciones Océano, 1988).

5. See Barbara J. Nelson, *Making an Issue of Child Abuse* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

ment leaders and their immediate followers. The PRI state's skill at such tactics has been widely acknowledged. But it is also well known that these efforts have become increasingly expensive and difficult to implement. The 1988 election demonstrated the depth of public discontent with the regime, and the emergence of independent labor, peasant, and neighborhood movements has seriously challenged the ability of the PRI state to co-opt its opposition easily. While these movements have won few policy victories, they have forced the regime to take its opposition more seriously. They have also managed to maintain their autonomy by appealing to democratization, a goal based on fundamental rhetorical tenets of the system, thus establishing an ongoing challenge to the system as practiced. Similarly, the peasant movement, while multifaceted in composition and demands, has crystallized around a platform that was once a slogan of the PRI state itself: Land to the tiller.

Democracy and agrarian reform are not mere slogans, however. In Mexico they are elements of what I call the "constitutive agenda" of a polity: those issues and formulations of issues that might be considered to somehow constitute a polity and "what it is all about." In the United States, civil liberties and at least a limited commitment to social welfare have become significant elements of the U.S. "constitutive agenda." Similarly, "democracy," land reform, and the "*rectoría*" (directing role) of the state in economic affairs are recurring, even "constitutive" themes in Mexican politics. The idea of a constitutive agenda—the generally accepted set of issues, terms, and understandings that circumscribe debate in a polity—recalls the distinction drawn by Roger Cobb and Charles Elder between the "systemic agenda" of a polity and its "formal agenda." The systemic agenda consists "of all issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority." In contrast, the formal or immediate agenda consists of "that set of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers."⁶

Cobb and Elder take a decidedly short-term view of their "systemic agenda," however. The agenda I wish to discuss is at once more general and more stable. It might be thought of as the framework that allows political contestants to decide, at any given moment, what is within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority. It includes the general terms in which debate is commonly conducted on a variety of issues (like "personal liberty" in the U.S. tradition and "social justice" in Mexico) as well as specific concerns that might at any time become more immediate agenda items (in Mexico, land tenure conceived as "Land to

6. Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, *Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1972), 85–86.

the tiller" or national control over national resources; in the United States, social security as a societywide entitlement or the shared responsibilities of state and federal governments). Although the precise content of such an agenda might be debatable, disagreements would be resolvable (at least in principle) by appealing to the historical importance of the issues and terms in question and their continuing relevance to contemporary debates. The ultimate key to the salience of such constitutive elements of political debate is their embodiment in enduring institutions, whether in constitutions, legal precedents, governmental bodies, or organized interest groups.

SHAPING THE AGENDA: "AGRARISMO" AND THE MEXICAN STATE

The ideological foundations of the Mexican state are embedded in the Constitution of 1917, with its promises of land for the campesino and commitment to justice for the worker.⁷ But constitutional provisions do not automatically become part of a nation's "constitutive agenda." Their inclusion depends in part on their repeated affirmation by key actors. In Mexico the principles of social justice represented in the constitution have provided the rhetoric for repeated presidential performances. Thus José López Portillo, at the close of his presidential campaign in 1976, declared: "Our Revolution . . . was not the last bourgeois revolution of the nineteenth century but the first social revolution of the twentieth, with its commitment to consummate that social democracy whose will is justice and whose imperative is liberty." These promises (*palabras*), he went on to say, however vitiated by the failures of Mexican society, will not be abandoned: "It will not do to invent others; they are not like some goods manufactured for a voracious consumerism avid for every novelty. We do not have other words to articulate and to govern what is most important. . . . Our failures to fulfill them neither detract from these assurances nor destroy these promises; they are but testimony to our own inconsistency (*inconsecuencia*)."⁸

More than anyone else, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) stamped the revolutionary promises of the constitution on the discourse of the ruling PRI, and in providing the institutions that carried those

7. The relevant sections of the Constitution of 1917 are Articles 27 and 123. The former established national sovereignty over the land and mineral resources of the country as well as the principle of land reform and the privileged position of the peasant community, or *ejido*. Article 123 was probably the most advanced piece of labor legislation in the world at the time.

8. José López Portillo, *Tenemos un camino: discursos de toma de protesta y de final de campaña, octubre 1975–junio 1976* (Mexico City: PRI, 1976), 24–25. A very helpful analysis of the clash between ideology and practice in Mexican politics and policymaking, with an emphasis on the López Portillo and de la Madrid administrations, is John J. Bailey's *Governing Mexico: The Statecraft of Crisis Management* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988).

promises forward, Cárdenas took the second important step toward making them a continuing and constitutive element of Mexico's national agenda. Cárdenas displaced the revolutionary oligarchy created by Elías Plutarco Calles by mobilizing a "progressive alliance" that included campesinos, workers, and the bureaucracy of the state and was built on a platform of land reform, justice in the workplace, nationalism, and economic development under the rectoría of the state. As Nora Hamilton pointed out in her admirable study of this period, Cárdenas's coalition went well beyond the populist alliances of other Latin American nations in including the peasantry in its explicit recognition of class struggle,⁹ an acknowledgement that even López Portillo could echo in proclaiming that to deny the reality of class struggle "would be democratic infantilism or an aberrant nationalism. We do not sacrifice the right to liberate oneself from exploitation to national unity. National solidarity is the environment in which the struggle can be worked out as a right."¹⁰

In the countryside, the class struggle meant land reform. For a time, it entailed arming a peasant militia against the attacks of the landowners' *guardias blancas* to block a military coup. In the cities, the class struggle meant guaranteeing the rights of workers to organize and strike as well as government intervention on behalf of organized labor, first in disputes with domestic firms and eventually to the point of nationalizing foreign oil and rail holdings. The vision of some of Cárdenas's advisors was radically populist. Ramón Beteta declared in 1935, "By observing the effects of the capitalist world's last crisis, we believe that we can reap the benefits of the industrial age without having to suffer the negative consequences. . . . We have dreamed of a Mexico made up of *ejidos* and small industrial communities, with electric power and health institutions, where goods are produced to satisfy the population's needs, where machinery is employed to alleviate men from hard labor, and not for so-called over-production."¹¹

Yet Mexico today is a land of runaway urbanization, impoverished *ejidos*, and prosperous *latifundistas*—and largely due to the instruments of control that this same Cárdenas administration created in shaping the progressive alliance. Cárdenas himself never doubted that Mexico should develop within a capitalist context, but one regulated and guided by the

9. Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 139. Hamilton accordingly uses the phrase "progressive alliance" instead of the more usual "populist coalition."

10. López Portillo, *Tenemos un camino*, 25.

11. Quoted in Gustavo Esteva, with David Barkin, *The Struggle for Rural Mexico* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1983), 62. The *ejidos*, the chief vehicle of the agrarian reform, are corporate communities with rights of usufruct granted to individual members or maintained collectively for the cultivation of ejidal lands. The Cárdenas administration vigorously promoted collective *ejidos* in the belief that Mexican agriculture could best be modernized through collectivized exploitation of the land.

state (significantly, the politicians of the PRI and Mexican officialdom today continue to reiterate the importance of state rectoría, even as they implement the neoliberal policies of the moment). Moreover, in enforcing the social program of the Revolution and harnessing the forces he had mobilized, Cárdenas established direct control over the popular classes while leaving the political role of the masters of production and finance largely undefined. Although entrepreneurial Mexico remains more or less outside the party apparatus to this day (but by no means without political power), the party of the Revolution, as reconstructed by Cárdenas, swept under its umbrella the majority of popular organizations, subordinating the labor movement under the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) and the peasantry under the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC).

Subsequent Mexican presidents have managed, sometimes with great skill, to subdue restless workers and land-hungry peasants through the CTM, the CNC, and other affiliates of the PRI. Particularly in agriculture, the regime has played a double game, on the one hand maintaining the rhetoric of "Land to the tiller" while, on the other, taking the teeth out of the agrarian reform laws created by Cárdenas, dismantling structures designed to aid peasant and cooperative agriculture, and pumping huge sums into developing commercial agriculture, especially in the North and Northwest.¹² Between 1940 and 1945, 15 percent of all federal government investment and almost 90 percent of agricultural investment went into creating the huge irrigation districts of the North and Northwest, where—in contravention of Mexican law—commercial growers came to control thousands of hectares of land irrigated with federally subsidized water.¹³ At the same time, Mexican presidents continued to redistribute land, with Presidents Adolfo López Mateo (1958–1964) and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970) together more than matching the eighteen million hectares distributed by Cárdenas. Despite the fact that as little as 27 percent of this increasingly marginal land was actually distributed, these actions nevertheless represent considerable rhetorical commitment.¹⁴

12. On the abandonment of efforts to aid small-scale farming in favor of large-scale, private commercial development (a switch partially backed by "green revolution" research money from the Rockefeller and Ford foundations), see Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara, *Modernizing Mexican Agriculture: Socioeconomic Implications of Technological Change, 1940–1970* (Geneva: UNRISD, 1976), 19–45. Also see Esteva, *Struggle for Rural Mexico*.

13. On the development of commercial agriculture in the region and the stratagems employed to circumvent legal limits on the size of landholdings, see Steven E. Sanderson, *Agrarian Populism and the Mexican State: The Struggle for Land in Sonora* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981); and David Mares, *Penetrating the International Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

14. See Esteva, *Struggle for Rural Mexico*, t. 8, "Land Redistributed: Real and Nominal, 1916–1979"; and Susan R. Walsh Sanderson, *Land Reform in Mexico, 1910–1980* (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 90ff. Note, however, the considerable social pressure created by population growth alone. Even when taking the new donations at face value, it has proven im-

But the contradictions inherent in this stance soon appeared insuperable to the leaders of the PRI.

In 1972 a leading defender of the campesinos wrote, "The crisis in the countryside is a constant element in the history of Mexico. Apparently, we have become accustomed to it. Likewise, it appears that the campesinos have habituated themselves to having only bad years and worse years."¹⁵ But by 1972, the economic crisis among the "chosen children of the regime" (as Arturo Warman ironically termed Mexico's campesinos) was emerging as a political crisis, stimulated by a president committed to restoring the tarnished image of the Mexican system after the student massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968.¹⁶ Lu s Echeverr a Alvarez (1970–1976) came into office determined to woo the disaffected youth of the 1960s and to reinvigorate the social promises of the Revolution. Although his proposal to institute fiscal reform put him on an early collision course with the business community, he was convinced he could have it both ways, promoting economic growth, social welfare, and social justice at the same time. This Cardenista theme had echoed increasingly hollowly in recent years, although certainly not for lack of growth. Echeverr a nevertheless intoned, "I can assure this sovereign nation that I have taken no decision nor authorized any act of government without first having determined irrefutably that it would promote growth and simultaneously add to social justice and the autonomy of the country."¹⁷ Thus while declaring that "we cannot denounce an oligarchical international system and at the same time favor the consolidation of new forms of domination at home," President Echeverr a argued that in regard to land reform, "we have to protect and stimulate, within the terms of the Constitution and the law, forms of tenancy and organization that have achieved high productivity,"¹⁸ namely the commercial latifundios of the Northwest.

possible to keep up. Whereas land reform under C rdenas benefited 40 percent of those economically active in agriculture, by 1970 beneficiaries represented only 27 percent. See Susan Sanderson, *Land Reform in Mexico*, 99.

15. Arturo Warman, *Los campesinos: hijos predilectos del r gimen* (Mexico City: Nuestro Tiempo, 1972), 9.

16. On this period, see the excellent introduction to Mexican politics by Judith Adler Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis*, 2d ed. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983). Much dispute exists as to the sources of the agrarian conflict of the Echeverr a years and afterward. Steven Sanderson claims in *Agrarian Populism* an important role for Echeverr a's initiatives, but Blanca Rubio emphasizes the mounting crisis in agriculture and the spontaneous emergence of peasant protest. See Blanca Rubio, *Resistencia campesina y explotaci n rural en M xico* (Mexico City: ERA, 1987). Generally, it should probably be assumed that however important the initiative of the poor or oppressed and the issues that motivate them, the larger political context will have a great deal to do with the impact and scope of their protests. See Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "Introduction to the Paperback Edition," *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

17. Lu s Echeverr a Alvarez, *Voz en la historia: II informe de gobierno, hechos e ideas* (Mexico City: Novaro, 1972), 22–23.

18. *Ibid.*, 69, 89.

In the event, Echeverría not only threw enormous resources into reviving peasant agriculture (despite the failures of fiscal reform and the inflationary pressures created by such expenditures) but became an agent of the largest land-reform agitation in recent Mexican history. During 1975 and 1976, land invasions took place in Sonora, Sinaloa, Chiapas, the Federal District, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and the Yucatán, and in the last days of "Echeverrismo," confrontations erupted in a half-dozen other Mexican states as well.¹⁹ Most dramatic were the land invasions in Sonora, where federally subsidized water had fed an enormous expansion of large-scale agriculture in lands owned by a few privileged families. The rhetoric of social justice adopted by the regime did much to fuel growing campesino claims on these latter-day *latifundios*, but Echeverría attempted to hew to a middle path, declaring on a trip to Ciudad Obregón in April 1976 that he supported "neither invasions nor *latifundios*. . . . I have requested that all of the governors impede all invasions, with the cooperation of the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional; I am responsible for that policy."²⁰

At the same time, Echeverría announced the opening of new lands to irrigation and ejidal settlement. He sought to channel the process through the official peasant organization (the CNC) and the independent organizations that had been co-opted in the course of the 1960s: the Central Campesino Independiente (CCI) and the Unión General de Obreros y Campesinos Mexicanos (UGOCM), which united with the CNC and the state in the Pacto de Ocampo. But when invasions continued under the auspices of the newly founded Frente Independiente Campesino (FCI), the captive organizations joined the fray in a battle over clientele. Despite repeated military actions to clear invaded land, the regime initiated expropriations. Almost one hundred thousand hectares of irrigated and pasture lands in the Yaqui and Mayo valleys of Sonora were expropriated and divided among campesino claimants on 18–19 November 1976, and more than six hundred ejidos were collectivized nationwide. On 30 November, the last day of his presidency, Echeverría granted nearly five hundred thousand additional hectares to campesinos throughout the nation.²¹ Even before these expropriations, however, the business community and private farmers had joined forces in denouncing Echeverrismo, accusing the president of leading the country toward communism. In the fall of 1975 and 1976, they staged dramatic "tractor strikes" in the Sonoran cities of Navajoa and Ciudad Obregón. The Consejo Coordinadora Empresarial (CCE) attacked "the unjust aggression of the authorities against small

19. On these events, see Steven Sanderson, *Agrarian Populism*; and Gustavo Gordillo, *Campesinos al asalto del cielo: de la expropiación estatal a la apropiación campesina* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1988).

20. Quoted in Steven Sanderson, *Agrarian Populism*, 192.

21. *Ibid.*, 198–99.

private property, action that is oriented toward its extinction through the pulverization of the land."²²

With the ascension of José López Portillo to the presidency, the cries of the business leaders and commercial farmers were heard, although the new president was careful to present a façade of continuity with the previous administration.²³ The growers' demands were met by final indemnification for expropriated land, and repression was endorsed as the proper response to further land invasions. More pertinent to the subject at hand was a subtle shift in political discourse: the López Portillo regime declared that the land reform must be completed to provide the foundations for a more modern, productive agriculture. Although López Portillo had promised campesinos his solidarity with them in "the battle against local political fiefdoms (*el caciquismo*), *latifundismo*, and marginality," this effort was to be carried out through the Pacto de Ocampo and through "the social pact of political concertation," that is, through the state and its allied organizations.²⁴

The president's main formula for the countryside, however, was his so-called alliance for production in which demands for social justice would be met by raising standards of living and stimulating new investment. In contrast to the rhetoric of the Cárdenas years, "social justice" in the new rhetoric was conceived of not in terms of property or the access to a better standard of living that land tenure could give peasants but only in terms of income or basic needs: assuring everyone of enough to eat, access to consumer goods, suitable housing, the protection of the social security system, and education.²⁵ These goals would be met, López Portillo argued, through a general alliance of the state, the business community, and the working classes. The alliance was soon to be funded by the Mexican oil boom and, given the failure of the Mexican state to exact the required fiscal reforms, through a disastrous commitment to foreign borrowing.²⁶

The new political discourse of the PRI was echoed even by *agrarista*

22. Quoted in *ibid.*, 190.

23. Gustavo Esteva tells the story of a special meeting of López Portillo's inner circle attended by two pro-peasant militants a few days before Echeverría's final expropriations: "After witnessing an unequal battle in which efficiency, 'comparative advantage,' economic realism, political stability, and many other things were thrown over the heads of the weary pair, the president-elect stood up and, with a sorrowful smile, said, 'In any period of rapid changes there is a group that always gets the worst part. This time again, it will be the peasants.'" See Esteva, "Food Needs and Capacities: Four Centuries of Conflict," in Austin and Esteva, *Food Policy in Mexico*, 44–45.

24. López Portillo, *Tenemos un camino*, 17.

25. *Ibid.*, 14.

26. Mexico maintained one of the lowest incidences of taxation in Latin America until the recent tax reforms, and taxes on corporate profits actually declined between 1960 and 1978 by some 18 percent. See E. V. K. FitzGerald, "The Fiscal Crisis of the Latin American State," in J. F. J. Toye, *Taxation and Economic Development* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 125–59.

elements in the establishment, who began to speak openly of the previous period as “a stage of demagoguery and disorder.” One scholar wrote, “The error of the politicians (demagogues) has consisted in believing that the solution to the agrarian problem is redistribution of land.”²⁷ The Echeverría administration had stressed the structural obstacles to enhanced welfare for Mexican campesinos, while López Portillo emphasized questions of production. Both put much effort, rhetorical and real, into improving the infrastructure of transportation, commercialization, and social services available to campesinos. Echeverría had spoken of exploitation by caciques and corrupt local officials, moneylenders, and intermediaries who marketed peasant crops, but the López Portillo administration focused on technical problems. The first analysis led to expanding the government buying agency (CONASUPO) and emphasizing collective and cooperative forms of organization. The second pointed in very different directions: increased agricultural extension work; a Mexican food-system project (the Sistema Alimentario Mexicano, or SAM) that openly elicited the support of the intermediaries—commercial producers, buyers, distributors, processors, and merchants; and increasing emphasis on commercial arrangements between the social (*ejidal*) sector and private farmers that generally favored more powerful farmers and agribusinesses.²⁸

The shift was momentous. In practice, it meant abandoning land reform as a platform for the PRI and replacing it with a program designed to enhance rural life even while bolstering the forces that have undermined the viability of peasant agriculture. As Merilee Grindle argues, “to the extent that programs for infrastructure and technological advancements increase the productive potential and value of land, *ejidatarios* and *minifundistas* will find it increasingly difficult to maintain control over their land; concentration of landholdings through purchase, rental, or contract will undoubtedly occur. . . .”²⁹ Such results were not simply a matter of oversight, however. The new Ley de Fomento Agropecuario passed by the López Portillo administration in 1980 legalized contracts

27. See Héctor Lugo Chávez, in the proceedings of a forum published by the Centro de Economía Agrícola, *Foro: perspectivas de la reforma agraria* (Chapingo, Estado de México: Colegio de Posgraduados, 1978), 24. See also the “Presentación” to the volume by Manuel R. Villa Issa, director of the center, who notes that increasing production is “the preoccupation of the hour,” 20.

28. See Merilee S. Grindle, *Official Interpretations of Rural Underdevelopment: Mexico in the 1970s*, Working Papers in U.S.-Mexican Studies, no. 20 (La Jolla, Calif.: Program in U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1981). In practice, SAM did benefit peasant producers, especially those in areas where soil and weather conditions involved considerable risk for rain-fed agriculture. Econometric studies suggest, however, that rural and urban consumers at the lower end of the income scale may have actually lost ground as a result of the program. See Bill Gibson, Nora Lustig, and Lance Taylor, “SAM’s Impact on Income Distribution,” in Austin and Esteva, *Food Policy in Mexico*, chap. 14.

29. Grindle, *Official Interpretations of Rural Underdevelopment*, 48.

permitting the use of ejidal lands by private enterprises, a widespread practice even before the legal revision and one that effectively turned ejidatarios short on resources for farming their plots into day laborers on their own land. López Portillo's vision for the countryside, it appears, was not at all that far from that of one economist who proposed a "neoliberal" solution: opening up ejidal lands for sale within the ejido, allowing concentration in the hands of more successful campesinos, and reducing the rest to rural or urban laborers.³⁰ But this proposal is not one that a Mexican president could openly embrace.

Nevertheless, a marked shift occurred in the discourse of the PRI regarding agricultural affairs. The extent of the shift was made clearest under the government of Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982–1988), when budgetary constraints and economic problems scarcely glimpsed under López Portillo dominated all other concerns. While compelled to continue López Portillo's promises to campesinos, albeit under new names, the de la Madrid administration demonstrated in its early years a wholesale abandonment of the rhetoric of social justice for a rhetoric of social welfare, a shift modified only when the economic crisis deepened and the PRI faced stiff electoral competition in 1988. Thus the de la Madrid administration argued that "just as the latifundio was the initial challenge for agrarian reform, today the chief problem to resolve is the continuing fragmentation of the land, the inadequate use of resources, and in the extreme, the waste of resources." Thus the "integral agrarian reform" that the administration put in the place of both the old agrarian reform and López Portillo's "alliance for production" took as its mission "the reorganization of the use of resources . . . to achieve, in the end, a modernized and technically sophisticated agriculture, which would maintain sustained growth to supply the internal market with food and raw materials and to obtain foreign exchange that can contribute to modernizing other branches of production."³¹

Meanwhile, the administration steadfastly rejected the "demagogy" of the old rhetoric of "Land to the tiller." Following López Portillo's lead, de la Madrid did not hesitate to declare the redistribution of land completed. His Secretary of Agrarian Reform, Luís Martínez Villicaña, insisted repeatedly that by the end of the *sexenio* all ejidatarios would have security of tenure and all "authentic small owners will be able to count on their certificate of unaffability," guaranteeing their holdings against expro-

30. Ramón Fernández y Fernández, "La salvación del ejido," in Centro de Economía Agrícola, *Foro: perspectivas de la reforma agraria* (Chapingo, Estado de México: Colegio de Posgraduados, 1978), 33–40.

31. Manuel García Murillo, *Desarrollo y reforma agraria: el pensamiento político de Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Agrarismo en México, 1982), 15–16 (García's summary).

priation.³² It should be noted that “authentic small owner” has become a code phrase that covers all private producers, many of whose holdings far exceed the limits stated in the agrarian reform law. The de la Madrid administration’s efforts to “regularize land tenure” have been directed primarily toward reassuring such farmers and ranchers that agrarian reform would not touch them, although it has also been justified as an effort to make peasant producers the proper subjects of credit.

President de la Madrid’s message to the legislature on presenting the new federal agrarian reform law made clear the administration’s priorities while revealing its effort to adapt and reinterpret the older rhetoric. In responding to public demand for swift satisfaction of justice in the countryside and in promoting integral rural development, the president noted, “it appeared necessary to review carefully agrarian proceedings of all kinds. . . . In Mexico today, delays and difficulties in resolving disputes signify injustice and produce uncertainty and legal insecurity, to the detriment of ejidatarios and *comuneros* [villagers who share common holdings of forest or pasture lands]. . . .” Thus it became necessary to modify the agrarian code “in order to guarantee juridical security in land tenure, whether ejidal, communal, or in private hands, as well as to promote the conditions for integral rural development with the object of generating employment and guaranteeing to campesinos well-being and participation and incorporation into the [process of] national development.”³³ According to de la Madrid, that is, social justice is best achieved by judicial reform, and peasant well-being and development likewise depend on nothing more than a program of land titling.

The reforms introduced with the new law placed initial decisions over redistribution in the hands of governors, making collusion between latifundistas and responsible authorities easier and appeals on the part of petitioners more difficult. The law now allows long-term contracts between ejidal authorities and private firms for exploiting communally owned forests, mines, fisheries, and tourist resources, thus encouraging the corruption of such officials. The new law abolished the practice of constituting an ejidal “committee of vigilance” from the losing ticket in ejidal elections, breaking down a major barrier against corruption built into the older system. The law also makes it possible to sell or rent to private parties nationally owned lands that had been previously reserved for creating new ejidos.³⁴ The bill was passed unanimously by the 256

32. *La Jornada*, 18 May 1985.

33. Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, “Exposición de motivos de la Reforma de 1984,” 30 Nov. 1983, in *Ley federal de la reforma agraria, reformada*, 2d ed., edited by José Carlos Guerra Aguilera (Mexico City: PAC, n.d.), xxxiii.

34. See the commentary of José Luis Calva reprinted in *Ley Federal*, xxiii–xxxi. Calva’s commentary was first published under the title “En el lecho de muerto de la reforma agraria,” in *UnoMásUno*, 13, 14, 15, and 16 Jan. 1984.

deputies of the lower assembly still present after the 100 representatives of minority parties had walked out in protest and some 44 PRI delegates associated with the CNC had quietly absented themselves.

In keeping with the orientation evident in these provisions, the de la Madrid administration made special efforts to assure the livestock industry of its support. Lacking the means or the will to continue to subsidize the commercial growers of the North, the government had already begun in the 1970s to import basic grains, eventually making huge purchases from the United States to supplement national supplies. The SAM program had been intended to rebuild peasant agriculture and ensure "food sovereignty" in response to the rising costs of such purchases. But the de la Madrid administration early declared its support for modernizing the livestock industry and matched its promises of protection from expropriation with deeds by bestowing numerous grants of immunity under the new laws.³⁵ Meanwhile, Secretary Martínez Villi-caña proclaimed that Mexico was not an agricultural country. On the contrary, he argued, "we are a livestock-raising nation." He noted that some ninety million hectares of Mexico's land were given over to grazing and stock raising while only thirty million were devoted to agriculture. He also suggested that it would be necessary to reduce "the absurd number" of campesinos, but without indicating what means the government had at its disposal for doing so.³⁶ Finally, Eduardo Pesqueira Olea, Secretary of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources, declared that the countryside should be managed as a social enterprise and that the state would provide financing, infrastructure, and technology to permit the private sector to participate in "important ways." Granted, rural Mexico had to be managed according to "social criteria," including the welfare of campesinos, self-sufficiency for the nation in food, improvements in employment and production, and so on. Nevertheless, the development of agriculture had to be carried out in a businesslike manner.³⁷

The agrarian discourse of the de la Madrid administration thus took up where Elías Plutarco Calles left off, shortly before the ascension of Cárdenas, when he declared in June 1930 that the land reform program was dead and that each governor should set a timetable for ending it and providing guarantees to private landowners.³⁸ Calles's circle, including the agriculture secretary in the early 1930s, Manuel Pérez Treviño, spoke

35. *La Jornada*, 15 May 1985.

36. *La Jornada*, 22 May 1985. The legal and rhetorical gestures simply reinforced a process that had been underway for some time. On the "ganaderización" of Mexico, or reorientation of its agricultural economy toward livestock production, see David Barkin and Blanca Suárez, *El fin de la autosuficiencia alimentaria* (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen and Centro de Ecodesarrollo, 1982); and David Barkin and Billie R. DeWalt, "Sorghum and the Mexican Food Crisis," *LARR* 23, no. 3 (1988):30-59.

37. *La Jornada*, 18 May 1985.

38. Hamilton, *Limits of State Autonomy*, 100.

of the need to defend the “honest hacendado” and to increase productivity through modernization founded in security of land tenure.³⁹ Their contemporary counterparts implicitly backed the same extensive livestock raising that blocked such modernization in the 1930s and that contributes today, as on the eve of the Revolution of 1910, to growing tensions throughout Mexico between land-hungry cattle ranchers and indigenous campesino communities.⁴⁰ One observer paraphrased the title to Warman’s famous study of the campesinos in naming the cattle ranchers “the chosen children of the government’s agricultural politics.”⁴¹

By and large, government efforts have not yielded significant advances in production. Although growers were reassured by alterations in laws on land tenure and the rental of ejidal lands was legalized, support prices for food grains and other key crops have declined significantly as a result of the economic crisis, and Mexico continues to import large quantities of grains. Demand for meat has plummeted while prices have soared.⁴² The export subsector, in contrast, has flourished, benefiting particularly from the generalized decline in wages imposed by the crisis in the 1980s.⁴³ The primary concern here, however, is the political repercussions of the regime’s abandonment of the legitimating rhetoric of the slogan “Land to the tiller,” which had wed millions of campesinos to the official party for four and a half decades since Cárdenas. The next section will trace the rise of an independent peasant movement over the last twenty years.

THE CAMPESINOS: FROM CO-OPTATION TO INDEPENDENCE

As was argued earlier, the elements of a nation’s “constitutive agenda” gain prominence from repeated usage and institutional embodi-

39. *Ibid.*, 117. For a summary of agrarian thought in Mexico, see CEPAL, *Economía campesina y agricultura empresarial* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1982), 19–59. The most thoroughgoing history is Jesús Silva Herzog, *El agrarismo mexicano y la reforma agraria: exposición y crítica* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959).

40. On the livestock industry in Mexico and its political and social impact, see especially Secretaría de Agricultura y Recursos Hidráulicos, *El desarrollo agroindustrial y la ganadería en México*, Documentos de Trabajo para el Desarrollo Agroindustrial, no. 8 (Mexico City: SARH/Coordinación General de Desarrollo Agroindustrial, n.d.). On the development of conflicts over land on the “livestock frontier,” see Rubio, *Resistencia campesina*, esp. 77–81.

41. Fernando Rascón, quoted in *La Jornada*, 23 May 1985.

42. José Luís Calva, *Crisis agrícola y alimentaria en México, 1982–1988* (Mexico City: Fontamara, 1988). By late summer of 1989, both campesino organizations and commercial growers were complaining that support prices had never been so low while interest rates had never been so high. The withdrawal of government subsidies from electricity and irrigation water and the privatization of the fertilizer industry in 1989 and 1990, coupled with competition from imports as tariff barriers were dropped, compounded the pressure on agriculture.

43. See Mares, *Penetrating the International Market*. Figures on the extensive diversification and growing impact on U.S. markets of Mexican fruit and vegetable exports in the 1980s are available in a U.S. General Accounting Office report, *Agricultural Trade: Causes and Impacts of Increased Fruit and Vegetable Imports*, GAO/RCED–88–149BR (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1988).

ment. Clearly, this process has occurred with the “agrarian question” in Mexico and its most appealing slogan. Indeed, one of the most powerful legacies of the agrarianist rhetoric of Cárdenas was the Confederación Nacional de Campesinos (CNC), which constituted the organized peasant movement in Cárdenas’s day and even now claims to incorporate the majority of ejidatarios. Moreover, the CNC was not just a creature of rhetoric but was for years its chief bearer. The CNC’s ability to demonstrate the benefits to be gained from affiliating with the official party became crucial to the government’s identity. And for years, those benefits were conceived in terms of redistribution of land.⁴⁴

Thus the CNC, even when successfully challenged on its own ground, managed to work out compromise solutions like the Pacto de Ocampo that allowed competing groups like the CCI and the UGOCM to accept governmental tutelage in exchange for a share of the spoils.⁴⁵ This system of co-optation began to break down in the Echeverría years, however, first because of the dilatoriness of the *oficialista* groups in supporting land invasions and then in the general chaos that gave independent campesino groups increased leverage.

The defeat of Echeverrismo, the closing down of land reform, and increased repression under López Portillo put a temporary stop to independent organizing, but it did not return power to the CNC. Despite the resources of the PRI, the CNC was precluded from maintaining even its shaky control over the campesinos for two reasons that were linked both to the direction state policy had taken under López Portillo and to characteristics of the CNC itself. First, the CNC had been organized primarily around groups of petitioners for land and groups of beneficiaries of the land reform. When the focus of state policy shifted away from agrarian reform, the organization was forced to find its rationale elsewhere but was slow in doing so. The López Portillo administration introduced reforms licensing the creation of new economic units, including credit associations, intra-ejidal cooperatives, and “unions of ejidos.” These units were incorporated into the CNC, and the organization was allowed for the first time to try organizing agricultural laborers. These measures may have been too little, too late, however. As Gustavo Gordillo has argued, the new organizations and the redirection of state policy toward more “productivist” goals created a dual structure within the CNC, weakening its

44. A perceptive study of the evolution of the CNC is Clarisa Hardy’s *El estado y los campesinos: la Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC)* (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen, 1984).

45. On agrarian conflict and peasant organization in the “golden age” of Mexican agricultural development, see *Historia de la cuestión agraria mexicana*, vol. 7, *La época de oro y el principio de la crisis de la agricultura mexicana, 1950–1970*, edited by Julio Moguel (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1988), and vol. 8, *Política estatal y conflictos agrarios, 1950–1970*, edited by Julio Moguel (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1989).

ability to manage its older task of coordinating and pacifying solicitants for land.⁴⁶

The second problem facing the CNC was that, unlike the corresponding labor confederation (the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos, or CTM), the CNC progressively lost its mediating function as government agencies stepped in to aid campesinos. Unlike strikes, land invasions were last-ditch efforts, and in cases where land had already been distributed, the CNC appeared less and less useful as an intermediary with officials who controlled genuine resources.⁴⁷ In many cases, the CNC came to be viewed as an agent of the government that was enforcing administrative decisions on its erstwhile constituents.⁴⁸

The declining relevance of the CNC, despite various efforts to use its easy access to government to the advantage of campesinos, thus contributed to its inability to take an independent line against the government. And its failure to do so increased its irrelevance in the eyes of campesinos. For example, in Sonora in 1976, the CNC and the other oficialista organizations repeatedly stopped short of actual land invasions because of presidential disapproval, confining themselves to scrambling for a share of the spoils once a presidential resolution was reached. But the militants who had remained faithful to the organization were scattered among militants of other groups in the new ejidos and soon found themselves in conflict with their former CNC leaders and the government agencies that were to oversee ejidal finances.⁴⁹

In 1979 the CNC revealed its understanding of the new party line when it undertook organization of agricultural laborers. As one CNC leader said, "It is estimated that there are five million wage laborers in the countryside, and we could include with them those ejidatarios and comuneros who work for some agricultural *patrón*. . . . In Mexico we face the possibility that agrarian redistribution is finished and that the remaining rural workers will not achieve this benefit."⁵⁰ This statement is realistic enough, but the CNC attitude contrasts strikingly with that of the CTM. For instance, in responding to the proposal to join private capital and private farming with ejidal lands, the CNC did not hesitate to endorse publicly the government's position. In contrast, the CTM protested vehemently: "Contrary to what the law proposes, the only viable alternative

46. Gustavo Gordillo, *Campesinos al asalto del cielo*, 277–80. See also Hardy, *El estado y los campesinos*, 188–89.

47. This is the central argument of Hardy's book. See *El estado y los campesinos*, esp. 189–95.

48. Such perceptions, for example, lay behind the formation of the militant Coalición de Ejidos Colectivos de los Valles del Yaqui y Mayo (CECVYM). See Gordillo, *Campesinos al asalto del cielo*, 21–22.

49. *Ibid.*, 20–22.

50. Quoted in Hardy, *El estado y los campesinos*, 97.

for achieving self-sufficiency in food production lies in support for ejidatarios and campesinos in general, and not in support for their exploiters.⁵¹ Even today, the CNC continues to back the new thrust, calling on private capital to invest in forestry, fishing, and agriculture in order to open up new economic opportunities for campesinos.⁵² Late in 1987, when the CTM used the threat of a general strike to achieve raises in a deteriorating economic situation, the CNC's labor organization refused to back the effort, arguing that the priority for campesinos in an election year was to promote harmony and tranquility.⁵³

By 1988, despite the CNC's claim that it had delivered some fifteen million votes to the PRI in the presidential elections, the organization had lost considerable ground, as the national and even the international press noted in the weeks following the election.⁵⁴ It had been equally clear for some time that new groups had arisen to challenge the CNC and in some cases had pushed it aside. Moreover, the militancy of these groups was forcing the regime to alter its rhetoric and adjust its political practice.

At the head of the genuinely independent national-level organizations stands the Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala (CNPA), a confederation of regional organizations named for the agrarian reform platform promulgated by Emiliano Zapata in 1911. Founded in 1979, the CNPA has focused primarily on land reform. Although the CNPA has been a key agent in uniting diverse groups, the issue of party affiliation (mainly with leftist parties) has dogged it since the early 1980s, with significant parts of the coalition insisting on strict independence. The Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (CIOAC) was founded in 1963 as the Central Campesina Independiente and was affiliated with the Mexican Communist party. After one wing was incorporated into the PRI coalition, the other, under Ramón Danzós Palomino, directed its energies toward organizing agricultural workers and in 1976 took on the name of CIOAC. In 1979 the organization again began to organize campesinos involved in land disputes, particularly in the state of Chiapas, and it started to attract peasant coffee growers and others with

51. *Ibid.*, 102.

52. *UnoMásUno*, 28 Nov. 1987. See also Graciela Flores Lúa, Luisa Paré, and Sergio Sarmiento, *Las voces del campo: movimiento campesino y política agraria, 1976-1984* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1988), 59-66.

53. *UnoMásUno*, 25 Nov. 1987.

54. See, for instance, the report by Maribel Gutiérrez and Emilio Vázquez, "Desertan de centrales oficiales campesinos de siete entidades," *UnoMásUno*, 8 Aug. 1988, pp. 1, 8. The decline of the CNC had already been noted by all the major commentators. See Hardy, *El estado y los campesinos*, 192; Rubio, *Resistencia campesina*, 160-62; and Gordillo, *Campesinos al asalto del cielo*, 276ff. It is important to add, however, that the lines of division between the CNC and its rivals remain fluid, as both larger organizations and local groups of campesinos shift back and forth in response to the situation of the moment. See especially Hardy, *El estado y los campesinos*, 175-89; Flores Lúa, Paré, and Sarmiento, *Las voces del campo*, 64.

more distinctly "productivist" goals. Of the independent organizations, the CIOAC has been perhaps the most willing of the independent organizations to work with other groups, including the CNC, and has actively promoted formation of a unitary peasant organization. A third major national group is the Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas Autónomas (UNORCA), which was formed in 1985 as an umbrella organization for some twenty-five regional groups. UNORCA employs both direct action and negotiation to advance campesino demands for better prices, access to credit, inputs on reasonable terms, and other "productivist" goals.

A variety of other groups, both regional and national in scope, are also identified as "independents," although some are closely allied with political parties, like the Unión General Obrera Campesina y Popular (UGOCP) and the Central Campesina Cardenista (CCC). The issue of party affiliation, or what some call the "corporatization" of peasant organizations by political parties, has bedeviled attempts at unity throughout the 1980s. The CNPA in particular, despite continued growth, fissured over the issue more than once. Recent attempts to create a more unified movement through the first and second Encuentros Nacionales Agrarias, in November 1988 and August 1989, have been impeded by the same concerns. The First Encounter led to the signing of the Convenio de Unidad de Acción, which promised cooperation in forming a unitary organization on the part of eight national organizations and some ninety regional bodies. But the Second Encounter was boycotted by one of its planners, the UGOCP, when partisans of presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas appeared to be dominating the process. CNPA and CIOAC leaders also objected to the prominence of Cardenistas in the meetings, where Cárdenas himself gave the closing speech. As Danzós Palomino said, "If we have combated the corporativism of the government, we are not going to turn around and promote a corporativism of the Left."⁵⁵

Despite such divisions, the movement has achieved a good deal of coherence thanks to a common adherence to the platform of land reform, coupled with a recognition that problems like prices and credit, labor rights, and persistent repression in the countryside would preoccupy some groups more than others. The one major group that has remained most noticeably aloof from the broader movement, UNORCA, is dominated by organizations of relatively successful ejidos such as the Coalición de Ejidos Colectivos de los Valles del Yaqui y Mayo (CECVYM). Their demands have been almost wholly oriented toward wresting better terms from the state in matters of production and marketing. The CNPA, in contrast, has made agrarian reform the centerpiece of its platform and

55. *La Jornada*, 8 Aug. 1989, p. 11.

organizing efforts. The CIOAC returned to the issue in 1979, on recognizing that a broad constituency remained to be organized on these grounds and that agrarian reform provided a banner under which various battles might be fought.⁵⁶

In April 1984 and again in 1985, marches commemorating the assassination of Zapata were sponsored in the capital and as many as thirty other locations by the CNPA, the CIOAC, and the UGOCM-Roja (the "red" wing of the organization co-opted by the PRI in the 1960s), along with a number of smaller national and regional groups. These marches, which comprised the largest unified independent action in recent Mexican history, pressed for an agrarianist platform drawing on the rhetoric of the past and the realities of the present. The coalition's central demand was thoroughly agrarianist: redistribution of the latifundios and reform of the "reformed" agrarian code.

Participants argued that the new law allowed extensive protection for those holding land beyond the prescribed limits on acreage and that there was a great deal more land to divide. Alejandro Gascón Mercado, director of the UGOCM-Roja, summed up the agrarista platform: "The problems of the countryside are the same for all: the agrarian reform is paralyzed. . . . There are right of appeal and protection for landlords. . . . There are thousands of petitions that have not been resolved; twenty million hectares have not been distributed despite presidential resolution; [and] the latifundistas are public officials."⁵⁷ More recently, Danzós Palomino responded to Secretary of Agrarian Reform Víctor Cervera Pacheco's admonition against agrarianist agitation by declaring that fourteen to fifteen million hectares of agricultural land continue to be held in parcels exceeding legal limits, while another twenty-five to thirty million hectares already adjudicated still have not been distributed.⁵⁸

The movement is increasingly stressing demands well beyond the traditional agrarista complaints. As one leader explained, "Those who have land don't have credit; the few who get credit get it late and at some expense. There is no crop insurance; if the campesino loses his crop, the insurer does not pay or only pays back the credit received. Our products are ill-paid, often returning only 20 percent of what they cost."⁵⁹ Demands for higher support prices and cheaper credit (Banrural interest rates had reached 50 percent in 1989) have been pursued energetically by UNORCA and especially by the collective ejidos of the Northwest grouped in the Alianza Campesina del Noroeste. This alliance combines shrewd

56. Information on the inner counsels of the CIOAC is limited, but for a thorough account of the early history of the CNPA and a discussion of the developing strategy of the CIOAC, see Flores Lúa, Paré, and Sarmiento, *Las voces del campo*, 66–99.

57. *El Día*, 11 May 1985.

58. *El Día*, 11 Aug. 1989, p. 8.

59. Gascón Mercado, *El Día*, 11 May 1985.

negotiation with government agencies and dramatic tactics such as highway blockades and seizures of offices. The CNPA and the CIOAC too field "productivist" demands regularly, and the CIOAC was active for a time in organizing disaffected peasant coffee growers to battle the state purchasing agency, INMECAFE, and in establishing a credit union to allow its constituents to circumvent the control associated with dependence on Banrural. Finally, the new movement has also promoted the unionization of agricultural labor, thus bridging a division that has long plagued the left in Mexico.⁶⁰

The new agrarianist rhetoric thus deals squarely with problems of production and the Mexican campesinos' immense entanglement in the bureaucratic web of the Mexican state. The state under Cárdenas made itself the salvation of campesinos and continued to do so throughout the 1980s in the political discourse of social welfare that replaced that of social justice. The same state thereby became the chief target of campesino suspicion, resentment, and political agitation throughout Mexico. This characterization applies whether the campesinos in question be peasant farmers, informal sharecroppers, or agricultural laborers because even where the social setting does not encourage identification between landed and landless campesinos (as it does in much of rural Mexico), the state's rhetoric has consistently cast campesino problems as a single problem. Perhaps equally important in recent years, the established order has confronted independent peasant organizations, whatever their ends, with repression. Blanca Rubio has traced the evolution of peasant protest in Mexico since 1970 through a systematic analysis of published reports. A striking finding from her data is the appearance since 1976 of increasing protests directed against repression, whether by local caciques or the state.⁶¹ Another study noted 760 political assassinations in the countryside between 1982 and 1987 in addition to hundreds of campesinos imprisoned for essentially political reasons, and the level of violence seems to be rising.⁶²

The new peasant movement, in short, stems from both structural and conjunctural features of the Mexican scene, from the character of the

60. See the comments of Magdalena Galindo in "El programa de la CNPA," *El Día*, 11 Apr. 1985. On the controversy among theorists, see Ernest Feder, "Campesinistas y descampesinistas: tres enfoques divergentes (no incompatibles) sobre la destrucción del campesinado," published in two parts in *Comercio Exterior* 27, no. 12 (Dec. 1977): 1439-46, and 28, no. 1 (Jan. 1978):42-51. See also Ann Lucas, "El debate sobre los campesinos y el capitalismo en México," *Comercio Exterior* 32, no. 4 (Apr. 1982):371-83; and the articles collected in the special issue of *Latin American Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1982). The summary of agrarian thought already referred to in CEPAL, *Economía campesina*, is also useful.

61. Rubio, *Resistencia campesina*, 91 and 144ff.

62. Flores Lúa, Paré, and Sarmiento, *Las voces del campo*, 230. See also the recent report by Americas Watch, *Human Rights in Mexico: A Policy of Impunity* (New York: Americas Watch, 1990).

Mexican agricultural economy and the Mexican political system, and from the state's responses to the economic and social crisis in the countryside. Many factors have contributed to a crisis in peasant agriculture and peasant livelihood and a concomitant focus on the land question in seeking a way out: the shift of resources to the private sector after Cárdenas; the steady decline in governmental support for peasant crops (particularly for maize production); declining labor opportunities in commercial agriculture as producers moved to less labor-intensive crops and mechanized production; increasing concentration of landholding; and pressure on peasant holdings from growing urban centers and the expanding cattle industry.⁶³

At the same time, the ready availability of a land reform platform (institutionalized in the CNC and allied organizations, in the Secretaría de Reforma Agraria, and in numerous laws) together with the government's approach to the issue have provided ample opportunity and incentive for independent organization around the agrarian issue. Reduced to the simplest terms, "the struggle for the land becomes progressively more political to the degree that the government is more inflexible in meeting campesino demands."⁶⁴ This conclusion also suggests some of the difficulties facing the movement. On the one hand, as the government meets the demands of particular local groups, the latter run the risk of being co-opted into a system that has not favored peasant interests in the long run. Thus they may be lost to their larger organizations, which need consistent support to pursue an agenda encompassing more than land reform. On the other hand, when faced with continuing intransigence, organizations may find their constituencies fading away. Both problems have plagued organizing efforts, and one result has been increased emphasis on productivist goals. To see how and why the independent peasant movement has continued to be a force in Mexican politics, despite these obstacles, it is necessary to examine more closely the response of Mexican administrations since López Portillo.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONDS: "MODERNIZING THE COUNTRYSIDE"

In practice, the de la Madrid administration's response to the new militancy was tough, but a new effort at conciliation emerged late in the sexenio. Secretary of Agrarian Reform Martínez Villicaña was replaced by

63. Rubio, in the second chapter of *Resistencia campesina*, stresses the structural sources of the diverse mobilizations. See also Flores Lúa, Paré, and Sarmiento, *Las voces del campo*, chap. 1. Both works, however, recognize the distinctively political dimension of recent events. On the crisis in peasant agriculture, see the works cited earlier and the careful study by Carlos Montañez and Arturo Warman, *Los productores de maíz en México: restricciones y alternativas* (Mexico City: Centro de Ecodesarrollo, 1985).

64. Flores Lúa, Paré, and Sarmiento, *Las voces del campo*, 56.

the more soft-spoken Rafael Rodríguez Barrera. The new secretary argued that there is no more land to distribute and that the solution to the problem of land tenure was to be found not in invading land but in working the land. He nevertheless conceded that the "principal enemy of the agrarian reform" remains that of "concealed latifundios" (*latifundios simulados*).⁶⁵ Another PRI leader, a former Senate president and current Morelos Governor Antonio Riva Palacio, promised in his gubernatorial campaign to fight illegal holdings and the takeover of peasant lands by other interests (*la simulación y el acaparamiento*). Riva Palacio observed that simple increases in production would be worthless if they do not lead to increased well-being for campesinos.⁶⁶

Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who was elected president in a disputed election in July 1988, attempted during his campaign to reconcile the conflicting imperatives of PRI ideology. While calling for the "modernization and transformation" of the ejido, he insisted repeatedly that ejidal property would remain a constitutionally protected form of landholding in the Mexican system. Modernization and transformation would be accomplished through increased participation by the private sector in joint investments with ejidos but without altering the campesino way of life or alienating campesinos from their land and their communities.⁶⁷ In his words, "The modern ejido should conceive of itself not only as a gift of land, water, and men, but as a complex unit of production that articulates at one and the same time agricultural, livestock, agroindustrial, commercial and even industrial processes." In the same campaign speech, Salinas declared that it was time to end the paternalistic approach of the Mexican state toward campesinos and recognize them as full adults. This observation echoed one peasant leader's comment at the 1985 march, "Why accept the tutelage of the government? Campesinos are adults, masters of their own production. . . . The land wasn't given to us by groups of bureaucrats, it was given by Emiliano Zapata and our ancestors."⁶⁸

For many PRI bureaucrats, the adulthood of campesinos has become a kind of watchword that, along with decentralization, defines the new agrarian politics. A widespread view today is that most governmental programs to aid campesinos did little good precisely because they were conceived and executed from the top down. The solution, an especially attractive one in a time of scarce resources, is to find ways to let peasant communities solve their own problems. As one specialist said, the organization of campesinos is absolutely essential, but it must come from the

65. *UnoMásUno*, 12 and 28 Oct. 1987.

66. *UnoMásUno*, 23 Nov. 1987.

67. Carlos Salinas de Gortari, "Modernización con apego a nuestros valores," *Discursos de campaña*, vol. 4 (Mexico City: PRI, n.d.).

68. *UnoMásUno*, 1 Dec. 1987. Gascón Mercado as quoted in *El Día*, 11 May 1985.

campesinos and society, not from the state.⁶⁹ Thus for Salinas de Gortari, modernization in the countryside includes democratization: "first, decentralizing decision-making authority from central authorities to campesinos; second, achieving justice for producers through an increase in production and elevation of the well-being of campesinos."⁷⁰

The familiar themes worked out in the López Portillo administration are all here, along with a perhaps more serious call for democratization in the countryside. Salinas's appreciation for the campesino way of life and its peculiar challenge to the Mexican state appears to be genuine. A student and friend of U.S. historian John Womack, who chronicled Zapata's "Revolution of the South," Salinas conducted his doctoral research in three villages in the state of Tlaxcala. His thesis argued that dispensing governmental benefits was not necessarily the way to win the support of campesinos.⁷¹ Salinas has backed his call for democratization and "pluralism" by appointing Gustavo Gordillo, one-time advisor to the CECVYM and outspoken critic of the vicious paternalism of the system, as Undersecretary of Agriculture for Sectoral Policy and Social Concertation. One of Gordillo's tasks has been to bring together campesino groups in forums like the Congreso Agrario Permanente (CAP) to work out common problems with the administration. Created in January 1989, the CAP includes most of the major peasant organizations, from the official CNC and organizations allied with it to the CIOAC, UNORCA, and the CNPA.⁷²

What is not found in Salinas's rhetoric is an approach to the problem of land tenancy, beyond the call for establishing "security of tenure." Even a cursory look at conflict in the Mexican countryside today confirms that this problem will not go away.⁷³ PRI officials have begun to recognize this reality, but nothing in the president's speeches or deeds to date indicates that he is willing to face it. Rather, Salinas's policy appears to be dominated by a neoliberal analysis of the failures of past administrations. For example, in August 1989, Banrural announced that it would concentrate lending on peasant farmers with "productive potential." Arguing that past policies had simply "administered poverty" by converting

69. Author's interview, Mexico City, 16 June 1988.

70. Salinas, "Modernización con apego," 20.

71. Carlos Salinas de Gortari, *Producción y participación política en el campo* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1980). For a short version, see Carlos Salinas de Gortari, *Political Participation, Public Investment, and Support for the System: A Comparative Study of Rural Communities in Mexico* (La Jolla, Calif.: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1982).

72. See Julieta Medina Santos, "Congreso Agrario Permanente: campesinos contra la subordinación al Estado," *La Trilla* (April 1989).

73. See Rubio, *Resistencia campesina*, for an account of the shifting geographical focus of land tenure disputes and an explanation of why the issue has become particularly acute in much of the traditionally peasant and indigenous areas of the country. In August of 1990, the issue resurfaced in Sonora with a dramatic series of land invasions backed by a variety of groups.

peasants in areas of high risk into "eternal debtors," Gustavo Gordillo stated that agricultural credit as a form of subsidy would come to an end. At the same time, subsidies for tortillas and other basic foodstuffs would have to become very selective, targeting effectively rural consumers who are no longer able to take advantage of the agricultural credit system along with the urban poor.⁷⁴ These measures are reasonable enough, and they are likely to save the government millions of dollars annually. But they leave unanswered the pressing question of how millions of campesinos with little or no access to land are to find livelihoods in an economy that has fallen far behind the demand for jobs. As one frustrated official put it, "It's as if [the neoliberal planners] were saying, 'We have too many campesinos.' By their logic, we have seventeen million too many campesinos! What are they going to do with seventeen million people?"⁷⁵

In the meantime, "agrarian reform" has become the property of the opposition, with apparently devastating results for the PRI electoral machine. Although returns from the countryside in the July 1988 elections appeared to confirm the PRI's sustained hold, widespread reports of local fraud, together with suspiciously high levels of abstentionism and the growth in opposition peasant organizations, suggest that the traditional stronghold of the party is going the way of the cities. While more recent elections show that neither the PAN nor the leftist parties loosely grouped around Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas have succeeded in capturing the campesino vote, it remains unclear whether and to what extent the CNC and the PRI will be able to regain the upper hand. Certainly, the outcome will depend on many factors, including the willingness of the regime to continue to sanction the use of force by local interests, the prospects for unity among opposition groups, and their success both organizationally and electorally in challenging the ruling party (in this regard, the prevailing abstentionism of much of the peasant movement gives the PRI time). But clearly the PRI regime has not succeeded in altering the terms of the debate, and the traditional rhetoric of social justice now belongs to the opposition.

On the basis of his study of agrarian conflict in Sonora during the Echeverría years, Steven Sanderson concluded:

If the occasional populist mobilizations [on the part of the regime] depart from the "normal" routine of PRI politics and state domination in their intensity and redistributive promise, both Echeverría and Cárdenas ultimately refused independence to working-class and campesino organizations when state control was threatened. Whereas the bourgeoisie has gained tremendous power in both

74. See any of the national press accounts for 10–11 Aug. 1989.

75. Anonymous interview, August 1990. On the necessity for a more adequately targeted program, see Montañez and Warman, *Los productores de maíz*; and Carlos Montañez Villafaña, "Los condicionantes de la política agropecuaria," *Comercio Exterior* 38, no. 8 (Aug. 1988):679–85.

political and civil society through the “economic miracle,” the underclasses have gained power only in sporadic rebellion against the terms of the revolutionary populist pact. The state, as promoter of capitalist accumulation and suppressor of underclass organizations in civil society, can no longer function as the “neutral” arbiter of multiclass coalition.⁷⁶

The picture may be decidedly more complex today, but these conclusions suggest the fundamental problem facing the regime.

The Echeverría years and the current mobilization demonstrate in their own ways the same point: that both the political discourse and political structure forged in Cárdenas’s “progressive alliance” guaranteed that sooner or later the conflict among agrarian capital, the campesinos, and the Mexican state, which broke out into open confrontation in Sonora, would have to be put back on the national agenda.

In effect, the defeat of Echeverrián populism in 1976 and his repudiation by the core of the PRI (not to mention the hostility of the latifundistas and business classes) demanded of the party a new populist rhetoric, one that carefully separates questions of property from questions of income and translates the terms of “social justice” into those of social welfare.⁷⁷ The PRI attempted to forge a new populism by linking urban labor and agrarian capital in the provision of meat and bread for the cities. This effort failed for practical as well as ideological reasons. Promises notwithstanding, the system has not provided “meat and bread” at prices acceptable to consumers, partly because the long neglect of the peasant economy and its primary crops led to enormous shortfalls in basic grains and rising costs for cattle producers. This situation prompted the export of beef while grain imports continued to soar. Thus potent practical reasons abound for attending to the question of self-sufficiency in basic grains. Yet the government has chosen to pursue that strategy, if at all, largely to the detriment of peasant farmers and workers, despite much talk about reinvigorating the countryside.⁷⁸ In the meantime, abandoning the revolutionary discourse of social justice for campesinos has contributed to a growing delegitimation of the regime while creating the political space for considerable popular mobilization outside PRI control.

The organizations that have sprung up in that space face major

76. Steven Sanderson, *Agrarian Populism*, 191.

77. As Jonathan Fox observed, “Subsidies are a much less ‘volatile’ form of distribution than is turning over farms and factories to peasants and workers. Redistribution of income rather than wealth does not fundamentally alter property relations, and subsidies and social-security-type measures tend to distribute income *within* rather than between classes, given regressive fiscal policies.” See Fox, “Agrarian Reform and Populist Politics: A Discussion of Steven Sanderson’s *Agrarian Populism and the Mexican State*,” *Latin American Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1985):33.

78. Barkin and Suárez, *El fin de la autosuficiencia alimentaria*. See Calva, *Crisis agrícola y alimentaria*, for a thorough critique of recent agricultural policies, including an assessment of the impact on peasants and consumers of the 1988 Pacto de Solidaridad Económica (rewritten in 1989 as the Pacto para la Estabilidad y el Crecimiento Económico).

practical problems of their own. Whatever the power of agrarianist political discourse in Mexican politics, the fact remains that land reform alone will not resolve the agrarian question. As far back as 1972, even Arturo Warman acknowledged that there was not enough land to satisfy the demands of the three to four million landless laborers in Mexico, not to mention the eight million or so minifundistas.⁷⁹ To a large degree, leaders of the independent organizations recognize this fact, and both their own concerns and the rhetoric of "production" that dominates official discourse have prompted them to pay increasing attention to such "productivist" demands as access to credit and crop insurance on reasonable terms, enhanced control over commercialization, and support for small-scale irrigation projects. As noted, these groups have also found room in their platform for agricultural laborers.

Whether this coalition can force substantial change in state policy is still uncertain. A more potent alliance may be available with organized labor, which has its own reasons for being dissatisfied with current agricultural policy and is sympathetic to the campesino cause. Such an alliance is not at all farfetched today, although continuing suspicion of electoral politics by significant elements in both movements leaves the PRI some room to maneuver. Salinas, meanwhile, appears to be building a new coalition by including business and the middle classes appreciative of the PRI's new, more "centrist" posture as well as commercial agriculture and more prosperous campesinos. Yet under these circumstances, the likelihood of Salinas, however pro-peasant in some senses, assuming the mantle of Lázaro Cárdenas and the rhetoric of the old progressive alliance is slight. He may be able to defeat the challenge on the Right by incorporating its critique of the PRI into his own campaign to reform Mexican society, but the challenge of the Left, reinforced by the old cry of "La tierra a los que la trabajan," will continue to be powerful.

CONCLUSIONS: AGENDAS, ELITES, AND POPULAR MOBILIZATION

Most of the literature on agenda setting takes a rather narrow, short-term view of agendas and focuses primarily on elite efforts to manipulate political questions to their own ends.⁸⁰ Certainly, elites play an important role in the story just considered. But they do so constrained in significant ways by both history and the popular forces that they

79. Warman, *Los campesinos*, 10–11.

80. Besides the works of Cobb and Elder, Baumgartner and Jones, and Barbara Nelson cited earlier, see Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, *Poverty and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Charles D. Elder and Roger W. Cobb, *The Political Uses of Symbols* (New York: Longman, 1983); John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1983); and William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

attempt to manage. How do these constraints emerge and operate, and what are the implications of the concept of agenda for understanding popular mobilization?

Agendas emerge, as John Kingdon has observed, from the conjunction of recognized problems, concrete proposals, and political opportunities.⁸¹ This description applies to what I have called "constitutive agendas" as well as to the more immediate agendas for legislative action that Kingdon studied, except that the former impress themselves on a polity in a more profound and often prolonged transformation than that ordinarily accompanying the emergence of passing issues on the political scene. In Mexico the agrarian question was thrust upon the national consciousness in three distinct moments: in the Mexican Revolution, an unprecedented civil war prolonged by the refusal of peasant forces under Zapata to lay down their arms; in the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, a gifted politician who revived the populist promises of the Revolution to forge a new developmentalist alliance; and in the Echeverría regime, when the PRI attempted unsuccessfully to recover its legitimacy through a renewal of Cardenista populism.

In each instance, the problem of rural poverty was conceived first of all as a problem of landlessness. Although proponents of small family farms on the U.S. model were present in the deliberations leading up to the Constitution of 1917, the dominant alternative was strengthening the ejido, the traditional vehicle for communal control of land distribution. For the peasant activists who shaped Article 27, recognition of ejidal and communal rights had the virtues of being rooted in tradition, preserving peasant holdings in perpetuity, and providing an organized base for claims against the latifundistas. Peasant activists gained the power to impose their solution from the military success of Zapata and from the willingness of organized labor to support them in exchange for peasant support of the labor platform.⁸²

In the Cárdenas and Echeverría reforms, by contrast, representatives of the official party defined the problem and managed its resolution, choosing definitions and alternatives largely worked out by their predecessors. Cárdenas rescued the agrarianist cause from a minority position in the party of the Revolution and made it a centerpiece in his restructuring of the Mexican economy and the party itself. His actions contributed directly to making the agrarian question a permanent feature of the national agenda by institutionalizing the ejido and the official

81. Kingdon, *Agendas*, 20.

82. On the struggle over the terms of the constitution, see Richard Roman, "Ideology and Class in the Mexican Revolution: A Study of the Convention and the Constitutional Congress," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1973; and E. V. Niemeyer, Jr., *Revolution at Querétaro: The Mexican Constitutional Convention of 1916-1917* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974). On agrarian ideologies at the time, see the works cited previously in note 39.

peasant organization that arose out of the land reform of this period and by making the rhetoric of "justice for the campesino" an integral part of the PRI platform. Both elements, the rhetorical adoption of an issue and its concrete institutionalization, are essential to establishing an issue or a particular formulation of an issue as part of a nation's "constitutive agenda."

Echeverría's reforms, by contrast, provoked a severe reaction in a PRI thoroughly beholden to capitalist development in the countryside, precipitating a rhetorical, legal, and political retrenchment that persists to this day. With the "progressive coalition" weakened by years of skewed growth and the CNC eroded as an independent counterweight in Mexican politics, Echeverría's efforts to push the agrarian question to the top of the formal agenda ended in official commitment to burying the issue.

The issue will not go away, however. Just as Cárdenas and Echeverría could draw on an ample national tradition that conceived the problem of rural poverty as a problem of land tenure, so successive administrations since Echeverría have searched for an alternative formulation capable of meeting their needs and satisfying the constituencies that have traditionally responded to the rhetoric of "Land to the tiller." To date, they have found it impossible to move the issue of land reform wholly off the national agenda, despite extended efforts at reformulation and reorientation. Why is this the case? Apparently, even political elites gifted with considerable resources and power cannot simply remake certain issues at will. In this instance, they are constrained in at least two ways. First, they are limited by their own legitimating rhetoric, which suggests that the regime exists to facilitate gradual resolution of class struggle in favor of the least advantaged and which has traditionally formulated this stance as a commitment to peasant agriculture. Second, land reform retains a place in PRI rhetoric because the party's safest constituencies have long resided in the countryside, where the benefits of land reform were immediately translated into political support and the promise of land reform could readily be turned to political advantage.⁸³ Thus the intractable quality of this particular issue, its "constitutive" character, lies not merely in the historical importance of the land reform platform but in the continued political importance of the constituency it serves. Economic abandonment after 1940 contributed to the rise of an independent peasant movement, which the PRI initially contained by continuing the land reform and distributing social services in the 1970s.

83. Even today, the PRI can present itself as the only route to land. In handing over seventeen thousand hectares to representatives of fifteen communities, Governor Heladio Ramírez López of Oaxaca said that in view of the complex conflicts facing the country today, "the regime of the Revolution is the only one capable of guaranteeing the resolution of these problems in a peaceful, civilized form and with a commitment to justice." See *UnoMásUno*, 10 Aug. 1988.

When the party abandoned the agrarian question ideologically, however, it succeeded only in placing the issue in the hands of an opposition that has grown strong by pointing out the gaps between the promises of the Revolution and the practices of the PRI regime.

In sum, the PRI has been constrained by its own rhetorical commitment to “social justice” and to fulfilling the promises of the Revolution and by the ability of a sizable population to organize against the state under banners appropriated—or reappropriated—from the state. Similarly, three factors contributed to independent organization, despite the apparent monopoly of the official peasant organization (the CNC). The first factor is “structural”: economic distress growing out of the neglect of peasant agriculture and the increasing bifurcation of the agricultural economy. A second is organizational: the failure of the CNC, given the policy positions adopted by the government since 1940, to act on peasants’ behalf in any but the most superficial ways. The third is ideological: the availability of a powerful formulation, made pressing by the situation of some peasants, around which other peasant concerns could be grouped. Thus the failure of the government to carry through the reform, combined with the regime’s attempt to shift the terms of debate, gave major ground to a growing opposition movement.

To insist on the importance of a historically specific “constitutive agenda” in shaping political debate and policy-making is to call into question the reductionism of much of the structuralist analysis that dominates discussion of Latin American politics. The point is not that national agendas are simply given, the product of some ineluctable and idiosyncratic cultural process. On the contrary, they are produced by political struggles, marked by contending interests and ideologies. But their power to shape debate and constrain the powerful as well as the powerless suggests that politics are more “open” than structuralist and state-centric approaches typically grant.⁸⁴ The argument is not just that states reproduce “the contradictions of capitalism” and thus cannot be expected either

84. See Ernesto Laclau, “Tesis acerca de la forma hegemónica de la política,” and Liliana de Riz and Emilio de Ipola, “Acerca de la hegemonía como producción histórica,” both in *Hegemonía y alternativas políticas en América Latina*, edited by Julio Labastida Martín del Campo (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1985). Both essays offer cogent critiques of standard structuralist Marxist analysis on the basis of a nuanced appropriation of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. De Riz and de Ipola note that “even apart from ‘vulgar Marxism,’ we have to think that even the best social and political thought in Latin America has been marred by a certain neglect of the cultural and ideological dimension of social processes” (p. 59). But their own survey of the issues raised by the concept of hegemony does not address the distinctive and enduring national agendas under discussion here. Others who have considered the impact of pervasive ideological constructs on popular mobilization include Guillermo O’Donnell, especially in “Tensions in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Question of Democracy,” in *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, edited by David Collier (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979); and Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

to act "in the interests of capital as a whole" or to advance cohesive projects of their own, as Judith Teichman correctly argues.⁸⁵ Nor is it simply that policies represent the outcome of struggles between state interests and ideologies versus more or less powerful forces in civil society, as the idea of the "relative autonomy" of the state implies. Beyond acknowledging the considerable complexities that these tensions entail, it is important to recognize that the constitutive elements of a polity's national agenda have been handed down in advance of current debates and political and bureaucratic struggles. Although this agenda might eventually be altered, in the meantime it provides constraints as well as resources for all actors in the system.⁸⁶

These observations on the limits that such agendas impose on elites also have important implications for the study of popular mobilization. For example, much of the literature on peasant mobilization has focused on the economic conditions thought to underlie peasant complaints.⁸⁷ It seems apparent, however, that economic conditions are only part of the picture. Economic conflict may provide the motive for peasant discontent and may help explain the targets of that discontent. But individuals must have some sense that they can do something about their situation before they will act to change it,⁸⁸ and organized dissent generally demands common understandings of what is at stake and what are acceptable solutions.

For action to take a political form, moreover, alternatives must be conceived in political terms. For example, the plight of U.S. farmers has frequently been viewed as a political issue, but rarely, at least since colonial times, as one involving land reform as an alternative.⁸⁹ In Mis-

85. Judith A. Teichman, *Policymaking in Mexico: From Boom to Crisis* (Boston, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 11.

86. If we conceive of the state, following Cardoso, as the overall pact of domination in a society, then what I call the "constitutive agenda" is presumably included in the terms of the 'pact.' Nevertheless, it is important to call attention to the historical specificity and ideological character of those terms and to their impact in everyday politics, something that is ordinarily passed over in silence or read off as a simple reflection of the distribution of power in a system. See Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "On the Characterization of the Authoritarian Regimes in Latin America," in Collier, *New Authoritarianism in Latin America*.

87. See, in particular, Jeffery M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: Free Press, 1975). Eric R. Wolf lays less stress on economic relations per se than on the effects of "modernization" on peasant communities and their opportunities. See Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969). But even an analyst like James Scott, who pays special attention to the peasant ideology underlying peasant revolts, takes pains to ground his analysis in the changing economic situation that peasants face. See James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).

88. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978), 459.

89. The major exception is the period of radical reconstruction following the U.S. Civil War. See the stimulating discussion by Barrington Moore, Jr. in *Social Origins of Dictatorship*

issippi in the 1950s, thousands of tenant farmers were driven off their land in the wake of mechanization without a whisper being spoken about returning land to the tiller. In Colombia, the issue was placed on the national agenda briefly, only to be withdrawn when the government-sponsored peasant organization asserted its independence and appeared to threaten commercial growers and entrenched interests. Repression replaced congressional debate, the peasant organization split, and by 1980 it was more or less tamed. The issue remains alive in the Colombian countryside but has little or no institutional and organizational support.⁹⁰ It is not part of the “constitutive agenda” in Colombia any more than it is in the United States.

How different the situation is in Mexico, where a popular movement based on land reform is rooted deeply in the Mexican past. The peasant way of life and peasant communities have been preserved largely through previous land reforms, enshrined in laws and political institutions, and the idea of “La tierra a los que la trabajan” has been absorbed as part of the national creed. Rhetorical abandonment of the reform in the late 1970s gave peasant organizations a platform and an organizing tool that the regime had once claimed as its own. In other words, while powerful economic motives existed for peasant discontent, Mexico’s historical commitment to land reform gave peasants the terms for formulating that distress politically and the opportunity to express it against a regime that was rapidly abandoning the *raison d’être* of its organizational base in the countryside. A variety of peasant groups emerged in the 1970s to take advantage of these opportunities, and they consolidated their efforts with increasing success in the 1980s.⁹¹

Just as an adequate account of agenda setting must consider both historical commitments and the popular forces that may arise to defend them, an adequate account of popular mobilization must include an understanding of the ways in which a nation’s constitutive agenda facilitates or impedes popular opposition to elite politics. In neither respect is political struggle static or predetermined. In both senses, its outcome is

and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1966). The failure of the land reform project of the Radical Republicans probably closed the book on U.S. sympathy for such solutions, at least in the United States.

90. See León Zamosc’s thorough study of the rise and fall of the Colombian Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos (ANUC) in *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

91. The emphasis here on ideological resources and political opportunity was inspired by the “resource mobilization” school of thought. See Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978); and Bruce Fireman and William A. Gamson, “Utilitarian Logic in the Resource Mobilization Perspective,” in *The Dynamics of Social Movements*, edited by Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979). “Opportunity” is also important in Theda Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and in Piven and Cloward’s account of the limits of social mobilization in the United States in *Poor People’s Movements*.

the creative product of historical achievements and ongoing efforts to define issues and alternatives. Elite action and popular mobilization depend equally on the terms of debate in which political struggles are carried out, and neither state elites nor their opposition can manipulate all the terms of debate at will. Each and all are bound by notions, questions, and formulations stamped on the polity at its founding and in crucial moments of political transformation.

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