

NEOLIBERAL REFORM IN RURAL MEXICO:
Social Structural and Political Dimensions*

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AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND POLITICAL POWER IN MEXICO. By Roger Bartra. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Pp. 221. \$45.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

MEXICO'S SECOND AGRARIAN REFORM: HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY

The struggle for democracy must
have as one of its primary goals
~~the establishment of a viable and~~

democratic political society. . . ,
but democracy also requires the

and pluralistic civil society.

Larry Diamond
The Democratic Revolution

The Mexican countryside has been one of the most explosive politi-
~~cal sectors in the twentieth century. The era opened in 1910 with the first~~

were becoming a rural proletariat, while a small minority were becoming part of the agrarian bourgeoisie. According to Lenin, poor peasants would do best by allying with the rural and industrial proletariat in the struggle for socialism (Lenin 1967). This essay will review several recent books on Mexico that deal with economic aspects of neoliberal reform and its political implications for the countryside. The first section will address briefly the original Mexican polemic on the agrarian question, one that dates from the 1970s. The second section will discuss the structural dimensions of neoliberal reform. Political dimensions are described in the third section.

where the key issue is no longer the transition to socialism but the transition to democracy within capitalism. My conclusions will sum up the political implications of neoliberalism in terms of what type of transition is taking place and what possible basis is emerging for identity formation of agricultural direct producers. I will also outline my own view of political

One of Roger Bartra's central contributions is his analysis of the peasantry as a simple commodity mode of production. He views the peasant mode as articulated in a position subordinate to the capitalist mode of

as craftsmen have a dual nature: "[T]his double nature is expressed in the fact that the capitalist and the worker are fused into a single person: the direct producer. The duality results from the fact that while the peasant and the craftsman are exploited by capital (by way of the market), they themselves are the direct agents of such exploitation to the extent that they work under noncapitalist conditions of production" (p. 17).

To arrive at this conclusion of unequal exchange, Bartra examined agricultural production census data using the concepts associated with ground rent developed by Karl Marx as analytical tools. From this perspective, agricultural products are priced according to the commodities with the highest production costs in the capitalist sector. Thus capitalist cultivators who produce under the most favorable conditions are able to obtain a ground rent according to the price differential between their products and other markets,

"an impossible ongoing assimilation" impossible because the peasantry

became indispensable to the postrevolutionary political regime but ongo-

ing as capitalism advances in the countryside.

Thus in Bartra's view, despite the political necessity of the peasantry for the state, the agrarian reform and the *ejido* as its main form of land tenure created major limits on capitalist development because about half the land was withdrawn from the market. This kind of argument has led some observers of the debate to liken the position of Marxists to that of the World Bank, with its tendency to favor market forces as the key mechanism of resource allocation. Bartra, however, was merely observing an objective

Kearney's critique of anthropological studies of the peasantry make his book a valuable textbook for courses on various topics, including economic anthropology, cultural and social anthropology, peasant studies, Latin American development, and Mexico. *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry* critiques the central problem of economically based class analysis, arguing that class has rarely been the basis for constructing identities. Part of the difficulty stems from economic reality, which has produced social actors who occupy more than one subject position. Kearney calls them "multi-

lation. Such disproportion reflected a tremendous technological lag and a ~~highly fragmented land tenure structure. The rural development strategy~~

followed by the Mexican state was predicated on the omnipresence of the ~~state, which intervened through diverse means (including selective indirect~~

~~subsidies), most of them regressive. The ejido was the main form of land~~

the origins of the ejido system and its functions of political control, political representation, and organization for production. The book then summarizes the main features of the 1992 reforms and moves directly into presenting the 1990 and 1994 national surveys that constitute its empirical core. Although the land market was legally opened only in 1992, some ac-

ico was divided, the land market was most active in the Gulf, Center, and North and least developed in the South Pacific, where tiny farms predominate. Also, the percentage of *ejidatarios* (beneficiaries of the original agrar-

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insurance between 1990 and 1994: access to loans increased through PRONASOL, a social assistance program. But the mass of credit to the sector declined, and access to credit was thus diluted by a larger number of users.

The chapter on organizations in Mexico's Second Agrarian Reform

seems to yield the least satisfactory information, but this may be merely a reflection of the state of things in rural Mexico. The authors conclude "by showing that ejidatarios are not strongly organized, with only about a

When disaggregating income data by quintiles, off-farm income is most important for the middle quintiles, while on-farm income is most important for the poorest and the richest quintiles (p. 178). Other studies that have quantified this phenomenon of the increasingly semiproletarian character of the rural direct producers are Appendini and Salles (1976, 1980), and R. Bartra and Otero (1987).²


Poverty was found to be extensive and deep in rural Mexico. According to de Janvry and his coauthors, "Overall, 47 percent of the households are in poverty and 34 percent in extreme poverty" (p. 197). In contrast, 25 percent of Mexicans fall below the poverty line in the urban sector

book just reviewed. Another chapter by Daniel Covarrubias Patiño describes an opinion survey on Procampo, Procede, and PRONASOL, three programs launched during the Salinas administration. Procampo was started in November 1993 to cushion the effects of NAFTA on Mexican agriculture while providing an incentive for peasants to shift from subsistence

and grain crops to fruits and vegetables for export. Procampo was also geared toward the nearest-term audience. Procede is the institutional

Political Dimensions

Now that the cold war has ended, the socialist alternative is hardly



(Castañeda 1993; Carr and Ellner 1993; Harris 1992). The question that remains is, what kind of democracy is Mexico turning into? Key words in the

presidential elections, using the Instituto Federal Electoral and the Alianza

exercise the right to secret balloting or if they faced pressure and also on the presence of opposition parties in rural areas. Fox first confirms some information provided by Armando Bartra on the distribution of Procampo funds. More than 2.8 million checks were distributed in the two weeks

transfer funds. Several municipal reforms since 1992 have increased municipal

politics increased responsibility for delivering services, and town councils

If some organizations in the private sector—big, medium, and small—are becoming more militant, it is because their former corporatist channels for exerting pressure on agricultural policy are no longer effective. With the advent of citizenship, three types of social actors have emerged: citizens as individuals, those defined by the kind of peasant or cultivator, and social movements. Social movements are taking on the character of broad fronts made up of local or regional organizations that keep their distance from political parties. These movements may nevertheless be linked

may remain independent of the state. While such social movement organizations may be described as “multiparty” because their members may also be party militants, their loyalty lies primarily with their social organization rather than with party membership.

Mackinlay); the role of independent organizations (Blanca Rubio); rural work and labor organizations (Sara Lara); the new forms of representation

Campeñas (Harvey); the indigenous movement for autonomy (Sergio Sarmiento Silva); other forms of productive organization for commercial-

de Janvry et al. indicate that few peasants remain in the Mexican countryside, at least when defined economically. Given the array of economic activities that direct producers engage in, most rural direct producers are what Kearney calls "polybians." The question then becomes, on what basis might such polybians, engaged as they are in a multiplicity of economic relations and subject positions, form identities and become politically consti-

tuted? Kearney's answer is that ethnicity may be such a basis. But this response is unsatisfactory to the extent that ethnicity will scarcely serve as an anchoring place to form identities across rural Mexico.

When viewed elsewhere that the process of political class formation

is mediated by the prevailing forms of regional culture, class interaction

their organizations are usually co-opted and integrated into bourgeois-
economic structures and politics. When the state threatens the basis of an

character. Furthermore, when state interventions favor direct producers in
response to their pressure, strength, and mobilization, their class organiza-

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