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Introduction

Peasant Movements in Latin America: Looking Back, Moving Ahead

by

Cliff Welch and Bernardo Mançano Fernandes

Through their actions and discourse, poor people throughout Latin America tell us that the peasantry is alive, vigorous, and anxious to struggle against the massive transformations unleashed by capitalist expansion and production intensification in the countryside. Because classical political economists and Marxists alike imagined capitalist development as making the peasantry extinct, their theories made it difficult to observe the viability of peasant models of development and the sustained appeal of the land in the context of industrial society. For contemporary rural social movements the land is a source of hope in a world led astray by capitalist excess. This issue of *Latin American Perspectives* examines, root and branch, the rise and prospects of some of these newer peasant movements in Latin America.

The movements discussed are diverse in their origins and natures. They are found in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, to mention only those countries that receive detailed attention from contributors. In fact, such movements can be found in nearly every national setting, even the United States and Canada, because recent processes of capitalist expansion have created similar conditions around the globe. The Green Revolution of the 1970s set the stage by displacing millions of peasants, and the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus stimulated action by transforming the political economy and jeopardizing the livelihoods of millions more. The more recent genetic revolution has further concentrated the power of transnational agribusiness corporations, deepening the trends of land concentration, social marginalization, and environmental destruction. In the meantime, hunger and malnutrition, which are often used to justify advances in agricultural technologies and further concentration, worsen.

Politically engaged rural social movements of indigenous peoples, dispossessed farmers, underemployed farm laborers, and the urban underclass have formed to challenge national development schemes that favor land concentration, expansion of the agricultural frontier, intensive farming methods, and the continued marginalization of the working class. Several articles

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defend the power of class as an organizing principle for rural studies, noting that structural and conflict factors played at least as important a role as identity, particularly ethnic identity, in uniting participants. Most contributors describe indigenous identity as less useful than class for understanding peasant movements.

Some of the movements, such as Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra—MST), have already entered their second generation of existence and combine grassroots movement practices with the institutional administration of innovative nongovernmental organizations. Others, such as the Ayala Plan National Coordinator (Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala—CNPA), are older but passed through a process of transformation in the 1990s. As Miguel Teubal's article in this issue indicates, the movements of the past fought to promote agrarian reform as a means of securing their hold on land they worked, while land struggle at the end of the twentieth century focused more on obtaining land for those without work. The essential need for a livelihood felt by millions, as well as the countryside's potential for fulfilling this need, reinforced the concept of the peasantry as a class.

While distinct in name and practice, many of these peasant movements are affiliated with the Via Campesina, the international peasant movement coordinating organization. Member organizations share a sharp critique of the wave of capitalist development brought on by the neoliberal reforms of international trade and property law that took off in the 1980s. In their confrontation with the unquestioned development of agribusiness, a concept that has come to signify the U.S. model of elaborate linkages among commercial, industrial, and agricultural divisions of the agri-food and bio-fuel chains, the new peasant movements defend sustainable agriculture, reduced land concentration, reduced dependency on environmentally destructive techniques, and fuller utilization of indigenous inputs such as native seeds, agro-centric vocations, revitalized country towns, and participatory democracy.

This issue on the (re)formation of Latin American peasant movements is structured around the belief that it is important to look back at historical processes and geographical transformations. Our objective in organizing it was to understand change and continuity among Latin American peasant and indigenous movements since World War II. During this period, peasant and indigenous organizations gained political weight and experienced change in their form, social relations, political position, and geographic space. From the perspective of various disciplines, the nine articles gathered here register the processes of change and continuity that have brought advances and new challenges for peasant movements.

Two processes of change emerge from the articles: privatization and territorialization. In the post-World War II era, many rural labor and peasant movements in Latin America were integrated into government-sponsored development plans. State-controlled in fundamental ways, their activities were encouraged to organize the labor market and thus promote agricultural modernization. In the 1980s, economic crisis and the neoliberal response brought an end to this developmentalist model and emancipated the peasantry from both government control and support. The older movements either adjusted to the new context, as did the CNPA in Mexico, or found themselves

eclipsed by competing, “private” organizations such as the MST in Brazil. While territorial questions remained a significant locus of struggle, their nature changed dramatically as national states ceded their powers to international bodies. In the developmentalist era, peasant organizations and states united in “nationalization” campaigns to protect national resources. In the neoliberal era, states sold off national assets to influential bidders, abandoning their capacity to control national wealth. No longer in partnership with states, the privatized peasant movements adopted direct-action techniques to preserve or take back resources from capitalists and force governments to institute agrarian reform. Agrarian reform, which had been abandoned along with the developmentalist model, became the flag that united the rural working classes against the transnational agribusiness corporations, with their national capitalist allies, that were invading the region and territorializing the land as well as policy-making processes. A striking example of this was the recent advertising campaign of the Switzerland-based Syngenta Corporation that superimposed a fictitious state called the “United Soy Republic” (República Única de la Soja) on Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay.

Instead of the politically based patron-client relationship between states and peasants developed at mid-century, contemporary organizations faced a finance-based clientelism articulated through national governments by the World Bank. But the relative autonomy of Via Campesina-linked movements has enabled significant resistance to the co-optation schemes of multilateral institutions. They have not been able to break the back of peasant mobilization as planned with such programs as the Land Bank, which sought to fragment peasant and indigenous movements by attracting away members with low-interest farm loans. The so-called market-based agrarian reform sponsored by the World Bank was effectively denounced by the movements as more of the same—an attempt to lock family farmers into forms of capitalist dependency akin to debt peonage. The co-optation tactic helped reveal the period as one characterized by a conflict between two models of development, one based on commodities and the other on agroecology. Via Campesina movements have worked to represent the former as destructive and unsustainable.

The articles also demonstrate how important peasant movements have been to democratization processes in Latin America. It is possible to believe that social movements, including the labor unions, recently elected presidents of like origins in the region. Brazil’s working-class president and Bolivia’s campesino president serve as cases in point. But more profound change has proved difficult to consolidate as the correlation of forces established by neoliberal policy continues to resist change. Leftist governments have been unable to satisfy the demands of their social-movement supporters, and conflict has intensified. In some cases, the new peasant movements have found themselves perceived as one more special-interest group—equated with but less powerful than agribusiness interests—with which governments need to negotiate.

Central themes of the dispute include tension over centralization vs. decentralization, food security vs. food sovereignty, and concentration on commodities vs. investment in diverse crops, with the former in each pair predominant because of its privileged position in the powerful world capitalist system. Other terms of the dispute pit the popular movements’ emphasis on the

multidimensional, the pluricultural, and the territorially diverse against the homogenizing, standardizing, and competitive values of the neoliberals.

The relationships between struggles based on class, ethnicity, and geographic space receive significant attention from contributors to this issue, who give the agrarian question a new component—the condition of the peasantry’s existence in its territories. In the dispute over models of development, the land of labor becomes a territory. The peasant’s countryside, thereby differentiated from the countryside of commodities, resists and advances at the same time as it submits to and interacts with agribusiness territory. This perspective amplifies the meaning of agrarian reform. Instead of representing a compensatory policy of economic development, it comes to stand for a policy of territorial development in the fullest sense of the term.

Essentially, the following articles demonstrate the protagonism of peasant movements organized around the concept of smallholders as a class, whether of indigenous, African, European, or mixed descent. In the construction of Latin American territory, the movements are joined with other key institutional “builders” such as the state, political parties, churches, businesses, unions, and nongovernmental organizations. Peasants are treated as historical subjects that must be considered as part and parcel of the social formation and must be studied if we are to comprehend the present.

The economist Miguel Teubal examines the politics of agrarian reform policies in various Latin American and Caribbean countries in an effort to understand how today’s policies and practices differ from those of the recent past. He distinguishes two periods in the history of agrarian reform as a government policy in Latin America, one for the post–World War II liberal developmentalist period and another for the post–cold-war years. For Teubal, peasant and indigenous movements were both cause and consequence of these policy shifts. His reading of these movements as protagonists in the struggle for land and agrarian reform is original and up-to-date.

The sociologists Hubert C. de Grammont and Horacio Mackinlay focus not on policy changes but on documenting the formation of peasant and indigenous movements in Mexico from 1938 to 2006. They develop an organizational typology and periodization to explain changes in these organizations and create a context for understanding contemporary peasant and indigenous movements. Corporatist, political-type organizations predominated from 1938 to 1988. With neoliberalism and democratization under way after 1988, a mixture of political and social movements characterized the shift away from developmentalism and authoritarianism toward neoliberalism and democracy. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, they argue, social movements had eclipsed the political organizations of the peasantry. The article is an excellent reference for reflecting on the relationship among movements, political parties, and the state.

Jasmin Hristov, a doctoral candidate in sociology, uses the case of Colombia’s Cauca Region Indigenous Council (Conselho Regional Indígena de Cauca—CRIC) to study the relationship between ethnicity and social class, analyzing policy disputes between the state and the movement. Giving emphasis to identity formation processes, she focuses attention on the structural conditions and political dimensions of the strategies used to shape ethnic identity among the peasant class. Her article demonstrates well the complex

relations that limit and expand the possibilities for peasant mobilization and argues that postmodernist interpretations have failed to represent these complexities.

Through a municipal-level examination of indigenous peasant movement political activity, the international development specialist John D. Cameron shows how such movements in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru have managed to consolidate their power at the grass roots and use this base of support to launch themselves as political forces on grander geographic scales. He studies the changes in their organizational forms and structures that have influenced these movements as well as municipal politics. His study helps us understand the indigenous peasant basis of support for the presidential victories and administrative capacities of presidents Evo Morales and Rafael Correa. In this way, Cameron illuminates relationships between class and ethnicity and between changes on micro and macro scales.

Susan Healey, a recent Ph.D. in rural studies, analyzes the victory of Bolivia's Evo Morales from a historical perspective, emphasizing the role of indigenous identity as an essential factor. Her analysis is based on the concept of resilience, arguing that the election of an indigenous president resulted from an accumulation of historical forces that have pitted indigenous peasants against the ladino ruling class since colonial times. In contrast to other articles in this issue, which examine empirical evidence to document the material basis of Morales's victory, Healey's adopts a cultural history approach at the national level to explain how a long-oppressed people finally achieved at least symbolic justice.

The development studies specialist I. S. R. Pape offers the third article on the theme of class and identity in the Bolivian Andes. Instead of focusing on municipal governments, it examines two indigenous peasant organizations to understand the unique nonlinear approaches to organizational administration that have helped these peasant movements persevere. This closely researched institutional profile also helps explain the "privatization" process that characterizes contemporary peasant movements.

Cliff Welch, a historian, documents the privatization of the Brazilian peasant movement. In a case study of three moments in the history of peasant struggle in a hotly disputed region of Brazil, Welch discovers both change and continuity in the collective action of peasants, their relations with the government, and their territorial occupation. The article also challenges the new-social-movements literature and contextualizes the MST, which is the subject of the following two articles.

John Hammond, a sociologist and a participating editor of *LAP*, reflects on the history of Brazilian rural society in examining the forms of violence used by latifundarios and the state to repress peasant families involved in land occupations. Particularly noteworthy is his discussion of the contradictory role of the state in repressing occupations and implementing agrarian reform. For Hammond, the fact that occupations are acknowledged to be an efficient form of land access for peasants contrasts sharply with the violence the landless must confront.

The political scientist Leandro Vergara-Camus ends the trilogy on the MST with a discussion of the movement's methods of organization and political formation. He analyzes the encampments and settlements of the MST as

spaces and territories of politicization and argues that these relatively autonomous spaces enable the construction of a movement identity that facilitates peasant mobilization. He goes on to examine some of the challenges faced by the MST, including its confrontation with the agribusiness sector and their commodity-enhancing policy proposals and its contradictory relationship with the Lula government.

The articles published here demonstrate the resiliency of peasant movements in Latin America and reaffirm the importance of analyzing their historical development and geographical transformations, processes that bring new lessons daily. The peasant and indigenous movements of today are renovated organizations that challenge political parties, unions, and governments. They demand structural change and confront neoliberal policies. The articles reinforce the thesis that peasant movements promote significant change in the substance of modern capitalist society and are among the most progressive organizations in the region. Through conflict, they promote development from outside the government and regularly fight for the society they dream of creating.