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Peasant Logic, Agrarian Policy, Land Mobility, and Land Markets in Mexico

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SUMMARY

Mexican rural reform has questioned the role of the peasantry and private national producers in agriculture. The reform followed a neoliberal paradigm for incorporating the nation into the global village. As part of a government strategy, land reform in Mexico aims to change entrepreneurial and land tenure patterns in rural areas into an individual, private, large-scale, and capitalist productive structure, and the land market is vital in allowing the land transfers needed to change the land tenure pattern.

There are alternative land reforms that favor a smallholding structure. Many academics, peasant and indigenous organizations, and even government officials, now favor structural changes that are related to the factors of production in rural Mexico and to the historical construction of the nation. The land market should have a vital role in agrarian reform that favors the peasantry and indigenous people. There is a need to understand the peasants and indigenous people's logic, rationality and subjective construction of land, for land is the foundation of their survival strategies. Land implies building local and regional power relationships; it means territory and space needed to exert autonomy. The land market, therefore, can answer to values that have deep cultural roots.

The modernization of rural Mexico could be more inclusive; it could consider peasants and indigenous people as main actors in the rural scenario. The land reform strategy could be designed from the bottom to the top and consider the diversity of the rural communities. The land market has a role in land reform in order to allow the mobility and transference of land according to the uses and customs of the peasants and indigenous people.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Land and the agrarian question have been fundamental issues in Mexican history. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, peasants and indigenous people have fought to have access to land and to regain control over their territories (Tunino 1990; Reyna 1980). Due mainly to land dispossession stemming from the liberal agrarian policies of the 19th century, the peasantry fought in the Revolution of 1910-17 in order to regain access to land. For over 70 years, agrarian reform has been a major political issue in Mexico. Land redistribution involved about 100 million hectares, slightly more than 50 percent of the national territory.² This land was distributed to nearly 3 million peasants, ejidatarios and comuneros, organized into 26,796 ejidos and 2,366 agrarian communities (Sector Agrario 1997). The agrarian process was generally carried out by the state, as part of the political bargaining with the peasantry and their organizations, in order to co-opt them and to keep the official political party in power. According to John Tunino (1990, p.22), “[T]he peasantry have fought for land and liberty, but they got land and the state instead.”

1982 represented a turning point in Mexican politics. The financial crisis due to the fall in gas prizes and the excessive foreign debt forced the government to subordinate the national political economy to the designs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The new paradigm was called neoliberalism, which, in essence, calls for reducing the direct involvement of the state in the economy and the enforcement of a free market system as a better way to regulate socioeconomic behavior. According to this belief, land in Mexico, regardless of its type of tenure, should be ruled by supply and demand and be open to any potential national or foreign investor. Government intervention should be kept to a minimum.

The Mexican government has taken actions to build a scenario like the one mentioned above. In 1992, it drastically changed the Mexican Constitution (Salinas 1992), and Article 27 on agrarian and territorial issues was modified substantially. Among the main changes were:

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²The private sector has just 64 million hectares.

- the end of land redistribution via agrarian reform, and the elimination of the rural communities' right to demand access to land. Both issues represented a unilateral resignation of the Mexican state to the social contract established as a result of the Mexican Revolution. They also implied the disappearance of one of the main factors used by the state to co-opt rural social movements and to obtain political votes in favor of the official party the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). From now on, whoever wanted a piece of land would have to buy it on the open market;
- corporate institutions, which were previously prohibited to own land in order to curb land concentration, could now own up to 25 times more land than any individual producer;
- the ejidatarios agrarian rights, previously given on a family basis, were now individualized;
- ejidatarios could privatize their land.

These changes give an approximate idea of the rural scenario that was pursued (see Levy and van Wijnbergen 1991; Téllez 1993). Inefficiencies in the agricultural sector were blamed on the peasantry, ejidos, the collective usufruct, and the minifundio³ (see Morett 1991; Cebreros 1990). The new agrarian strategy implied a radical change in the entrepreneurial and land tenure patterns, where the idea is to “modernize” the agricultural sector at the pace set up by NAFTA in order to become part of the global village according to principles of comparative advantage (see Salcedo 1992).

In this “modernized” rural Mexico, the government seemed to see no room for the peasantry, except as cheap laborers, and there seemed no room for “inefficient” commercial private producers either. If these rural actors wanted to survive, they had to be competitive within the international market (Téllez 1994). Recent government visions of rural Mexico tend to be more inclusive, especially after direct foreign investment—the preconceived driving force of modernization in agriculture—has not flowed into the country as expected.

The need to reactivate agricultural production requires recalling the “non profitable” agricultural producers into the scenario. The impact of the neoliberal political economy in the countryside has become a main concern for Mexican society, the uprising of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN) in 1994 being the most notable example of the resulting social pressure (see Diego 1997).

Although there is no consensus about rural policy among the different *camarillas*⁴ of decision-makers in the Mexican government, an important number favor reinforcing peasant agriculture, arguing that peasant land markets should play a vital role in the improvement of the land tenure

³The literal translation of minifundio would be smallholding. However, if translated, the Mexican political and economic connotation of the term would be lost.

⁴The camarilla is an extended informal closed political group loyal to a particular high Mexican politician (see Camp Roderic 1970).

pattern in peasant and indigenous communities.⁵ Any agrarian policy of land redistribution through the market must better understand the logic and functioning of peasant land markets.

II. ALTERNATIVE LAND REFORMS ASSISTED BY THE MARKET

Agrarian reform and land redistribution in less economically developed countries (LEDCs) has been fundamentally a product of peasant agrarian social movements, and subsequently a vital issue in the economic development strategy imposed by the Alliance for Progress and by the World Bank in the 1960s and 1970s (IBDR 1975). In countries such as Mexico and Bolivia, initial stages of land redistribution were in peasant hands; however, sooner or later the state apparatus got control of the process with different aims in mind: to legitimize itself in power, to obtain the political backing of the rural population, and in most cases to undermine the redistribution of land and to favor the interests of *hacendados* and rural elites (see Thiesenhusen 1989; Dorner 1992; Chonchol 1994). For critics of the agrarian reform strategy:

Programs of agrarian reform carried out in Latin America, whose main objective was to provide land to the peasantry in order to solve problems of equity and productive efficiency and to modernize agriculture, have not succeeded in fulfilling their goals. Reasons are diverse, among them it is worth mentioning that programs for the provision of inputs and services for agriculture were channeled more towards the commercial sector of agriculture than to the beneficiaries of land reform and that the slow pace and the bureaucratic processes of land redistribution hindered to a great extent the success of the implementation of agrarian reform programs. . . . [I]t is important to stress that the lack of political will to implement the agrarian reform was related to the strong political power of the proprietary classes, that normally seek possibilities of direct and/or indirect benefits intrinsic to the property of land. (Reydon and Ramos 1996, pp. 22-23)

Due to the deficiencies mentioned about the agrarian reform carried out by “interventionist” states, the supranational organizations have made alternative proposals in order to restructure land tenure patterns through the open market. The agrarian reform assisted by the market has resulted in opposite strategies. Both are already being implemented in different countries. In Mexico, Peru, and Chile it is expected (1) to incorporate all land within a unique market, (2) to change the pattern of the entrepreneurial structure in favor of better market responsive actors, (3) to eliminate the corporate and collective usufruct of land, as is the case with the ejido, in favor of individual private property, (4) to eliminate the *minifundio*, in favor of big, capital intensive commercial enterprises, and (5) to open up the land market to international private investment. According to this strategy, most peasants should end up transferring their land to private entrepreneurs in tune with the neoliberal paradigm (for the Mexican strategy see Téllez 1994; for Peru see Mejía 1990; for Chile see Jarvis 1989). The only hope for the peasantry, according to this logic, is to be “refunctionalised” as rural laborers. Paradoxically, it is said that they will eventually increase their income and their quality of life after losing their land and after assuming a

⁵In Mexico the social land tenure system is composed of the Ejido: a land based organization product of the land redistribution of the agrarian reform and the comunidades agrarias product of the government’s recognition of indigenous people ancestral rights.

subordinated role in worldwide competitive and efficient private enterprises (an argument advanced by Levy and van Wijnbergen 1991).

The other side of the agrarian reform assisted by the market, also proposed by the World Bank (South Africa seems to be a good example of this) involves an opposite path (Van Zil, et al. 1995). This other strategy gives peasants and the rural population the possibility to obtain land so that they can become productive rural actors, and it involves dismantling large commercial farms and distributing land into smallholdings, with the aim of increasing the internal market, as well as generating new sources of self employment in order to improve the pattern of income distribution.⁶

For some international organizations, agrarian reform assisted by the market represents a solution to some negative effects from stabilization plans and structural adjustment. Even if the withdrawal of the state, elimination of subsidies, deregulation of the market, and open trade are seen as fundamental measures for the mid-term solution to LEDCs political and economic problems, these organizations also recognize that these measures create in some countries (like South Africa) a deep crisis in the agricultural sector that produces: (1) a generalized drop in production, (2) a decrease in private investment in agriculture, (3) a wave of bankruptcy in the agricultural sector, (4) a sharp decrease in the demand for land, (5) a generalized drop in the price of land, (6) a growing demand for pardoning financial debts of agricultural producers, and (7) the worsening of rural poverty and the nutritional situation of the population (Van Zil 1995). It is said that agrarian reform assisted by the market can solve some of these problems by alleviating the financial crisis of entrepreneurial agricultural actors by creating an attractive land market and self-employment opportunities via land redistribution.

In Mexico, the political will favors large capital entrepreneurs; they have more room for maneuvering with high government officials. The peasantry and the indigenous communities are seen as leftover from the past, elements that have to be removed from the productive scenario as part of the cost of modernization. Externally, there is pressure to reach competitiveness at international standards so that Mexico finally becomes part of the global village and gains its place as an OECD member. There is a policy to attract transnational companies to rural areas with the idea is that modernization of the countryside will follow.

Apart from favoring large capital intensive enterprises, there are attempts to return the peasantry to the productive scenario, at least in marginal and rain-fed regions. For some decision-makers it is urgent to include in Mexican economic policy almost 25% of the population which happens to live in the countryside and to make their living from agriculture. The agrarian policy for rural actors does not seem to consider their forced proletarianization anymore but rather their strengthening as peasant minifundio in an environment that has not proved very attractive for private investment.

⁶ Other international organizations, like FAO, have made similar proposals: an agrarian reform via land market that favors peasant minifundio. Colombia represents one of the best examples of this strategy(see FAO 1994).

III. RATIONALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN PEASANT LAND MARKETS

In Mexico, land cannot be seen as simple merchandise or factor of production. Land forms part of the strategy for survival of the peasantry, but it is also a main factor in shaping the rural power structure. It is strongly related to the collective imagination and the individual and social identity of the peasantry and indigenous people. The sense of belonging and the need for space also changes the meaning of agrarian issues to territorial ones, embracing elements of autonomy and sovereignty that are beyond its commoditization. All these issues are relevant to understanding peasant land markets.

From the neoclassic perspective, it is difficult to find a convincing answer about the main determinants of land markets in Mexico. The price of land is not set solely by supply and demand forces since there are few information channels open to buyers and sellers. Land markets also tend to be quite selective in social terms, depending to a great extent on non-economic criteria. In schematic terms, it is possible to conceive of at least two different rationalities: that of the peasant and indigenous people, and that of the capitalists. These rationalities imprint a diverse meaning and a distinct dynamic to different land markets.

For the peasantry, land transactions are determined by the conception they have of land as a multifaceted space used for production and as a place to live. For them, land also means territory, the foundation of their history and their social identity. From this perspective, the final determination of peasant decisions over land transactions is not the “implacable” logic of the free market but a series of subjective internal evaluations confronted with a dominant economic rationality. Peasant rationality embraces market rationality, but under distinct meanings. It follows the rural communities mobility and distinct forms of organization. This implies that the market is seen not only as the expression of economic exchanges of merchandise—land—but as a sociohistorical process of transactions, power relations, and different strategies of different rural actors. It is in this sense that land markets can be mentioned in plural, since they respond to imperfect patterns built from distinct political, economic, social, and cultural logics, at the same time that they form part of a complex social totality.

A. LAND AND POWER RELATIONS

Land markets, as historical constructions, represent a particular development of social relations and power structures within rural communities. Studying land transactions, and especially the actors involved and their relations, is relevant to understanding the role of these markets in the development of the rural society.

The social subjects appropriate the territory in a physical, symbolic, and political sense. They establish market relations, but they understand them as an arena of social confrontations, of conflicts and alliances. The economic domain corresponds to a power structure. This domain has its foundations in land; therefore, the transactions of this quasi-merchandise involve extra-economic elements that can overpoliticize land markets (Sereni 1980).

The gestures of tradition, the symbols of power and the investiture that land grants to the individual and to the domestic unit gives prestige and influence that cannot be expressed in purely economic terms. For Theodor Shanin (1976), “[L]and signifies power and, reciprocally, power is

often transferred to land and therefore to its proprietor.” That is why the sense and amount of land transactions are modified, as in the cases where the sale or the rent of a plot of land can include the weight of extra-economic coercion. Land transactions are an important part of social relations behind which stand different actors with their interests and means to achieve those interests.

B. CYCLIC TIME AND PEASANT LOGIC

One of the difficulties in research on peasant land markets is that they are generally based on a conceptual framework that does not correspond to peasants’ rationality and concept of time. They leave aside the study of cycles of social life and of units of production (qtd. in Shanin 1983). In order to understand the dynamics of peasant land markets, it is relevant to focus on the cyclic conception of time and on the temporal dimension of events. These are some of the main differences between the cosmic vision and the archetypes of thought between “modern” humankind and the peasantry (Eliade 1970).

The intrinsic cyclic behavior of most peasant activities, as well as their cosmic vision, imprints their mark on the cyclic mobility of land. “So, for a time one peasant unit will raise its socioeconomic consideration in a peasant community, and after reaching a certain level, it will suffer a decline. Years later, the same peasant unit, after reaching its lowest productive level, could begin to move upwards again and it will start all over again” (Shanin 1973, p. 112).

C. LAND AND THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION

For the peasantry, land represents a vital source of food, a territorial space, a source of power and prestige ingrained in the social structure; but land is also inseparable from the cosmogony that gives the peasantry their particular individual and social identity. In this sense, the peasant conception of land is anchored not only in production or in power structure, but in the collective imagination that has its greatest expressions in myths, rites, popular religion, and folklore. For the peasantry, the sacred land is not precisely localized in the ground. It is interwoven in the unity of all rites that are carried out around land, as a receptacle of sacred and diffused forces. In a religious way, land represents a gift where territory, landscape, and nature constitute a cosmic unity, a fundamental and sacred good, a giver of life. This is why peasants are linked to the cosmic medium in a more complete way than the modern and profane mentality can conceive (Eliade 1970).

D. NATIONAL LAW AND JUDICIAL FOLKLORE

In a peasant community, the norms that order every transaction, and especially those that have to do with land, are the product of a sort of syncretism between the formal state legislation and a local repertoire crystallized in cultural manifestations. “Judicial” folklore acquires shape through symbols expressed in myths, rites, and images that form part of the decision-making of daily life (Delpech 1992).

Judicial folklore does not necessarily imply a vague adaptation of stereotyped or apparently petrified, autarkic, and archaic formulas. On the contrary, it can refer to lively forms of internal and external elements, including laws. The development of internal rules and regulations of a peasant community implies the arbitration between distinct logics and rationalities: (1) the external judicial system and the internal uses and customs, (2) the communal interests and the individual ones, (3) the public domain and the private one.

In this judicial dimension of peasant communities, consuetudinary practices acquire life and are constantly re-elaborated according to new situations. This simultaneous process of continuity and change allows peasant norms and regulations to survive and sometimes to transcend the judicial system supported by the national constitutions. Norms of conduct are generally formalized in constitutions and codified in laws; however, these norms may not reflect adequately the interests, behavior, and judgment of significant social actors like the peasantry that tend to be guided more by uses and customs than by written national laws, which generally do not take them into account or have been enacted and modified against their interests. In extreme cases, the uses and customs of peasant communities can be in open conflict with the judicial norms established by the state.

The confrontation of diverse rationalities tends to be the norm: “[F]or plenty of peasant societies, the law tends to represent something imposed externally, tailored according to the interests, rationality, and ideology of other social actors that have more political and economic power. On the other hand, peasants live under an intricate consuetudinary structure that expresses their subjective historical construction as well as their strategies for survival” (Shanin 1973, p. 299).

Land markets tend to be locally regulated by a mixture of national legislation and judicial folklore. Each corresponds to a different correlation of power relations and to a distinct logic and historical construction. Each local and regional land market is bound to be characterized by these diverse situations that have to be taken into account in view of this diversity.

E. LAND AND TERRITORY

Land, more than merchandise or factor of production, is a strong referent of identity (Lenkersdorf 1996). It represents the recognition of social authority, and it is a patrimony, a place of residence, a source of status, and a foundation of the local and regional power structure. The process of socioterritorial legitimization and the intervention of power relations can be seen through social controls, the actors involved, and the amount of land transactions.

Land is conceived as a patrimony of the domestic unit. It also tends to represent the basis of their identity and a sense of belonging to their communities. History and territorial ancestral domains are commonly used by the peasantry as a political argument in order to defend and recover what they consider the foundation of their land: territory, sovereignty, and a sense of homeland.

For the peasantry and especially for the indigenous people, land means territory, the space where power relations take place, not just as a form of domination, but also as a process of forming social structures. The politicization of these relations in the land markets explains why in some rural communities land tends to be sold to local people, people they know, and denied to outsiders. In a sense, whoever gains access to land is also acquiring power within a community, which in exchange might be losing part of its territoriality.

In this respect, peasant and indigenous communities tend to relate the survival of the community to the social limits that they must exert in the land markets. This means that it might be socially acceptable for an individual to sell land to an outsider, provided the territoriality of the community is not left at stake. If the transaction involves risking territorial integrity, an apparent peaceful and passive community can react fiercely in order to avoid being obliterated by external and powerful actors (Stephen and Pisa 1994).

IV. PEASANT LAND MOBILITY AND LAND MARKETS IN MEXICO

Land mobility in peasant communities is related to inheritance patterns and to lending land as part of political and social subjective values. The pledge of land tends to be quite common in peasant and indigenous communities as a form of building patron/client relationships and paying debts. Partly as a response to the agricultural crisis at the beginning of the 70s, up to 55% of ejido land was leased as mainly irrigated land in different regions of the country (Gutelman 1981). Twenty years later, at the beginning of the 1990s, the “illegal” market transactions, although difficult to quantify, were estimated at around 50% of the best ejido and communal land (Martinez, et al. 1990). Therefore, legal changes will certainly modify the rhythm and modalities of land markets, but they cannot be the main incentive for them since these markets have been part of daily life in peasant communities for decades.

Ejido land, before the 1992 agrarian reform, was usually sold locally to other members of the community. There were no formal contracts. The arrangements were made verbally, and the transactions were formalized at the *asamblea general de ejidatarios* (general assembly of ejidatarios), and they were usually legalized years later by the *estudio de usufructo parcelario* (study of parcel usufruct), carried out by representatives of the *Secretaria de la Reforma Agraria* (SRA, or Ministry of Agrarian Reform).

Temporary market transactions are of a different kind: renting, lending and different modes of sharecropping like the *mediería*⁷ and the *siembra al tercio*.⁸ The temporary land transfers are usually handled directly between tenant and sharecropper. The rent in cash is usually present in good quality irrigated land, as well as in grassland in some regions. Sharecropping is more common in rain-fed areas dedicated to produce staples. Lending land is more related to patron/client relationships between the peasantry and their relatives, as well as relevant political and social actors.

A. LOGIC AND REASONS FOR LAND INHERITANCE

The logics of land inheritance are related to maintaining domestic units of production. At present, logics of inheritance in Mexican rural regions tend to be complex due to the survival strategies of each domestic unit, as well as to gender, age, variety of productive activities, and place of

⁷Form of sharecropping that implies some investment by the landholder and the equal share of the harvest.

⁸Form of sharecropping that does not require any effort from the part of the holder; all the effort is made by the individual that leases the land; the landholder receives a third of the harvest.

residence. These scenarios, when studied within a structural approach in order to establish some general patterns on land inheritance, may be self-limiting. Understanding “multiple choice” decision-making, around land mobility via inheritance in Mexican rural areas, implies adopting an actor-oriented approach, starting from the individual, the family and the domestic unit, within a communal and regional scenario; in other words, seeking coherence within diversity. In this way, it will be easier to understand the logics and reasons that drive individuals to designate members in the family or outside it as inheritors.

In order to illustrate the concepts above, it is convenient to elaborate on the factors that influence the logics of land inheritance in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. One could start by mentioning the different land tenure systems that might exist in any rural community. Most of them have private land as well as ejido land. Some also have *bienes comunales*. These different systems are distinct from the designation of inheritors. In the case of private land, it can be inherited by only one son, generally the eldest male, in a similar fashion as the *mayorazgo*. A more generalized pattern is for all male children to inherit, and when women do not receive dowry at marriage, all children, regardless of gender, might inherit a plot of land.

In the case of ejido land, the law only allows for one inheritor, generally a male, although not necessarily the oldest son. In some communities, though, the head of the domestic unit might disregard the agrarian law and give an inheritance to more than one son with the *parcela ejidal*. This situation can be informally recognized inside the unit, or may be somehow validated with the help of a public notary. However, until now, these inheritances are not officially validated by the *Registro Agrario Nacional*.

The use of land is another element that adds to the complexity over whom should inherit agricultural land. In the case of the *milpa*,⁹ leaving the land to a woman implies condemning it to be let or left idle. This is not only related to the capacity of women to cultivate the *milpa*, but to the uses and customs of some communities which do not consider it proper for a woman to cultivate the *milpa* on her own. If, on the other hand, land is planted with coffee or fruit trees, then the inheritance criteria tends to change due to the fact that both activities can be carried out by all members of the domestic unit. Therefore, a coffee plantation or a fruit orchard may be left in inheritance to a woman since both types of crop will guarantee some income.

Another relevant factor for the logics of inheritance could be the location of the land in relation to the urban settlement, main roads, irrigation, and other means of access. If the plot of land is further away from town, and if it is more inaccessible, the designation of the inheritor will tend to favor the male part of the domestic unit, since it is assumed that a woman would have problems tilling the land and carrying the harvest to the nearest road or urban settlement.

Patterns of permanent and temporary migration also influence who inherits land. In the case of ejido land, before the reforms of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution in 1992, it was considered a risk to name as a successor a member of the domestic unit that was not a resident in town. This fact on its own could imply the withdrawal of *derechos agrarios* (agrarian rights), whenever the representative of the SRA, the *promotores agrarios*, arrived in town to carry out an

⁹The *milpa* can be just a maize crop, or it can be a mixture of maize with either beans, hot pepper, cucumber, and other horticultural crops.

estudio de usufructo parcelario. In such a case, the successor had to be a member of the domestic unit that lived most of the time in the community.

The age of the ejidatario is another relevant factor in this complicated matrix of particularized logics. Young men tend to give the inheritance to one of their sons. They assume that any of them will take care of the mother if the father dies. In this way, they guarantee that the land will stay within the control of the domestic unit. If the wife is young, it is almost certain that sooner or later she will find another partner. Therefore, if she inherits the land, it will fall under the control of the male newcomer and the land will go out of the patrilineal domain.

An important factor that is generally ignored in the research on land mobility via inheritance is the degree of confidence that the male ejidatario might have in each of the members of the domestic unit. In some cases, one will have blind faith in his partner. In others he will believe that once he passes away she will go to live with another man and his children's heritage could be at stake. Therefore, the present landholder will tend to deposit the main productive resources, as well as the survival responsibility of the domestic unit, with the son or daughter in whom he has more confidence, regardless of that child's age or gender or whether he or she is the first born.

The process of getting rich or poor for a domestic unit is also relevant in terms of inheritance patterns. If a domestic unit accumulates capital, then the tendency will be to give land to everyone, despite their place of residence. In this way, one son is left as the formal successor to the *parcela ejidal*, while others receive other *parcelas ejidales* bought in the informal market of ejido land, and some others receive plots of land which are bought in the private land market of the community. Planting coffee or fruit trees on some of the land, or having irrigated and well-located land, aside from the economic benefits, will also influence the possibility of leaving a patrimony to the female members of the unit.

Holding urban land is also relevant to the members of a domestic unit being full members of the community. Even those who reside elsewhere need a place to arrive when they come to participate in the town festivities or to visit relatives. It is also important to provide them with roots and an identity so that they keep belonging to the community, and a place to return when they get old and need a place to die and be buried.

B. PRIVATE AND SOCIAL PEASANT LAND MARKETS

In peasant and indigenous communities, ejido and communal land have been subjected to a scrutiny as intense as that of private land by the market forces. In ejidos, the *estudios de usufructo parcelario* and the *depuraciones censales* give evidence that a significant number of *cesiones de derechos* have been made between individuals of different surnames, giving evidence of "illegal" market transactions. In the domestic units that have prospered economically, it is quite common to find some of their members with *parcela ejidal* that was bought from other members of the community.

A significant difference in private and ejido land markets is that the first one admits the legal subdivision of land into small plots, while the *parcela ejidal* cannot be legally and formally subdivided. Therefore, the *parcelas ejidales* tend to participate in the market as whole units of land and stick to the *certificados agrarios o parcelarios*.

In some ejidos, time has revealed a pattern of land concentration by some prosperous individuals and domestic units of production. At the other extreme of the social structure, some individuals and domestic units have lost land, having from now on to obtain their means of survival from other sources.

There are other scenarios where the pattern of distribution of land tenure has widened since the *parcelas ejidales* have been “illegally” subdivided, and, furthermore, the collective land, most of it forestry and grassland in previous times, has been informally distributed to other members of the community who did not benefit from the *reparto agrario*. The private land has also gone through a process of concentration/fragmentation due to the fact that this type of land can be legally sold in parts and that the traditional forms of inheritance can establish explicitly the transmission of fragments of plots of land to each inheritor. Therefore, in relation to both types of land tenure, while in some rural communities the pattern of land tenure has changed from large- and medium-sized plots to small ones, in other communities the plot sizes have increased, and in still other communities both processes have taken place, pushing land tenure distribution aside.

C. PRICE DETERMINANTS OF LAND

One of the main differences between the private and the ejido land markets is the price of land. Ejido land is generally less expensive than private land due to the differences between a *parcela* received in usufruct and a private plot of land held in property. The differences are deeper when, in the case of the ejido land, there is a sense of insecurity in land tenure. It is worth mentioning that this feeling could be reversed once the subdivision of the land has been certified in some of the ejidos by PROCEDE.¹⁰ Private land market transactions are generally formalized by *contratos de compra-venta* that can be bought in any office supply store. Although they seem to work under uses and customs of rural communities, they could be quite useless to formally legalize land market transactions. The only way to do this is to register these transactions with a public notary, but notaries can be too expensive and, in addition, they belong to an alien world: *gente de razón*¹¹, people historically who have been abusive and even racist. Therefore, the tenancy of ejido land could eventually be considered as more secure than private land; due to this fact, it could reach a better price.

The price of land is also related to its quality and its capability to give consistently good harvests. In any rural community, there is good agricultural land and there are other lands of regular and bad quality that are generally used as grassland or forests. Some good land can give up to two harvests every year without the need of irrigation and with no fertilizer; other land will barely give one poor harvest per year.

¹⁰PROCEDE stands for *Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos*. It is the program in charge of setting up the legal boundaries between *parcelas ejidales*, and between ejidos and private properties. In the end it provides each ejidatario with a *certificado de derecho parcelario*.

¹¹In indigenous regions, the white and the mestizo that live in the urbanized towns and speak Spanish are called *gente de razón*.

The use of land, and the investment made by the holder, also significantly influences the price. A plot of irrigated land, good for growing melon for the international market, will involve labor to level the surface of the parcel, good accessible roads, and a secure provision of water which implies being near the main irrigation channels. In this case, a plot of irrigated land planted with coffee or fruit trees can reach up to three and four times the price of similar land dedicated to annual crops.

The nearness to the urban settlement and the accessibility to main roads is relevant to the price of a given piece of land. A plot of land far away from town will be more susceptible to thieves, and it will involve more time lost in transport. A plot of land that has a trail as its only access in a steep mountainous area will require strong shoulders to carry around 70 kilograms per trip of either inputs or agricultural products. Financial and other pressures of the seller are also factors that condition the price of land. It is not the same to offer a plot of land without any particular pressure than it is to offer it on the market under pressure due to a bad agricultural year or the need to finance the medical care of a relative; such situations can lower the price of land significantly.

The buyer position in the local and regional scenario is also quite relevant. In rural areas the property of land implies social status, and economic and political power. Actors that are improving their position and their power at local and regional levels are more likely to convince demeaned actors that will be unable to confront eager and powerful individuals interested in acquiring their property. Drug dealers are part of this rural elite. It is partly due to their demand for land in order to clean up their income that the price of land in some regions of Mexico has risen well over their productive potential. Paradoxically, outside buyers, no matter their economic power, will be asked to pay a higher price, and they will tend to be excluded from the local land markets due to the subjective territorial identity of the natives.

D. LAND RENT AND SHARECROPPING: THE *MEDIERÍA* AND THE *TERCIO*

The temporary, shared, or partial cession of land tenure is generally conditioned by the landholder's needs, amount of resources and time. The *mediería* is usually offered to the individual that rents when the one that offers the land has resources, inputs and manual labor to provide. The *tercio* implies that the landholder either does not have resources and inputs to offer, or he/she is not interested in providing anything for the cultivation of the parcel. Another reason could be that he/she might be satisfied with a third of the harvest from the land.

These two types of sharecropping are somehow conditioned by the specific crop that is about to be produced. When the transaction implies crops with a high cost of production, like horticultural crops, then the most common arrangement is the *mediería*, since the one that receives the land is generally unable to finance all the productive needs and therefore is in need of the owner's contribution.

In the case of coffee, sharecropping generally takes the form of the *tercio*. This is probably due to the overall profitability of this product and the lack of resources of the landowner to plant the coffee. In this case, the one that receives the land provides everything, including the plant, and receives as an exchange the right to harvest a third of the plants. The *milpa* can adopt any of the types of sharecropping according to the lender's needs for acquiring corn and the amount of

resources at his/her disposal. In the *mediería* he/she will have the right to harvest half of the cultivated land. In the *tercio* he will harvest the third of it.

A recent fashion is sharecropping uncultivated land, including land with natural vegetation, from ejidatarios and small private producers to other peasants. The main purpose here is to put the land to work in order to include it in the census of PROCAMPO.¹² Under this arrangement, the landholder will take the subsidy of PROCAMPO, as well as part of the product, while the one that receives the land will take a bigger portion of the harvest than in the *mediería*.

E. CONCLUSION

In the neoliberal paradigm of modernization for Mexico, constitutional agrarian changes have played an important role. Those favoring the changes see it as the beginning of the end of the post-revolutionary agrarian reform period and also as an alternative to democracy by dismantling not only the interventionist state but also its clientele relations with the society. The neoliberal paradigm claims that social conflict would be resolved through the free market as a matter among “equal” individuals. Unfortunately, the reality is that the uprising of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), which represented the tip of an iceberg of the agrarian, territorial and autonomic demands of the peasantry and indigenous people, shows that this simplistic and naive conception of social change is in trouble.

It is certain that most, if not all, modernization processes in the past have been made ruthlessly, with bloodshed and very high social cost. There is a more civilized and inclusive way of building an “alternative modernization” that should take into account the historical memory of a nation, not as a nostalgic ballast, but as a political process that considers the social subjective identity as a cultural root from which to grow. The state certainly has a role to play, not as an interventionist, as in the past, but as a supportive actor that devolves functions previously usurped from “the people.” In this sense, public policy, and not government policy, should spring out of the organized civic society, and it should be constructed in continuous negotiation among all the actors involved.

The modernization of Mexico, therefore, should be an inclusive process. The belief that the peasantry and the minifundio are economically inefficient has no factual evidence. On the contrary, there is worldwide evidence that under similar productive technologies, the smaller the plot size the bigger the productivity per unit of area (Heath 1992; Luisselli 1996). It is true that large-scale enterprises are more convenient for private entrepreneurs. In their logic, the Mexican government should promote large-scale agriculture, but this argument does not consider the real factors of production of Mexico, where there is a shortage of good agricultural land and there is a relative surplus of manual labor with about one quarter of the economically active population still

¹²PROCAMPO is a direct subsidy to each producer. It is set up according to the surface cultivated with maize and other main crops. It was introduced in order to counterbalance the withdrawal of indirect subsidies and the reduction of internal prices of staples. Today it is a direct subsidy to poverty stricken regions, and a new means of political legitimization by the government.

living within the agricultural sector¹³. The issue here for the government is to think in terms of national development, especially after the productive specialization in the agricultural sector, according to the principles of comparative advantage, has been called into question by the drastic reduction in worldwide food stocks in recent years. The need to reach self-sufficiency in some staples becomes more evident with time.

Agrarian reform that reinforces small-scale peasant agriculture should be in line with a productive strategy in favor of local and regional self-sufficiency or another strategy channeled toward the national and the international market. There is a need to support small rural producers within the market and the state. In relation to land tenure, this strategy can be locally reconverted through the market in favor of small rural producers, provided this process is supported and controlled by the state. In this reconversion, besides “market fundamentalism,” land redistribution by the state should not be eliminated, especially if this redistributive process is devolved in part to the social actors as part of their autonomic and territorial demands. The agrarian policy has to take into account other rural actors like the large-scale private producers and even the investment of foreign capital in agriculture. These actors, though, should be conditioned according to the development needs of the rural society.

Although it is possible to observe some trends in the agrarian and land market situation, the complexities and the diverse expression at the local level imply that agrarian and territorial policies should be formulated from such diversity instead of denying it or subordinating it to grand designs conceived at the top of the bureaucratic structure. Land cannot move around. Therefore, it is possible to implement a diverse and differentiated agrarian and land market strategy that allows room for maneuvering in decision-making at the local and regional levels.

These diverse and bottom up agrarian and land market strategies need a proper understanding of the logics and rationalities of all the actors involved, among them, the peasantry, indigenous people and private entrepreneurs. For the peasantry and the indigenous people, land mobility and land transactions are influenced by a net of determinants related to economic needs, survival strategies, power relations, subjective historical constructions that form part of their identity, and territorial and autonomic needs. The particular manifestation of these determinants makes land a more complex concept than simple merchandise.

Land markets involve the economic domain, but they are also an arena for social confrontation, of conflicts and alliances, where the local and regional power structure manifests itself. The peasant conception of land also belongs to the collective imagination expressed in the form of myths, rites, popular religion and judicial folklore, where land is also a main factor in the formation of social identity. For most rural communities, land means also territory, the vital space where they can exercise their autonomy. Land markets are greatly determined by all these elements that shape the logics and the rationalities of the peasantry and the indigenous communities.

Peasant lands markets are as active as commercial ones. They are not removed from economic rationality, but they are more complex. Land mobility by inheritance and land markets are diverse and heterogeneous depending on factors such as: the meaning of social territoriality, the relevance

¹³ Even if this population wanted to move to another activity for good, Mexican history has shown severe limitations within the other economic sectors in generating sources of employment.

of land in peasant identity, the type of land tenure, the role of land in the survival strategies of the domestic units, the status and real power of interested parties in the market scenario, the actual use and the potential use of land, the land quality, the parcel accessibility, the resource and financial disposability of both parties, and so on. This complexity around land markets expresses itself in diverse ways in local and regional scenarios and, therefore, has to be taken into account at precisely these levels in the establishment of political and economic policies for the countryside.

During integration of the Mexican economy with the North American regional market, national projects cannot be reduced to economic variables related to markets of products, money, technology, or land. Neither can they be solely associated with fragmented and decontextualized concepts like the comparative advantage and productive efficiency in a global framework where the principles of the free market are not really present. It is necessary, as a counterpart to the homogeneous tendency, to conceive alternatives directly from the social subjects that embrace the origins of the building of culture, identity, and nation such as within the rural world typified by peasant communities.

This civilizing project cannot be instantaneous. It is certainly impractical to try to achieve it mainly through government programs. This other way of achieving social change has to be derived from a cultural strategy, from multiple social constructions through an exercise of democratic practices, and from a national unity that recognizes and is enriched by diversity and tolerance.

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