

Fantasy and Reality in Restructuring Mexico's Land Reform*

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Introduction

In 1992, the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari modified Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution in what most commentators saw as a decisive attempt to tackle the enduring problems of the country's land reform agriculture. The amendments did two basic things. Firstly, they set the legal seal on the principle that there was no more land in Mexico to redistribute to the landless. The only possible exceptions would be in cases where private proprietors held land in excess of the legal maximum, or where land was confiscated by the state from delinquents such as drug traffickers. Secondly, the amendments changed the nature of land tenure. Up to this point, the state had retained ultimate title to the land, and peasant beneficiaries of land reform simply enjoyed rights of use. These were transferred on their deaths or incapacity to a nominated successor (who would normally be their spouse in the first instance). In the event of no successor being available, land would revert to the agrarian community for redistribution to a landless claimant. In legal theory, land reform land was inalienable and could not even be rented to a third party on a long term basis.

In practice, the agrarian law was widely abused, and one justification for reforming it was that it was beneficial to regularise *de facto* practices. The fact that reform sector land was not legally alienable made it impossible for land reform farmers to obtain finance from the private sector, since they could not use land as collateral. The old system was said to sustain peasant farmers' dependence on a paternalistic state, inhibit economic rationality, and make them prey to the manipulations of corrupt officials and the local bosses called *caciques* who have proved such an enduring feature of Mexican rural life. Under the new rules, farmers would obtain definitive title to their land and total security as full proprietors. This, it was argued, would make it possible for them to become more productive.

Critics of the reform immediately responded that it was a recipe for the wholesale privatisation of the land reform communities, called *ejidos*. It would lead to the rapid concentration of land as poor peasants sold their plots, and the consolidation of large-scale capitalist farms. The conventional rhetoric spoke of the return of the *latifundios*, the great estates whose expropriation was supposedly one of the positive achievements of the 1910 Revolution. The critics tended to combine this emotional theme with equally emotional talk of a massive new wave of migration to the cities—eleven million people thrown onto an urban labour market in which job creation was not even keeping pace with the existing urban birth rate. Advocates of the reform retorted that this was hysterical nonsense. In the first place, the legislative changes did not even lead directly to the abolition of the *ejidos* and the transformation of land into individual private property. The first step of the reform was a programme of certification of individual rights to farm plots, common land and urban lots, the PROCEDA,¹ which was put in the hands of a new federal government office created for the purpose, the Procuraduría Agraria.² After certification, there would have to be a majority

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¹ Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos.

² The creation of a new ministry was designed to increase peasant confidence in the certification process given the long-standing history of corruption on the part of the Secretariat of Agrarian Reform (SRA) bureaucracy and also to ensure that the federal government exercised greater control over the newly created corps of officials.

vote in the ejidal assembly before proceeding to full privatisation with the registration of the plots with the National Agrarian Registry (RAN). Clearly, there are various means by which "majorities" can be engineered, and no protection for the interests of substantial minorities in these proposals, but data available so far do not indicate a massive leap towards full privatisation. Secondly, advocates of reform argued that the new legislation freed peasant agriculture from the dead hand of state intervention which had manifestly failed to produce genuine "development". Farmers could now engage in joint ventures with foreign as well as domestic agribusiness companies which would provide either the capital or the jobs of which they had been starved for so long. Thirdly, from the point of view of the nation as a whole, including low income urban and rural consumers, it was quite obvious that many peasant farmers were not productive, so that a certain degree of triage seemed beneficial to a society in which they were now only a minority.

This kind of argument clearly abstracts from the question of the extent to which the problems of Mexican peasant agriculture are an historical product of both state economic policies and a systematic plundering and decapitalisation of the more productive branches of the sector by the holders of formal and informal political power. What I want to stress particularly in this discussion is that economics cannot be separated from politics. This seems a particularly important issue given that a great deal of the rhetoric of neoliberal reformers seems to be premised on the idea that private business and the market can somehow operate in a sphere that is outside politics and non-economic power relations. Even in terms of a more orthodox perspective on economic issues and social costs and benefits, the "productionist" approach to the question of *ejido* reform seems absurdly narrow: it abstracts, for example, from the relationship between the *ejido* and labour markets which are transnational in scope and from the synergies which developed in Mexico between the *ejido* sector, private agro-industrial capital and more diversified small-town economies. But if we are interested in the purely empirical question of how peasants are reacting to the reform process and what they might do to modify the expected economic and political outcomes of the reform, we do need to look beyond economics.

In addressing the question of why people might be willing to defend their *ejidos*, anthropologists have emphasised that the *ejido* is more than a land tenure institution or a means of organising agricultural production, that it can have cultural and political meanings and broader social functions. It can mean different things even to different members of the same community, depending on wealth, status, age or gender (Stephen, 1994; Goldring, 1996; Zendejas and Mummert, 1996). In the messy world of local politics, regional factional in-fighting and conflicts between regional and extra-regional interests, many different kinds of alliances can prove expedient to competing groups. Conserving the *ejido* as an institution in one form or another can be attractive to the relatively powerful as well as the powerless in at least some contexts. In addressing the actual mechanics of the rural reform process itself, anthropologists have also tended to highlight the enormous gaps which have always existed between legal theory and on the ground realities and practice, and the way that the implementation of state bureaucratic projects is mediated by the micro-politics of bureaucrats' interactions with local people (Nuijten, 1995). I will have a little more to say on some of these issues at the end of the paper, but I want to concentrate on a more general level of discussion rather than dwell on community-level case studies because that seems the best way to emphasise the way the *ejido* reform needs to be set in the context of a much broader discussion of the economics and politics of Mexico's brand of neoliberalism.

"Political Economy"

From the urban technocratic viewpoint, reforming the land reform is essentially a matter of boosting farm productivity and reducing the burdens of farm support on the taxpayer. Even in official circles it is, however, widely recognised that much of the land reform sector peasantry occupies land that is beyond the marginal of commercial cultivation, though it may not be unattractive to cattle ranchers. The most recent effort to produce a typology of Mexico's land reform farmers is Gustavo Gordillo and Alain de Janvry's work (De Janvry,

Gordillo and Savroulet 1997). This is based on 1988 and 1990 survey data on 2,582,000 *ejidatarios*, 87% of the total number of land reform sector producers holding an individual plot and declaring their principle activity as farming (see Figures 1 and 2). It highlights the fact that, in 1990, only around 15% could be said to be making anything approaching a living as farmers, although it also identifies a group of producers who use their land mainly to grow pasture for cattle which are their main source of livelihood.

Typology of Ejidatarios

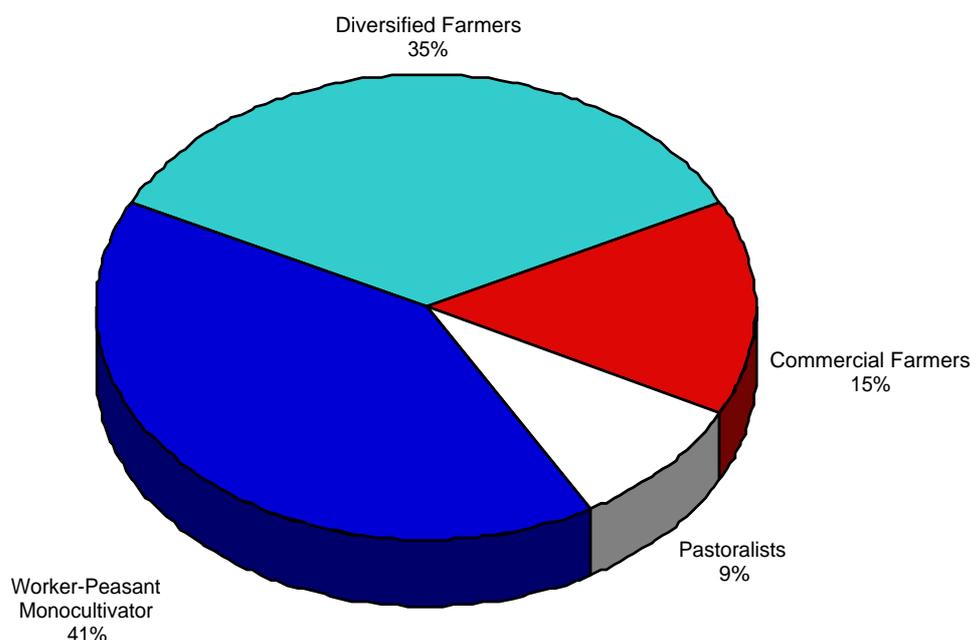


Figure 1 (Source: Draft Version of de Janvry, Gordillo and Sadoulet 1997)

What the charts do not show is that even under 1990 conditions, there was a process of what Teodor Shanin has termed “multi-directional mobility” between the first two categories. This highlights the already precarious situation of most *ejido* families in the wake of 1980s structural adjustment policies. Developments since 1990 have had a devastating impact not only on the incomes of the poor majority but on the position of the better-off 15%.

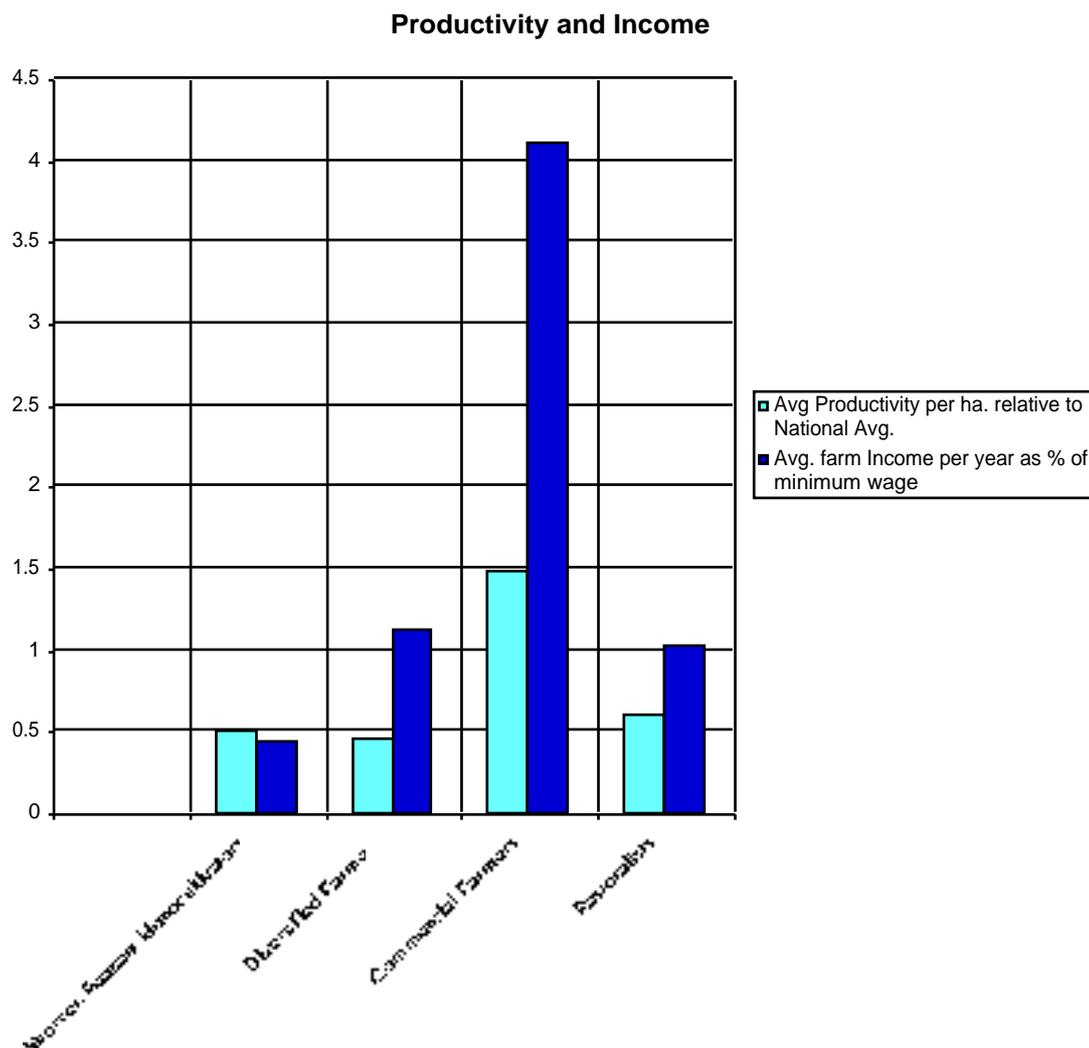


Figure 2 (Source: Draft Version of de Janvry, Gordillo and Sadoulet 1997)

The charts do give a preliminary window onto *ejidatarios* as economic actors. But in the popular imagination, land reform is about social justice and social dignity. Although there is some scope for dialogue across this divide in terms of the discourse of social policy and poverty alleviation, the attempt to remove the legal basis for land redistribution has proved much more controversial than was anticipated because it has become strongly entangled with the issue of the rights of Mexico's indigenous peoples. The catalyst for this was, of course, the Chiapas rebellion of January 1994, but the issue is much broader than Chiapas. The low intensity war which characterised Chiapas throughout the period of dialogue with the government has now spread to the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and the Huasteca region of San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo and Veracruz.

These patterns of conflict need to be related to both agrarian conditions and to the regional political systems which shape both the agrarian conditions and the way local elites respond to peasant protest. The heartland of the Zapatista rebellion, the region of Las Cañadas, is a zone of colonisation populated by former plantation workers from a variety of indigenous groups (Leyva Solano, 1995). The colonists were able to recreate peasant communities by securing grants of *ejido* land, but the development of their *ejidos* was restrained by the creation of forest and ecological reserves, accelerating the point at which population growth would outstrip available land. With limited migratory alternatives, and a strong sense of collective identity forged in opposition to the structures of class and ethnic oppression from which they had escaped, the new peasant communities of Las Cañadas

were fertile ground for agrarian mobilisation, particularly given the limited interest of the state elite in providing public services and development resources for supporting production and employment. It is significant that the government negotiators involved in the now suspended dialogue with the Zapatistas have persistently refused to discuss demands for abandonment of the changes to Article 27.

Elsewhere in Chiapas, and in parts of Oaxaca and the Huasteca, agrarian conflict is, however, more directly related to the coexistence of indigenous communities and disguised *latifundios*. President Zedillo has repeatedly claimed that the backlog of unresolved agrarian disputes throughout the country will be resolved before the end of his period of office. But this claim needs to be taken with a considerable pinch of salt. There is a discrepancy between the number of outstanding cases of land claims that Zedillo cites and figures issued by the Ministry of Agrarian Reform. The reduction in the Ministry's figures has largely been achieved by passing the cases to agrarian tribunals: this administrative sleight of hand enables the government to declare cases solved which are in effect still unresolved on the ground; it also obscures the fact that almost half the cases that have been decided by agrarian tribunals during his period of office have been decided against the peasant claimants (*Proceso* 1054, 12th January, 1997).

The peasants have good reason to be dissatisfied with these results. Consider the case of San Luis Postosí, where indigenous peasant militants staged a mass hunger strike to protest about the gap between Zedillo's rhetoric and on the ground reality. It is claimed that 150,000 hectares of disputed land remain in the hands of state and federal functionaries, including some of the most powerful figures in the land (*La Jornada*, 11th April, 1996). In Chiapas, where Zedillo declared an historic solution to the state's long-standing agrarian problems in March 1996, in the form of a programme to benefit 58,000 peasant claimants, the state governor responded with a programme to expel land invaders by force from 90,000 disputed hectares (*La Jornada*, March 24th, 1996). The first action after Zedillo's pronouncement was taken in defence of a property belonging to the fugitive financier Carlos Cabal Peniche, closely associated with the Salinas brothers and the controversial governor of Tabasco, Roberto Madrazo Pintado.³

These cases highlight some crucial realities which need to be considered in surveying Mexico's land reform. Firstly, we have the implications of the co-existence within Mexican agrarian structure of a private-property based agriculture and the *ejidos*. Even in the period of Mexico's most radical land reformer, Lázaro Cárdenas, who was president from 1934 to 1940, large properties and capitalist farmers were given important guarantees, and patterns of state investment after 1940 favoured the development of large-scale capitalist farming in the Northern Mexico. Political connections enabled landowners to control illegally large properties, and members of the political class at regional level throughout the country have been able to protect such properties.

Secondly, these problems are particularly explosive in the states which have large indigenous populations. *Latifundios* were not an important phenomenon in all areas prior to the Revolution, and there are other sources of agrarian conflict between communities, although even boundary disputes have a political dimension given the fact that the success of some communities in defending their interests is tied to their leaderships' relations with political actors above the community level. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the pervasive existence of illicit forms of land appropriation which are difficult to identify by standard bureaucratic procedures in the absence of detailed local knowledge. Mexican agrarian law recognises indigenous communal property as a third category of land tenure besides "small private property" and the *ejido*. As a number of anthropological studies have revealed (Schryer, 1990; Chevalier and Buckles, 1995), communal land tenure has very frequently served as a convenient cover for disguised private property holdings, especially by cattle ranchers. These holdings have been protected by local structures of village bossism and patron-client relations, though often at the cost of intense intra-communal factional conflict.

³ Madrazo has been accused of using drug money laundered by Cabal Peniche to meet electoral expenses wildly in excess of legal levels; his administration's reputation has also been tarnished by its treatment of Chontal Indians protesting against pollution caused by the national oil company PEMEX and more recently, hunger-striking refuse collectors. But he continues to enjoy unswerving federal support.

The massive bureaucratic intervention embodied in the PROCEDE should, theoretically, bring all these issues into the light of day. Yet even the most committed and irreproachable functionaries face real difficulties in adjudicating claims and counter-claims on the basis of the sedimented paper products of years of illegalities, leaving aside the political pressures and threats to personal security which can be brought to bear on them in rural locales not noted for the transparent application of the rule of law. The PROCEDE process made headway initially by taking unproblematic cases first: there is now a suspicion that the process is not removing the most glaring of existing injustices but ratifying them, and this will add to the already substantial investments federal and state governments are needing to make in rural social pacification.

Thirdly, it is extremely important to locate the ejido within regional systems of land tenure and class relations (Gledhill, 1995). In some areas, like the State of Mexico, most *ejidatarios* only hold tiny parcels of land, which were granted to them on the assumption that they would supplement an agricultural wage. In other regions, like the Ciénega de Chapala in western Michoacán, which is the birthplace of Lázaro Cárdenas, the best, irrigated, land went to *ejidos*, and it was private property that was restricted to the margins of the local agrarian regime. What didn't go to the peasants, for essentially political reasons, were the resources to make this land productive and escape dependence on either the state or private capital. The historical pattern here was massive land rental and the phenomenon known as *neolatifundismo*, where capitalist farms are created through rental of ejidal land by an emergent new agrarian bourgeoisie which fed off the land reform system. There are other regions where *ejidos* predominate and control prime quality resources whose agrarian history is rather more positive than that of the Ciénega, largely because the peasant communities were more strongly politically organised, but this only confirms the need to locate specific kinds of land reform communities in their regional social and political contexts.

What peasants can do politically is dependent on the alliances they can make in specific historical conjunctures with other regional social classes and political factions and with the agents of the national state, which has sometimes backed peasant demands in the interests of consolidating its own control over regional elites. Even the history of an individual *ejido* in a given region may be shaped by the particular political networks a particular local peasant leader can mobilise (Zendejas and Mummert, op.cit.). It is seldom possible to understand patterns of internal community social and economic differentiation without considering the role of forces and agents from outside the community in question. In the case of the Ciénega, for example, relatively rich *ejidatarios* and community bosses were often persons who acted initially as administrators for the *neolatifundists* and then became independent, able to maintain their own networks with politicians and sources of private finance.

These factors alone make it extremely difficult to talk about "the Mexican *ejido*" in general. There are many other social and cultural as well as economic factors which promote diversity in the *ejido*'s place in the regional landscape. But it is also essential to factor in change over time. Migration as a strategy of peasant household reproduction has had important cumulative social and political impacts on most kinds of peasant communities in Mexico, including many that would be regarded as relatively isolated and marginalised. The fact that the impoverished Huasteca was the site of a major peasant insurgency in the 1970s and is again manifesting high levels of militancy has a lot to do with its patterns of return migration from urban areas. Migration to the United States has also had crucial political impacts in various times and places, though its results are complex and in some cases provoke new forms of local agrarian conflict: for example, when unusually successful migrant families decide to turn land into dude ranches where they can relax while on holiday.

What is, however, clear as a general point of principle, is that contemporary rural communities are open to a wide variety of social, cultural and political influences and not closed social worlds. Most span the rural-urban divide because households depend on income streams from shifting and diversified migratory strategies, and some have become spatial components of transnational communities which organise themselves across the frontier between the United States and Mexico. In some of these transnational communities, both economic and political power at community level has increasingly gravitated towards

those who are most rooted in the North. If we add in the roles of both national and transnational NGOs in the current political landscape of the countryside, it becomes clear that globalisation has a very significant impact on the mobilising capacity of at least some segments of the Mexican rural population.

That is one reason why it may not be too easy to declare land reform and alternatives to private property an historical anachronism in Mexico. Others are the extreme difficulties people now face in finding employment in urban environments, despite a massive new "informalisation" of economic activity, and the enactment of yet more anti-immigrant measures in the United States. Nevertheless, there are also very powerful factors working against the success of piecemeal, "weapons of the weak" style resistance to the reform.

Agricultural crisis and the NAFTA

The amendment of Article 27 was only part of the Salinas de Gortari regime's effort to restructure Mexican agriculture as a whole. Phase One consisted of shock tactics: a reduction of public input subsidies, credits and price controls on imports which was clearly intended to eliminate as many unproductive peasant farmers from the market as possible. Deregulation did, however, have adverse consequences for private farmers as well. Although the overt pressure from the US side was to do something about Mexico's heavily subsidised land reform sector, it rapidly became clear that Salinas was willing to sacrifice the interests of the agricultural sector as a whole to get the NAFTA through Congress.

It was once relatively prosperous private sector farmers in Jalisco who founded what is now one of Mexico's most important social movements, the *El Barzón* debtors movement. *El Barzón* continues to grow in strength as successive government measures to restructure debts fail to do anything other than keep the banks solvent. Given the impact on the private sector, it is not surprising that shock tactics also devastated the 15% of ejidatarios that were considered viable commercial producers in Gordillo and De Janvry's analysis. My own research between 1991 and 1994 identified a clear pattern of richer peasants reducing their rental of land and switching to production of lower value crops in Michoacán that turned out to be quite general. Given that 1994 was an election year, the government was forced to do something, and its response was the PROCAMPO programme of producer subsidies. This was justified as a measure to cushion the transition to a regime governed by international market prices which would enable producers to switch crops. In practice, the implementation of the programme was distorted, as usual, by political considerations, as indeed, it now transpires, was the privatisation and deregulation process in agriculture as a whole because of the benefits assigned to the coterie of entrepreneurs and overnight financier millionaires in the inner circle of *Salinismo*.

Leaving political corruption aside for the moment, the consequences of the NAFTA for the Mexican agricultural sector continue to be alarming. Part of the problem lies in Mexico's inability to contest the terms of its agriculture's integration into the US market. Tomatoes are one of the country's most successful exports, but precisely because of this, immediately faced demands for anti-dumping measures from the Florida growers. Although the Mexicans were absolved from the charge of dumping, the US Department of Commerce still managed to broker a deal in which all the Mexican growers bar those of Baja California accepted low prices and a quota (*Mexico & Nafta Report RM-96-12: 2*). This is bad news for both US and Mexican consumers, does not enable Mexico to take full advantage of one of its few comparative advantages, and may lead to all kinds of agrarian problems in Baja if Sinaloa growers try to switch production there and need more land. Pork and avocado exports continue to be blocked by flagrantly unjustified appeals to phytosanitary risks, whilst Mexican consumption of pork imported from the US has more than doubled under NAFTA.

The major problem is, however, that Mexico has become the dumping ground not merely for US grain surpluses but for various products that could never be sold at all on US markets. In 1996, Mexico imported 14 million tons of basic grains, whilst 5 million hectares were left uncultivated in Mexico and one and a half million peasants and rural workers lost the income they would have received from local production. The cost of these

imports was one and a half times the total federal budget for supporting the farm sector and three times the value of the subsidies distributed under the PROCAMPO programme. The importation of five million tons of maize alone cost 250,000 permanent jobs. But the policy decisions which have brought the country's food dependence to the historically unprecedented level of 50% were reinforced by a May 1996 presidential decree on tortilla subsidies: this effectively obliges the establishments producing this staple food to use imported US yellow maize of a quality only used in animal feedstuffs in its country of origin.⁴ Tortillas with the texture of cardboard are, however, slightly less prejudicial to consumers than radioactive milk and meat which is unmarketable in the United States because of chemical contamination or excess traces of growth hormones.

The scandals surrounding the management of food imports when the brother of the former president, Raúl Salinas, was in charge of the CONASUPO agency, have done little to improve the quality of what poor and not so poor Mexicans eat. But it is more significant that this growing mountain of nutritionally substandard imports has been financed from credits supplied by the US Commodity Credit Corporation. Cheap food may be welcome to a population which has seen its real incomes fall by 30% since the crash of December 1996, but consumption of basic foods fell 29% in the eighteen months to August 1996, and 50% of all Mexicans now fail to consume the 2,430 daily calories recommended as a minimum by the WHO. Child malnutrition figures are now equal to those of sub-Saharan Africa.

The NAFTA has therefore provided the United States with a golden opportunity to counteract the shift of power from the North American and European surplus producers towards rich importing countries like Japan which followed the collapse of the Atlantic food system (Friedmann, 1993). It is something of an irony that the destruction of the potentially more viable part of Mexico's *ejido* sector is the price of greater integration: firstly, it was migrant labour from relatively more prosperous *ejidatario* families that supported the transformation of California agribusiness in the second half of the 1970s (Palerm and Urquiola, 1991); secondly, the "modernisation" of ejidal production under the auspices of the interventionist Mexican state in this period broadened the market for US-produced inputs and underpinned the growth of agro-industrial activities within Mexico that boosted the profits of US-owned agro-food companies. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to understand the politics of the new regime from the US side, given Clinton's eagerness to harvest the votes of farm lobbies in states like Florida which had previously been Republican.

Within the United States, farm lobbies had lost ground to consumer interests, but the NAFTA has given them the perfect opportunity to recover something at the expense of Mexican peasants and agricultural workers. The new regime also remains highly advantageous for corporate agro-food interests in the US: Mexican producers of fruit and vegetables are increasingly dependent on the export market as domestic purchasing power falls, and the US brokers are finding it very easy to spur competition between producers in different regions of Mexico. They can now get better quality with highly competitive pricing and, as the case of tomatoes illustrates, find the Mexican growers willing to compromise to avoid being shut out of the market altogether. The combination of *ejido* reform and the inability of commercial producers within *ejidos* to valorise their land and water assets makes it far easier for growers to establish production in new regions.

There have already been major collapses of established branches of export agriculture in states like Michoacán which have been accompanied by the emergence of new production zones in states like Guerrero to the south. It is true that celebrated cases like the collapse of melon production in Apatzingán, Michoacán, were not a direct result of the NAFTA: this was a region where relatively prosperous *ejidatarios* were allowed to participate in the agro-export market with state credits, and the peasant producers' effectively sabotaged the system by the tactics that they adopted to improve their returns in a context where corrupt *ejido* union directors and transnational brokering companies filtered off the lion's share of the profits (Stanford, 1991). Yet even this case illustrates the

⁴ A similar problem has afflicted peasant households that supplied milk on a small scale to processing plants, since the latter turned increasingly to the use of imported powdered milk as the basis for the liquid product sold in supermarkets, groceries and bakeries to urban consumers.

principle that peasant producers who retain the land, labour and water to produce higher value crops can only be expected to strike the best deal going for themselves and their families in terms of immediate returns. Increasingly mobile transnational capital may not be any more interested in the long term than the farmers that they contract can afford to be.

Finally, not only has the migrant labour, documented and undocumented, continued to flow to the North in annually increasing numbers, but it has entered entirely new sectors of the US economy in new areas of the United States, such as the Georgia and the Mid-West. Much of this labour is still going to the farm and food processing sectors, but it is now often displacing more expensive or unionised native labour, and a larger proportion of the immigrant workforce are women and children.

If US agro-food companies are the big winners, not all Mexicans are losing out in this transformation. Mexico's shift towards neoliberalism has also been driven by the collective economic interests of the core social elite behind the technocrats standing in front of the state apparatus. Even the so-called "dinosaurs" who resist the dismantling of some of the old structures of political control belong firmly to this transnational core elite. The interest of major national and regional elite economic actors in land is not solely a matter of exploiting the opportunities that remain to make money in the field of export agriculture:⁵ land, including land currently occupied by peasants, is also of interest to them in the context of tourism and real estate development.

One of the most spectacular proposals of the past two years was to evict peasants from 55,000 hectares of ejidal and private farmland in Hidalgo state in order to construct a new airport and planned postmodern mega-city, backed by the Koll Corporation of Los Angeles (*La Jornada*, 30th October, 1995). This image of the future envisages a core city of high-income domestic consumers and foreign tourists, surrounded by a penumbra of low-cost housing for a commuter service class. There are many proposals for more modest developments of this kind, some of which have already provoked local social mobilisation across class boundaries and violent responses from the authorities: the golf resort development proposed for the anthropologically famous community of Tepoztlán in Morelos is a case in point. Few commentators appear to have focused on these kinds of alternative uses for rural green field sites, despite the fact that a considerable amount of good farmland has already been taken out of food production for the construction of housing developments around secondary and tertiary as well as large cities.

The conversion of growing numbers of rural people into a service class for a transnational leisure industry is just as plausible a scenario as their absorption by offshore assembly plants and other kinds of manufacturing industries, and perhaps more so. Despite the recent apparent health of the trade balance, Mexico faces a rising deficit on its manufacturing exports in 1997 which will not be fully covered by the surplus on oil exports.⁶ The growth of assembly plant employment is inconsequential in comparison with the impact of trends in agriculture alone, let alone in comparison with the growth of unemployment elsewhere in the urban economy since 1994 and the remorseless increase in the numbers of young people looking for jobs.

The results of the NAFTA to date have, of course, produced a broad and lively debate within Mexico itself in which these kinds of issues have been aired. The political forces that are maintaining the momentum of Mexico's economic restructuring despite public disquiet are, however, less publicly visible. We are not simply dealing with the forms of political power which emanate from position within the ruling party, the PRI, since social ties and business relations quite often transcend political differences at both national and regional level where the relationship between the PRI and the right-wing PAN are concerned.⁷

⁵ It is, however, striking, for example, how many of Michoacán's avocado orchards are property of politicians and their political friends.

⁶ Exports to the US, especially of textiles but also of commodities like steel have grown significantly in volume and value under the NAFTA, but so have manufactured imports from the US, and current macro-economic conditions have unfavourable implications for costs as imports of plant and equipment rise to increase capacity and productivity.

⁷ The most spectacular and controversial, though scarcely unique, example of this is the participation of the former PAN presidential candidate, Diego Fernández de Cevallos in the Punta Diamante luxury hotel and condominium development in Acapulco. The ex-candidate's political enemies on the Left have argued that

Although business organisations often try to project themselves as outside politics and sometimes appear highly critical of the political class, the practical realities of the social organisation of the Mexican economy are, I would argue, very distant from this ideological representation.

The points of genuine tension arise in the context of the regional impacts of NAFTA integration, which is not only adding to the polarisation of national income distribution, but increasing the gap between the Northern part of the country and the Centre and South. The impact on the Centre and West of Mexico is particularly significant because it represents a new phase in the development of regional economic inequalities. The process also reinforces the cultural divide which exists between the Northern states and the rest of the country: this might have interesting consequences given that the existing division between "mestizo" and "indigenous" identities is a political construct associated with a model of national identity which it may prove harder to sustain as a greater proportion of the population are marginalised by neoliberal economics (Gledhill, 1997).

But the picture is complicated somewhat by the major development in Mexico's economic relations with the United States which is not adequately reflected in official economic statistics. Mexico passed from supplying 20% of the total drug imports of the US in 1988, when Salinas de Gortari took office, to 80% by the end of his *sexenio* in 1994 (*Mexico and NAFTA Report*, RM-96-10: 8). The trade has a number of facets: marijuana and poppy cultivation, cocaine processing and transshipment, and meta-amphetamine production. The drugs trade has a major impact on the Hot Country region of southern Michoacán and neighbouring parts of Guerrero. In the wake of the collapse of the Apatzingán melon export industry in which *ejidatarios* participated, the drug lords have been left as masters of much of the regional economy, and can use the growing population of US-bound migrants as part of their distribution system.⁸ The development of what is essentially a cottage industry of production of synthetic drugs does represent an alternative model to the tightly controlled cultivation of marijuana on the relatively isolated uplands of the region and to the cocaine transshipment business whose local development has ebbed and flowed in relation to conflicts between Colombian as well as Mexican cartels and competition from alternative routes. But from the point of view of understanding the rural economy and capital formation within it, it is important to understand how easily the infrastructure of agro-export activity can be harnessed to the drugs trade, and how drug cultivation has made it possible to find a profitable alternative use for land that was previously used for a type of family-based pastoral production that was becoming increasingly non-viable.

Again, the political dimension of the development of the drugs trade is central. The political commentator Jorge Castañeda has suggested that Salinas made an explicit agreement with the major cartels that their enterprise would flourish under his administration providing that they took care not to cause problems which the US could not ignore. Whether or not that is true, the recent row over Mexico's certification by the US congress is continuing to bring forth fresh revelations about the ongoing involvement of leading political and military figures in the drugs business. But we do not need to rely on the newspapers, let alone the somewhat hypocritical discourse of US politicians on the issue. Even the most casual observation of Michoacán's small towns and discreet enquiries in some of the rural areas would be sufficient, I think, to convince most dispassionate researchers that little has changed since Salinas left office as far as drugs and money-laundering are concerned, despite the upheavals and violence which followed the arrest and removal to the USA of the head of the Gulf Cartel, Juan García Abrego. At first sight, the

"irregularities" in the processes by which he acquired these properties testify to the truth of their accusations that this was his recompense for "throwing" the election. Don Diego himself responded by arguing that President Zedillo also held property in Punta Diamante, an accusation which has been robustly contested. Punta Diamante is also another prime example of how real estate projects which aim to reach "First World" standards can be pushed through at the direct expense of *ejidatarios*, who have in this case been deprived of access to the sea as well as violently removed from their land after rejecting very low levels of compensation (*La Jornada*, April 1st, 1997).

⁸ These developments are analysed in Ph.D. research by Victoria Malkin, of University College London Anthropology Department.

growth of the drugs economy in parts of rural Mexico might seem positive in the sense that it provides income and employment to compensate for what has been lost as a result of a decade of neoliberal agricultural policy. Such a conclusion would, however, abstract from the violence that has accompanied these developments, much of it inflicted on peasant families, and its cultural impact, especially on young people: money becomes the measure of social worth, and death or imprisonment are more frequent outcomes than sustained enjoyment of a better material life for the peons of the industry.

The attempt to restructure Mexican agriculture has, therefore, thus far had generally adverse consequences for peasant producers and rural workers. Disaggregating the picture to regional level would reveal some successful developments in the commercial and agro-export sectors, but it would also reveal areas where prosperity has declined because of competition from rival supply zones or incapacity to compete on the international market under the conditions established by deregulation and the NAFTA: the dismal state of Mexico's sugar industry is a case in point, although once again it is the workers and peasants who have lost, not the owners of the privatised mills who received cast iron guarantees through the privatisation arrangements.

Since most rural households sustain themselves by a variety of different economic activities, and not all those activities are located in the countryside or even within national boundaries, the impact of agricultural policy is not the only factor which influences their economic well-being. Nevertheless, the deepening of social inequalities is undeniable, and rural residents dependent on wages are in an increasingly difficult situation, which is not necessarily ameliorated by an ability to grow their own food. Even in 1991, I met people who had lost jobs in small towns as well as landless villagers who were willing to work as day-labourers in return for food. But there is more to the situation than simply material poverty. The rich continue to prosper despite the crisis which the majority of the population are experiencing. It is not that this is exactly a new experience, but that the basis for making it tolerable has been eroded with the abandonment of the basis of the post-revolutionary hegemony.

Conclusions: Rural reform and the Unravelling of the State

The original land reform created as many problems for rural people as it solved. The break-up of the great estates often left large numbers of villagers outside the land reform and without a job, though there were at least new jobs available in the cities from the 1940s to the 1960s and many who left the countryside in this period entered the middle class in the next generation. The land reform sector never secured a fair deal from the state because it favoured the capitalist pole of the agrarian structure, pursued policies which sacrificed peasant interests to industrialisation, and persistently failed to prevent the holders of political power and influence abusing the law by taking peasant land, developing commercial cattle-ranching at the expense of subsistence farming, plundering community forests and grabbing the lion's share of those surpluses peasants did manage to produce in one way or another: usury and commercial intermediation in some periods, misappropriation of operating and investment credits in others. There were repeated waves of peasant mobilisation, both in pursuit of agrarian demands and, especially in the 1970s, for a better deal for producers in terms of freedom from bureaucratic abuses and ability to operate free of domination by private intermediaries and agribusiness.

Much of this effort was orientated towards escaping the system of political control embodied in the official organs of popular representation by establishing independent peasant organisations. Until the 1980s, the state generally managed to defuse this militancy by co-opting leaderships and making selective concessions: although the latter did not threaten the fundamental interests of Mexican or transnational capital, they did have non-trivial material effects which kept the countryside relatively loyal to the PRI regime or at least at levels of loyalty which could be handled by routine practices of electoral fraud and coercive persuasion. Even as the regime turned towards neoliberalism, these older mechanisms of political control continued to be deployed, although they were now used

increasingly selectively and had to be revamped through the creation of new social programmes.

Until the crash of 1994, it looked to many analysts as if the political instruments adopted to manage the transition were going to work. Most of them were in the hands of the federal government, and Salinas was extremely astute in staffing the new bureaucratic agencies he created to fill the gaps created by the weakening of existing institutions of mass incorporation. He not only appointed leading left-wing intellectuals to cabinet positions in the agrarian and agricultural ministries but recruited large numbers of committed community activists and left-of-centre professionals to fill the lower ranks of the new Procuraduría Agraria and the vast National Solidarity Program. The latter subsequently became a ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL) headed by Luis Donaldo Colosio, the future presidential candidate of the PRI who was assassinated in March 1994.

This new apparatus could be used to coerce consent as well as persuade, and it was always deployed in a strategic and selective way, but there is no doubt that it did help lend the processes of change some legitimacy in the eyes of at least some peasants. The on-the-ground rhetoric of the bureaucrats employed on the programmes emphasised the evils of statist domination of corruption and still preserved some of the rhetoric of a social contract between the state and the people. Nevertheless, as Lynn Stephen (1997) has shown in the case of an *ejido* in Oaxaca, we should be careful not to underestimate peasant scepticism about such rhetoric.

In this particular case, the community had won its land originally because the government had adjudicated its claim against a neighbouring village in its favour, so that local historical consciousness saw the national state apparatus as its ally. The community was therefore inclined to give PROCEDA officials the benefit of the doubt. It was also willing to continue to vote for the PRI, but this was largely contingent on the continuing flow of PROCAMPO cheques. And most villagers expressed sympathy with the Zapatistas in neighbouring Chiapas on the grounds that the peasants there had clearly not been granted the justice they deserved from the government which had acted "correctly" towards themselves.

These observations illustrate the fragility of the processes that were maintaining political order in the countryside even before the economic situation worsened further, and the resources flowing through the SEDESOL system were reduced and decentralised. There are still many contexts where loyalty to the regime is being maintained among some sectors of the peasantry despite worsening economic outcomes, but this is increasingly a matter of two conditions: alienation from militant groups within local rural society which are seen as a threat both to security of property and public order, and a generalised politics of fear of escalating violence.

Long-standing conditions of impunity and absence of the rule of law have long shaped the politics of everyday life and popular attitudes to democratic governance (Gledhill, 1995). Agents of the PRI regime have manipulated these conditions quite consciously and cynically over the years to divide potential opposition coalitions which cut across class and ethnic lines of division. The high-profile assassinations of 1994 were one of the factors, along with the opposition's own failures, that encouraged Mexicans to vote for regime continuity in 1994. Since then, however, the direct and often pre-emptive use of violence against all forms of dissent has become increasingly central to the regime's reactions to mounting problems of ungovernability. The growing militarisation of security in both the metropolitan areas and dissident rural areas suggests that the mechanisms that Salinas deployed to manage a transition to a new form of hegemony have failed or ceased to be viable on an adequate scale.

Let me look at the question first from the peasant point of view. Under what we can now call the old regime, peasants of all kinds, including rich ones, had absolutely no illusions about the connections between wealth and political power. What mattered was what the regime delivered to them, and how they could manoeuvre within the world as they knew it to secure benefits: in the last analysis negotiation, pragmatism and compromise have always followed outbursts of militancy. Local grievances were never forgotten: disputes over land show a clear tendency to flare up again as conjunctures change and new factions achieve ascendancy at community level. In struggles against local bosses and landlords that are often centuries old, indigenous communities in particular have also shown

a great capacity to reinvent themselves in symbolic terms and to ground their struggles in cosmological conceptions of moral order that are quite distinct from the official nationalist order of the state. But the old regime worked as a hegemonic form, despite its profound inequities and duplicities, because it offered spaces for the practical pursuit of dreams of justice.

After 1988, levels of dissent increased, but many people came to admire Salinas because he was seen as a strong president who got things done and enhanced the dignity of the nation and its citizens, *despite the fact that the same people* were happily telling stories about his personal corruption while he was still in office and long before they appeared in national newspapers. Even many who had supported Cárdenas in the 1988 elections were subsequently willing to give Salinas the benefit of the doubt because he appeared to be leaving open spaces for negotiation and an eventual renewal of social progress. Developments since 1994 seem, however, to have convinced growing numbers of rural people that the spaces have closed forever and that they can expect nothing more from the national state and the political class which has, from their point of view, been plundering Mexico since the Revolution.

The consequences are a growing willingness to take risks in direct action, a certain sympathy with armed movements, and disturbing tendencies towards escalating cycles of violence and counter-violence in states like Oaxaca which were still relatively tranquil in 1994. The British government has now been forced to warn its citizens about the dangers inherent in visits to the states of Oaxaca, Michoacán, Guerrero, México, Puebla and Tabasco because of the mounting frequency of attacks on government installations.

The growing ungovernability of parts of rural Mexico is not, however, simply a question of peasant reactions to impoverishment, broken promises of public services and development resources, or even being declared an historical anachronism. It is also a result of the weakening of the national state apparatus and the rebirth of regional power (Gledhill, forthcoming). Under conditions of economic globalisation, regional power is seldom grounded solely in regional resources but generally depends on wider political and economic networks. Today's regional bosses are increasingly able to run their regions as they wish precisely because they are networked into the national elite and have a wide diversity of economic interests and sources of power. It is a question of social power expressing itself in more decentralised and autonomous forms vis-à-vis the national government. What the national state is becoming is the coordinator of the military repression needed to support these networks of social power and mediator of the crucial relationship with Washington.

The polite term for the restructured Mexican state is "the new federalism", which at least demonstrates that Mexicans are more orthodox in their use of that term than John Major. Theoretically, we are talking about fiscal decentralisation and greater respect for the divergent political postures of different regions. But it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the results of such "federalism" to date have been a considerable strengthening of the impunity of governors to deal with situations as they see fit and continuing diversion of targeted poverty alleviation resources into the pockets of established community *caciques* and more recently enriched protegés of the regional regime. Given the uneven regional impact of the NAFTA, it is conceivable that the North could end up with a somewhat different style of government from other parts of the country—more democratic in some ways, but also more overtly plutocratic. It does, however, seem likely that Mexico's social and political future will continue on its present messy and conflictive course for the foreseeable future. As far as the peasantry is concerned, paper will continue to issue from the offices of the bureaucracy, but it will largely be up to local coalitions of rural interests to salvage what they can from the continuing wreck of Mexican agriculture.

As I noted earlier, to date there seem to be many more examples of *ejidos* carrying through the certification and titling process than there are examples of the next stage, full privatisation and the end of the *ejido* structure of organisation. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, a majority of *ejidatarios* are older people and still have an ideological attachment to the *ejido* as central to their social dignity and identity. Secondly, the continuing existence of the community is seen as offering some protection of the individual against the pressures that might be exerted on them to sell up by powerful outside interests or richer members of the same community, pressures that have historically sometimes taken

violent forms. Land is still seen as an asset and a source of security by many *ejidatarios*,⁹ and even if they rent it to someone else to sow, possessing it still brings in some income: this consideration is particularly important to female holders, and there are plenty of past precedents for people selling their land and then finding the money they derived from the sale devalued rapidly by inflation, so that they have ended up no better off than other landless people. Holding a plot of land is still a mark of social status relative to landlessness, and in the case of more marginal *ejido* land the only potential buyers would be cattlemen: since marginal cultivators tend to produce subsistence crops to supplement their money wages, the subjective value of their land to them is often *higher* than it is for better-off and better endowed *ejidatario* households that have multiple sources of income from the migrant activities of other family members and are more likely to rent their land if they cannot afford to cultivate it.

But it is the 15% of *ejidatarios* who once made a living out of farming who seem to have the strongest sense that they are potentially under siege by more powerful capitalist forces and their political backers. Events since 1994 have diminished their confidence in their ability to survive as producers on their own in the free market. Those who tried to operate with private bank credit are mostly now militant *barzonistas* if they have not already been forced to sell up, and these experiences have dampened enthusiasm for privatisation.

Thirdly, the *ejido* institution has been both a political and economic resource for those who occupy offices in it. Even in an era of gravely diminished state support, there still some benefits to be had by controlling the administration of many *ejidos*, especially where the *ejidos* possess assets other than simply farmland. PROCEDE has been acceptable to many *ejidatarios* because it is seen as giving them security of tenure. Since land was illegally bought and sold in many regions under the old regime, leaving many people cultivating the land without any legal right to do so, PROCEDE's legalisation of de facto situations has actually strengthened some *ejidos* by confirming the rights of membership of its genuinely active members. The legalisation of future sales implies no practical break with past practice in these cases.

It is, however, a quite different matter in communities where there were stronger controls on who could get access to land and community consensus would not land to pass to persons who had money at the expense of poorer members, especially if they were not born in the community. Even where land sales were commonplace, some *ejidos* are riven by sharp inter-family and factional conflicts over the present de facto patterns of control over land, presenting PROCEDE officials with difficult if not impossible and personally dangerous problems of adjudication. Some communities are continuing to resist PROCEDE because the one thing upon which they are able to achieve consensus is that the process would be disastrous for the precarious balance of community sociability.

Where powerful elite interests are at stake, however, matters tend to be resolved by violence and imposition rather by a transparent and consensual bureaucratic intervention. Some of the agrarian backlog that has not been consigned to the paper world of agrarian tribunals has already been handled by the intervention of heavily armed "white guards" backed by state and federal troopers. Yet there is little sign as yet that the ghost of agrarian militancy can be laid to rest by these measures. The neoliberal restructuring of Mexican agriculture may have the ironic consequence of making it impossible for potentially productive small farmers to produce what they are capable of contributing to the national economy without being able to stifle a demand for land and justice from the margins. Yet despite widespread abandonment of cultivation and increasing emigration, the *ejido* is still proving a more resilient institution than the architects of reform imagined.

There is, however, another side to the coin. Mexico's experience of globalisation has been skewed by the peculiarly disadvantageous terms of NAFTA. Yet the NAFTA was simply a culmination of moves towards trade liberalisation and a recognition of the fact that Mexico's economy had, for a long period, been becoming increasingly integrated with that of the US. In this sense, Salinas's policies did embody a genuine realism, even if they fell far short of constituting an optimal response to the realities of globalisation from the point of view of ordinary Mexicans. Many effects of the treaty are now probably irreversible.

⁹ In case of family illness, for example, having land to rent is seen as a safety-net, and the advantage of *ejido* land has always been that loans could be raised against a harvest without risk of losing the land itself.

This makes any attempt to rebuild peasant agriculture problematic, and it obliges critics of current policy to think hard about the best ways of promoting growth of rural incomes in the future. A return to a system in which individual peasant farmers are theoretically supported but in practice plundered by the state and its agents has little to recommend it, and the value of any kind of public financial support to restore food self-sufficiency, for example, would depend crucially on the political arrangements through which it was delivered. Any new model should give much more serious consideration to the condition of landless rural workers and ways in which their interests might be advanced. Assuming that continuing rural-urban migration to existing population centres does not offer a good social return relative to costs, socially desirable models of "rural development" should not be focused exclusively on farming.

Through arrangements such as service cooperatives, better endowed small farmers might yet prove viable producers on the world market at acceptable public cost, but a majority of Mexico's "peasants" have been part-time wage-labourers for many decades. Current trends in agribusiness development and the development of rural service industries are clearly not likely to deliver much, if anything in the way of rising living standards. To improve on this situation, Mexico needs new kinds of rural agro-food processing, manufacturing and service enterprises which are competitive in a globalised economy with rising real wages. This might be easier to achieve by reducing reliance on mobile transnational capital and fostering local collective ownership rather than the reverse, providing the problems of political domination could be resolved. "Integrated rural development" is hardly a new concept in Mexico, but any future revival of the principles of integrated rural development would have to be consistent with the changing realities imposed by an information-based, global economy (Castells, 1996).

There is, however, another way in which globalisation is a central issue in Mexican development. An ever-increasing number of rural people today are also workers in transnational migrant circuits. That the NAFTA did not address the movement of labour is one of its most basic failings from the point of view of Mexican working people, though its partial approach to the problem of economic integration had clear economic as well as domestic political advantages for the US side. The implications of this asymmetry in the treatment of capital and labour are increasingly alarming for the working populations of all three NAFTA partners, but there is no doubt that they are peculiarly bad for Mexican immigrant workers. The new US Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which came into force on April 1st, 1997, is blatantly racist and discriminatory. It adds another chapter to an evolving erosion of the labour and social welfare rights of Mexican-born migrants and their children in the United States; it does not simply hit the undocumented but damages the position of legal residents relative to non-Mexican US citizens.¹⁰ It is conceivable that the Act will, in the medium term, strengthen the political organisation of Mexicans living and working in the United States as they confront an increasingly hostile and xenophobic environment in the North. It will certainly teach a lesson to those Mexican-Americans and legal migrants who thought that further measures against the undocumented would improve their own positions in US society.

The emergence of transnational organisations representing the interests of migrants as workers and citizens is another unintended consequence of capitalist restructuring and economic globalisation. This, as I noted earlier, is another factor which may prove significant in the struggle over the future of rural development in Mexico, as transmigrants turn their attention to the politics of their home regions. One interesting facet of some of the transnational organisations that have emerged from indigenous regions of Mexico is that they tend to be more ethnically inclusive: the Oaxacan Mixtec-Zapotec Binational Indigenous Front, for example, not only brings Mixtecs and Zapotecs together, but is also

¹⁰ The new legislation has particularly appalling implications for the US-born children of Mexican undocumented immigrants, effectively turning them into second class citizens deprived of rights which many thought were guaranteed to them by the Constitution. One object of the exercise is clearly to force their removal to Mexico and there is no doubt that many supporters of the Act see it as a means of reducing the absolute numbers of persons with Mexico origins in the United States, rolling back the earlier unintended consequences of the Simpson-Rodino Act, which largely failed as a measure of immigration control (Gledhill, 1995).

working to bring in other groups like Triques and Mixes, overcoming past divisions (Kearney, 1996). But the continuing downward pressures on the real wages and working conditions of Mexican workers in the US have also provoked tendencies to fragmentation, conflict and individual competition among some migrant groups which inhibit the growth of the kind of mutual solidarity that a common experience of discrimination can foster (Gledhill, 1995). How these contrary tendencies will work themselves out in the longer term remains to be seen, and there will no doubt be variations between regions in this as in other facets of future development, but there may be increasing grounds for optimism about the positive, solidarity-enhancing effects outweighing solidarity-diminishing tendencies. The US posture on the NAFTA, drugs and immigration is not only problematic for a Mexican elite which is facing a mounting political crisis but may also play an important role in fostering the conditions for a new kind of popular, democratic nationalism in place of the old models of *mestizaje* as social progress and a protectionist state. The land reform is likely to be central to such a new nationalist imaginary. Even if it must, in the last analysis, be adapted to the inescapable realities of a global economy, the ejido may thus find its place in a new popular vision of what it means to be Mexican.

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