

The End of All Illusions?

Neoliberalism, Transnational Economic Relations and Agrarian Reform in the Ciénega de Chapala, Michoacán¹

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Department of Social Anthropology
The University of Manchester

The geographical and cultural setting

The Ciénega de Chapala region of Michoacán lies to the south-east of Lake Chapala, on the border with the neighboring state of Jalisco. A fertile plain extended by reclaiming land from the lake under the Porfiriato, it is bounded to the West by the rugged sierras of the Jalmich highlands, a more sparsely populated region of *ranchero* communities which see themselves as “white” rather than *mestizo* or *indígena* and have traditionally prided themselves on their relative freedom from economic and political domination (Barragán 1990). By the 19th century the hills rising up from the plain to the South-East marked another social and ethnic frontier, that between a lowland *mestizo* population and the indigenous Purhépecha communities of the Meseta Tarasca highlands. Some of the Ciénega peasant communities themselves in fact had indigenous antecedents,² but these had long been obliterated in terms of everyday social practices and identity. Although colonial ethnic statuses figured in some of the judicial processes associated with community struggles to reclaim land before and after the 1910 Revolution (Gledhill 1991: 56), the region had long become home to people of diverse social, ethnic and geographical origins, and the politics of land reform fostered a specific kind of “mestizo” regional class culture. Influenced by the ideologies associated with the neighboring *ranchero* populations, which stress a relationship between private property and social dignity, the local culture of *mestizaje* displays a certain tendency to self-doubt, and even self-denigration, since its place in regional society has become inextricably bound up with the *ejido* and the social project of the Mexican Revolution (Gledhill 1995: 59-61).

The old *camino real* which passed along the southern edge of the Ciénega linked the area to the town of Zamora to the East, and beyond that to the state capital, Morelia, and Mexico City. To the north-west, the road passed through the two towns, Jiquilpan and Sahuayo, across the state boundary through La Barca and Ocotlán, and on to the capital city of Jalisco, Guadalajara. But it was the establishment of a steam-boat service across the lake and the construction of rail links to Mexico City at the end of the 19th century which did most to facilitate realization of the area’s commercial agricultural potential, before a paved road suitable for heavy trucks was constructed as part of a series of transformations brought to the region by the post-revolutionary state in the second half of the 1930s. Prior to the modernization of its transport infrastructure, the produce of the Ciénega, which included sugar, was packed by mule-trains. The muleteers operated over great distances and difficult terrain, articulating the plain to the *haciendas* of the *Tierra Caliente* zone to the South, via routes which differed substantially from the modern road network. It was not, however, simply physical geography which had shaped the economic structure of the region and its articulation to the larger world at the time of the Revolution.

The principle social fact of the western part of the Ciénega in 1910, and for some time afterwards, was the gigantic landed estate known as Guaracha. Owned at this stage by a wealthy Guadalajara banking family with the best of marital and political connections within the Porfirian macro-regional and national elite, Guaracha was the center of a local power network which embraced a number of smaller estates in the north-eastern corner of the Ciénega and in the Vaso de la Laguna area beyond the hills to the South. The smaller landowning families resident in the town of Jiquilpan also lived in the shadow of Guaracha. These families provided the estate with some of its administrators, but there was a substantial social gap between them and the absentee masters of Guaracha. Differences in the class positions of different strata of the regional elite were complemented by variations in the class relations and systems of labor exploitation which characterized different agrarian enterprises in the wider region of western Michoacán (Moreno 1980, 1989; Gledhill 1991, 1995). Guaracha itself was, however, in

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² Michoacán contained Nahuatl as well as Purhépecha speakers in the precolonial period, and the indigenous villages of the Ciénega seem to have mainly belonged to the former category.

many respects quite close to the stereotypic picture of the Porfirian *hacienda* painted by the “Black Legend” of agrarian revolutionary ideologues, although the crushing exploitation which it inflicted on its peons and sharecroppers was driven by a capitalist rather than feudal rationality (Miller 1990; Gledhill 1991; Knight 1991).

The peons of the old *hacienda* did develop certain tactics of “resistance” to the disciplines that their masters sought to impose on them, by trying, for example, to cultivate their own subsistence plots instead of reporting for work in the cane fields. Landlord control in the 1920s rested on the pervasive use of surveillance and violent punishment meted out by the estate’s armed guards. Nevertheless, such resistance to the terms of capitalist exploitation did not amount to a challenge to the system as such and the special historical interest of the Ciénega de Chapala lies in the fact that Guaracha was not to be destroyed by the revolutionary fervor of the workers and peasants it exploited, a majority of whom remained loyal to their *patrón* to the last. Land reform in the Ciénega was brought about, from above, by a “petty bourgeois” group of Jacobin revolutionaries. Their local power base lay in the clerks, traders and artisans of the provincial towns, better-off peasants in villages which had been deprived of land and economic autonomy by the expanding *hacienda*, and migrants returning from the United States in the wake of the Great Depression of 1929. The leader of this revolutionary faction was the son of a shop-keeper and billiard hall owner from Jiquilpan, who had married a woman from the humiliated municipal head-town of Villamar, which had lost all its lands to the Guaracha estate. After fleeing his home community and enlisting in the revolutionary army, this man was to become not merely a successful soldier and state governor, but to rise from the position of a regional *caudillo* to become, firstly, the principal architect of the more radical phase of the Mexican agrarian reform in which the *ejido* was presented as a viable alternative to large-scale capitalist agriculture and secondly, the consolidator of the post-revolutionary political system based on the hegemony of the PRI and top-down control of peasant and labor organizations. The Ciénega de Chapala was the birthplace of Lázaro Cárdenas, and its subsequent agrarian history has, in part, been the history of a very special set of relationships between the Cárdenas family and those who benefited from the land reform that family brought to the region. Yet it is also part of a more general history, a history which is central to an evaluation of the past failings and future possibilities of land reform.

A rural landscape consumed by “development”

In the Ciénega, the *ejido* became the principal form of land tenure. The *campesinos* received not merely land of the highest commercial quality, but water with which to irrigate a substantial proportion of that land. Major new investments were made in the irrigation infrastructure in the 1960s and 1970s, and this is the kind of region in which the *ejidos* theoretically had most to gain from the renewed support which the national state began to offer peasant agriculture from the administration of Díaz Ordaz through the apogee of statization under the governments of Echeverría and his successor López Portillo. Lázaro Cárdenas himself showed a renewed interest in channeling resources to the Ciénega in the two years before his death in 1968. This, then, is not an area where peasant farmers were left to eke out a living on marginal land, with no practical alternative but to grow corn and beans to supplement family subsistence. The areas of land assigned to each *ejidatario*, four hectares of irrigated land or eight of *temporal*, whilst perhaps not generous, were envisaged by the reformers as providing a basis for a self-sustaining small-farming enterprise rather than as a supplement to the wage on the model of the smaller, rain-fed, plots allocated to beneficiaries in other regions like the State of Mexico (Rello 1986).

The Ciénega de Chapala was well-placed geographically to benefit from an expansion of the national and international markets for fruit and vegetable products, and did indeed do so during the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s. But it was not, in fact, the *campesinos* who held title to most of the land on which crops like tomatoes and lettuce were grown who earned the big money in the years when Ciénega agriculture boomed. As the state progressively withdrew its financial support from the “social sector” during the crisis years of the 1980s, more and more *ejidatarios* abandoned the land entirely or restricted themselves to a small amount of subsistence production in a corner of their field. Yet even as the Salinas de Gortari administration was announcing the need for profound reform of the *ejido* system, it was becoming apparent that it was not merely the poorer *ejidatarios* who were failing to survive Salinas’s neoliberal shock tactics of ending subsidies and opening Mexican agriculture overnight to the chill winds of international competition. Once relatively prosperous *ejidatarios* who had rented extra land on a substantial scale and been junior partners in the previous commercial boom were also going under. Even the big vegetable growers who dominated the *mercados de abastos* of the metropolitan cities were contracting the scale of the operations (and thereby the amount of work available to the landless and opportunities for *ejidatarios* who rented out their land to the entrepreneurs or their local agents in the villages). By the middle of the 1990s, what I had first known, at the end of the 1970s, as a bustling and productive agrarian landscape had become a vista of desolation, with large areas of land left entirely unsown, and more humble fields of sorghum and maize in place of tomatoes

and other high-value crops. Even the corn and sorghum fields looked impoverished by past standards, disfigured by undersized plants and reduced weight of grain.

If the more arcadian landscape of the past had disguised the fact that the peasants themselves were not really the main beneficiaries of the process of “development,” the landscape of the Nineties poses the starker question of whether Mexican agriculture as a whole can recover from the damage wrought by a now discredited *Salinismo*. It is not, however, simply a product of the mistakes of *Salinismo*, which, at the time of writing, remain uncorrected by a successor administration which seems even less preoccupied with the problems of reviving agricultural production as it confronts the generalized economic and political crisis which has developed since December 1994.³ As an especially favored child of *Cardenismo*, the Ciénega de Chapala illustrates the limitations of even the most apparently radical moment of agrarian reform in Mexico, limitations which are at once political in origin and also related to the predominantly capitalist character of the national economy.⁴ During the 1970s, the region illustrates the limitations of the neo-populist statism that preceded neoliberalism: if, with hindsight, the period between 1970 and 1982 might be seen as virtually a “Golden Age” from the *campesino* perspective in comparison with the periods which preceded and followed it, this was also a period during which the capitalist transformation of rural society deepened in significant respects, and in which the international dimensions of that transformation became more visible (Gledhill 1991: 298-301). Furthermore, from the ecological standpoint, it was a period which was destructive of the region’s capacity to reproduce its former richness and diversity (Boehm de Lameiras 1989). The progressive erosion of some of the material foundations of a regional agricultural society had been preceded by social changes which undermined some of the bases for community and peasant cooperation, and, as I will show in more detail later on, the increasing dependence of *campesino* households on migrant labor north of the border has reinforced these tendencies, especially in recent years.

The Ciénega de Chapala could therefore be seen as a region caught up in two, interrelated, processes. One is the unfolding and unraveling of a land reform project inextricably linked to the political project of maintaining the hegemony of the party of the state created to consolidate the power of the urban *caudillos* who defeated the popular peasant project embedded in the Mexican Revolution. The other is the evolution of a set of transnational class relations based on the articulation of this zone of rural Mexico with centers of economic power in the United States via flows of migrant labor power and commodities. As Palerm and Urquiola (1993) have suggested, this second process suggests the need for a closer look at the apparently “dysfunctional” nature of the Mexican *ejido* in regions like the Ciénega de Chapala. What, from the Mexican side of the border, may look like decapitalization and a failure to sustain social reproduction might be viewed in a more positive light by Mexico’s northern neighbor. U.S. capital has secured both the benefits of employing workers from households which are partly sustained by economic activities in the South and markets for a variety of products, including the farm machinery, chemical herbicides and pesticides which underpinned the transformation of Ciénega agriculture (and the local ecosystem) in the 1970s.

In 1995, the Ciénega de Chapala is beginning to look like a region which has not merely acted as a periphery feeding the prosperity and growth of a distant metropolitan core, but which has been virtually

³ After a meeting on 17th May, 1995, between President Zedillo and leaders of the peasant organizations participating in the CAP, the UGOCP representative, Alfredo López Domínguez, remarked that: “(Zedillo) is preoccupied with other problems, and we, the leaders of the organizations, will have to look for points of contact and sympathy from other members of his cabinet because we are faced with a pragmatism in which the head of the executive’s attention is taken up with the big economic problems” (*La Jornada*, 18th May, 1995). The principal requests made by the leaders of these moderate peasant organizations, including the CNC, were for an urgent revision of the reform of Article 27, on the grounds that neither officials nor judges knew how to respond to the ambiguities of current legislation, and for a more adequate program of subsidies to compensate producers for the short-term effects of the devaluation and longer-term effects of the NAFTA.

⁴ For a particularly trenchant critique of Cardenista land reform from the latter point of view, see Markiewicz (1993). This writer argues that the failure of Cardenismo to alter the basically capitalist character of the economy condemned the *ejido* to failure from the outset, so that neither Alemán’s “counter-reform” of the 1940s nor Salinas’s neoliberalism should be seen as “betrayals” of a more radical policy which would have produced different historical results had it not been undermined. Although I agree that it is important to be realistic about the limitations of the Cardenista project (and subsequent neo-populist attempts to “refunctionalize” the *ejido*), I still feel that it is important to recognize, firstly, that alternative models for rural development do exist and that large-scale capitalist agriculture is not the only, or even necessarily the most economically efficient, let alone socially desirable, kind of agricultural regime which is compatible with a market economy. Secondly, different models of agrarian reform in Mexico did, and still potentially do, have distinctive qualitative social implications.

consumed in the process, left as a husk of its former self. As I will demonstrate in more detail below, large-scale out-migration from the region is nothing new, and even international migration has a very long history in most of the Ciénega villages. But of those who remained, past generations could count on good harvests from its rich black earth if they possessed, or could borrow, the money to sow a crop; nor did they experience the shortages of drinking water which the lowering of the water table and exhaustion of subterranean aquifers now make regular occurrences. Today, even the hillside fields (*ecuaros*) which *ejidatarios* and non-*ejidatarios* alike could farm with a hoe in order to supplement family budgets with self-grown food are severely eroded and relatively unproductive even with applications of fertilizer. The recent decline of vegetable production on the plain has now added to the employment problems caused by mechanization of harvesting and limited job opportunities in local towns. Life in the Ciénega in the 1990s may be improved by the fact that many families now have color TVs, videos, gas stoves, refrigerators and even flush toilets, and PRONASOL money has provided some of the bigger communities with more paved streets and street lighting. Yet most of these “material improvements” owe more to migrant earnings than to local agricultural development, and will become less and less relevant in the absence of the creation of new jobs. This is not to say that the local peasantry have not resisted and contested the structures of domination responsible for the outcomes I have described in various ways that I will outline below. It is simply to observe that the gains from such resistance are proving increasingly marginal.

The agrarian history of the Ciénega before *Salinismo*

The struggle for land reform began in some Ciénega communities before the outbreak of Madero’s armed insurrection against the government of Porfirio Díaz, and some land was distributed to peasants before the period of the Cárdenas presidency, notably under the radical governorship of Francisco Múgica at the start of the Twenties, and under Cardenista auspices during the General’s own period as civil governor at the end of that decade. The region was, however, distinguished more for its adherence to the Cristero cause than for its popular enthusiasm for agrarian reform up to the 1930s (Gledhill 1991). The cause of *agrarismo* did receive an impetus from the return of large numbers of migrants from the United States at the very moment when *Cardenismo* finally secured political power at state level, but that power was keenly contested by a landlord interest which still conserved substantial social power despite the Revolution and had strong ideological backing from the Church.⁵ Many of the former *norteños* had, like the famous Michoacán agrarian leader Primo Tapia from Naranja (Friedrich 1977, 1986), returned from the United States equipped with radical political ideas drawn from the international socialist movement, but the regional balance of power created a situation favoring pragmatism over pursuit of ideals, and violence proved a means thinly justified by ends on both sides of the struggle. The association of *agrarismo* with the figure of the violent *cacique*, who frequently used his precarious power to benefit his kin and clients materially in terms of land allocation at the expense of other members of peasant communities, did little to strengthen the mass base of *Cardenismo* in the region of its birth, and the precise nature of the Cardenista project remained full of ambiguities. Since the days of Primo Tapia’s state-wide Liga de Comunidades y Sindicatos Agraristas,⁶ the radical leaderships of the agrarian reform movement had favored a model of the *ejido* based on collective cultivation of the land, and such systems were maintained through violence in some of the indigenous *cacicazgos* (Friedrich 1986). This too proved an unattractive paradigm to most potential beneficiaries of land reform in the Ciénega, but it was the system imposed on the former *peones acasillados* (resident workers) of the ex-*hacienda* of Guaracha, when the estate was expropriated by presidential decree in October 1935, in the face of the opposition of a majority of the peons themselves.

The expropriation of the Guaracha *hacienda* was a process negotiated behind the scenes with the former owner, designed to create a show-case for Cárdenas’s new agrarian policy. The landlord abandoned the estate completely, selling not merely his residual private property but also the estate’s sugar mill to the government. This rare experiment in running an entire agro-industrial enterprise as a peasant cooperative was an unmitigated disaster which ended in closure of the mill and parceling out of the land to individual beneficiaries in four years (Gledhill 1991). Peasant resistance to collective cultivation was only one facet of the problem, although the fact that most of the land which had previously belonged to the estate was used to create individual rather than collective *ejidos* was not lost on the ex-peons, who were dragooned into the cooperative without even their own leaders being informed of the President’s plans before they were implemented. The bureaucracy brought in to

⁵ I do not, however, accept the argument that local support for the Cristiada can be explained simply in terms of the passive “mystification” of the peasantry by the clergy. See Gledhill 1991: 90+92.

⁶ The League was established in 1922, but began to disintegrate after Tapia’s assassination in 1926, eventually to be replaced by the Cardenista Confederación Revolucionaria del Trabajo, founded four months after Cárdenas’s assumption of the governorship in September 1928.

oversee the management of the mill in this authoritarian social revolution from above proved incapable of communicating culturally or politically with their recalcitrant peasant clients, and their administration through carefully selected intermediaries helped to foster a corruption which rapidly bankrupted the enterprise. But even this was more a symptom than a cause of the disaster, which seems to have been deliberately engineered by an unholy alliance between the President's younger brother Dámaso, now the undisputed regional political boss, and private landowners in Jiquilpan who coveted the former *hacienda's* irrigation water. The next phase of the region's agrarian history, which spanned the period from the Forties until the late Sixties, can be summed up as one of exploitation of the *ejidos* by a new regional agrarian bourgeoisie which was a product of the changed balance of class power produced by the Revolution (Zepeda 1984).

At first, the exploitation of the newly individualized *ejidatarios* was an indirect one, a "formal subsumption" of the peasant production process by (merchant) capital in Marxist phraseology. Advances of seed and money to be repaid at the time of the harvest enabled merchant-usurers to deprive most of the *ejidatarios* of their entire surplus over and above family consumption needs, and, as time went by, create a situation of deepening indebtedness which laid the basis for a neolatfundist system of capitalist exploitation of the *ejidos* via land rental (Gledhill 1991, Chapter 5). From the late 1940s onwards, most commercial production in the Ciénega was carried out by capitalist entrepreneurs on rented land, with administrators drawn from the ranks of the *ejidatarios* supervising cultivation by gangs of day laborers. These would sometimes include the title holder of the plot, though many *ejidatarios* preferred to try to live on what they or their sons could earn through *bracero* migration to the United States rather than suffer further humiliation. Dámaso Cárdenas himself at one point aspired to become the new appropriator of the peasant surplus, through a system of credits administered from the wheat mill that he built in Jiquilpan from the fruits of political power and class compromise. It was run by a network of agents in the *ejidos* under the supervision of the last administrator of the Guaracha *hacienda*. He was, however, forced to abandon this role after realizing his ambition to become state governor at the start of the 1950s, leaving the field clear to a group of less politically influential, self-made men whose main assets, beyond starting capital, were adeptness at the manipulation of the local idioms of patronage and peasant class culture.

The local neolatfundists were ultimately merely cogs in a bigger machine, forced to take on the risks on direct control over production instead of enjoying the easier pickings of commercial intermediation by the weakness of the underlying peasant economy. The renewed growth of wage labor, both at home and in the United States, dealt a death blow to attempts by some peasant farmers to make up for their lack of capital by practicing reciprocal labor exchanges in lieu of paying for non-family labor in cash. Use of family labor aside, money was increasingly to become the measure of all things as far as peasant farming was concerned, as the first tractors began to appear, followed, in the Seventies and under state sponsorship, by new agro-chemical inputs like herbicides which could do the job more cheaply than laborers wielding machetes. By this stage, only a minority of farmers still possessed horses or mules, so that those tasks which were not mechanized generally required hiring for cash. At no point did independent peasant production disappear entirely, however, since there were always some *ejidatarios* who invested migrant earnings in the land, or who were a little better off than their fellows by possessing some other source of livelihood. A few stubbornly stopped short of renting their land out by struggling on with the aid of children who were not yet migrating and keeping their debts under control. But the general tendency was for *ejidatarios* who retained their land rights to become increasingly dependent on U.S. migrant earnings. Those who left for the cities were more likely to sell their titles definitively⁷, but up until the 1970s, land values remained so low that buying rights in an *ejido* was a possibility for most ordinary U.S. migrants, so that international, as distinct from rural-urban, migration perversely acted more to conserve the *ejido* system than to dissolve it.

The original neolatfundists dedicated themselves primarily to the production of basic grains, helping to make good the deficit caused by falling peasant production, although they were at the forefront of the introduction into the Ciénega of new crops ultimately destined for industrial processing. Sorghum, grown here as a constituent of the balanced feedstuffs fed to cattle and pigs in the commercial meat industry, and safflower, sunflower and other oil seeds, are all susceptible to mechanized sowing and harvesting, for which Ciénega conditions were ideal, given that the majority of the land is flat, unobstructed and susceptible to irrigation. Exploiting the inability of peasant agriculture to prosper now that it was abandoned by the state, neolatfundist activities were parasitic in the sense that entrepreneurs enjoyed access to *ejido* land extremely cheaply, but the situation changed somewhat with the arrival of large-scale vegetable growers from the Bajío in the second half of the 1960s. The entry of the *jitomateros* not only ended twenty years of stagnation of the rental value of land, but created a new demand for labor, including the labor of women and children. This new kind of agribusiness demand for labor was complemented by other developments in nearby regions, in particular the rise of the strawberry agro-industry in Zamora (Arizpe and Aranda 1981). The strawberry

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of land alienation, see Gledhill 1991, Chapter 6.

industry recruited young female workers as commuters from the villages on a significant scale in its heyday, which ended a decade ago as far as the Ciénega is concerned (Gledhill 1995: 42-43). Since earnings from international migration also tended to increase after contract labor gave way to undocumented migration following the end of the *Bracero* program in 1964, this period of deepening capitalist exploitation of the land and labor of the Ciénega peasantry was actually a period of slight economic improvement relative to the previous decade, but the major transformation was yet to come.

The 1970s saw a major contraction of neolatifundist rental of ejidal land, as availability of cheap credit and a new support package for peasant farming encouraged many *ejidatarios* to return to the land. Many *parcelas* continued to be rented, especially those which were in the hands of old people whose children had emigrated permanently from the region or widows, who would sometimes prefer to rent than allow the land to pass to their own adult sons. As public employment and salaries increased, some *ejido* plots passed permanently into the hands of local professionals, doctors, teachers and agrarian bureaucrats, and increasing land values made buying into the *ejidos* increasingly difficult for ordinary U.S. migrants. The reconsolidation of the *ejidos* was therefore accompanied by new forces promoting the long-term dissolution of traditional peasant communities, and these forces were strengthened by an increasing peasant differentiation and land concentration in the hands of better-off families. At the forefront of this buying up of ejidal land titles were the families of those who had acted as the peasant administrators of *neolatifundios*, who generally accumulated enough wealth in their own right to set up as entrepreneurs on their own account. But statization created other elements of an emergent *ejido* elite, in the form of *ejidatarios* who formed close relationships with agrarian officials, who were themselves interested in renting ejidal land and pursuing various other modes of private accumulation based on the illicit manipulation or theft of public resources (Gledhill 1991, Chapter 9). Technological transformation and investments in infrastructure put a premium on private investments in farm machinery and trucking and transport. Whatever the origins of their capital, a small group of “rich *ejidatarios*” and local entrepreneurs involved in these activities were main regional beneficiaries of the “modernization” which the state promoted. The Ciénega de Chapala provided a number of examples of how an alternative way of organizing modernization, on the basis of developing service cooperatives through which peasants could share collectively owned machinery and processing and marketing facilities, could be defeated by the close ties which developed between private sector interests and the agrarian bureaucracy.

What at first glance appears as a revival of peasant economy therefore turns out to be less substantial on closer inspection, and such a judgment is reinforced by other evidence. Firstly, the real returns from peasant farming were limited, especially for those who had no money of their own to supplement credits received from the government. Problems in the administration of the credit system, such as late delivery of money for performing specific tasks, fostered imperfect cultivation practices, which lowered yields.⁸ An index of the limitations of the new state-sponsored farming system is provided by the changing patterns of international migration. One might have expected those zones, like the Ciénega, which apparently benefited most from the new policies, to show lower rates of migration in the 1970s, but in fact the reverse is true. Credits and technological modernization did increase household incomes, but not enough to provide a living for the whole family: part of the increased income was therefore invested in sponsoring the international migration of one or more children (López and Zendejas 1988).

Nevertheless, farming an ejidal parcela did at least bring most *ejidatarios* a substantially better income than working as a laborer in the 1970s and early 1980s. By 1990, peasant producers of sorghum, the most popular crop in the Ciénega at the start of the decade, had seen costs escalate dramatically whilst market prices fell, as a result of the reduction of subsidies and removal of controls on imports: even with yields of 6 tons per hectare, far higher than the Ciénega average, a producer with 3.5 hectares could attain a net income little greater than a single minimum wage at the start of Nineties (Gledhill 1995: 16). By this stage, another of the great benefits of statization from the peasant point of view was also disappearing: the full insurance against crop failure provided by the state agency ANAGSA, which was replaced by a new scheme run by AGROASEMEX, discussed below, in 1990. Although ANAGSA only covered the *ejidatario*'s debt to the state credit bank, BANRURAL, so that farmers who lost their harvests entirely would be left without any net income, they were at least spared the debts which had previously bound them to the usurers and neolatifundists. Furthermore, officials were often willing and eager to organize fraudulent insurance claims which were generally beneficial to the peasants concerned (though the lion's share of the proceeds went to the officials). Fraud was endemic to the administration of the statized system, and had a variety of further consequences. A large proportion of the resources directed towards peasant farmers was simply diverted into the pockets of officials or private entrepreneurs renting ejidal land. Maladministration by BANRURAL officials promoted the development of a “black market” in vital inputs such as fertilizers,

⁸ In fieldwork conducted in the early 1980s, I found that differences in yields per hectare between adjacent plots in the same *ejido* were regularly of the order of 100% or more (Gledhill 1991: 338+40).

which meant that private sector farmers and a small elite within the *ejidos* themselves were the main beneficiaries of the subsidies offered to the countryside by the government. This situation not only represented a great cost to the rest of society, including urban workers, but also reduced the dynamism of a capitalist agriculture which had less incentive to innovate and maximize efficiency whilst it could continue to feed off the *ejido* sector.

The pervasiveness of corruption was, however, in part a reflection of the political significance of land reform, and of the way the hegemony of the PRI had been maintained in rural areas through the support of local and regional bosses whose function was to harvest the votes of *ejidatarios*. The massive state intervention in the countryside in the 1970s was enormously productive of *cacicazgos*, as new careers were built on the wealth and power which accrued from managing some of the ambitious new development projects that the government funded, such as an ejidal strawberry processing plant and various schemes for promoting high grade dairy herds in the Ciénega. Even the more humble role of ejidal commissar now became a certain route to personal advancement for those who “cooperated” with higher-level officials. The peasantry of the Ciénega began to refer to themselves as victims of a “mafia” of officials and political promoters whose impunity was often guaranteed by personal networks in the state or national capital. Nevertheless, the mere expansion of the state sector of the economy brought other benefits to areas like the Ciénega, in the form of a vast increase in manual as well as professional jobs in the public sector, increasing the number of local sources of income available to households. Many peasant households invested the scarce resources they saved from a combination of farming and labor migration in education, on the assumption that this would provide social mobility for the next generation, and at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, such a strategy seemed to be paying off. The onset of crisis with the economic collapse at the end of the López Portillo period and the switch to neoliberal policies under the administration of De la Madrid was soon to dampen such hopes. Between 1983 and the accession of Salinas to the presidency, jobs in the public sector disappeared at an accelerating rate. The real earnings of local professionals, especially school teachers, dropped sharply, to the point where many of them chose to supplement their incomes by migrating to the United States.

Under the statist regime, the peasantry of the Ciénega reproduced itself socially by combining farming with various forms of migration, though it was international migration which became the predominant strategy for families which remained resident in rural areas, and previous patterns of seasonal migration to other parts of Michoacán, such as the cane-growing region around Los Reyes, declined in importance. There were considerable variations in the agricultural strategies pursued by different families, related to “traditional” factors in peasant economy like disposability of family labor as well as to “non-traditional” variables like income from off-farm work (Gledhill 1991 Chapter 9). But this “peasant economy” was playing its role in an internationalized system of agricultural production: it supplied crops destined for industrial processing rather than direct human consumption; it grew those crops using machinery and agro-chemical inputs supplied by transnational companies; and it reproduced a labor force which found employment north of the border, not simply in agriculture, but in industrial and service jobs in American cities which would not have existed in the absence of a stream of cheap and relatively defenseless undocumented migrants. It was the Mexican state which underwrote this “refunctionalization” of the *ejido* in a changing world, but it did so in a way that ensured that the peasant farm could never achieve self-sustaining growth by accumulating a surplus for reinvestment (Gordillo 1988). As the country slid into deepening general economic crisis, the neoliberal faction which gradually took control of the Mexican state found it convenient to emphasize the “dead hand” which state tutelage and “paternalism” had placed on possible peasant initiatives (as well as the vast fiscal costs of public subsidies). A new kind of debate appeared in official circles between technocrats whose hidden agenda was a rapid replacement of the *ejidos* by capitalist agriculture and *campesinistas* who adopted a more nuanced view of what made sense in the Mexican context and still clung to the idea of reforming the *ejido* rather than abolishing it (Cornelius 1992). As things turned out, however, the basic conditions for a reformist approach, gradualism and transitional arrangements, were not to be on the agenda of a regime which was willing to sacrifice the entire agricultural sector to the exigencies of the NAFTA negotiation and evolved an inconsistent agricultural policy which lurched between Eastern European-style “shock therapy” and politically-motivated concessions which had little real economic significance.

The Eighties crisis and the impact of *Salinismo*

Although BANRURAL credits were still available to Ciénega *ejidatarios* with irrigated land until 1991, the numbers who were unable to repay their loans and were deprived of credit increased progressively, and many chose to withdraw voluntarily from the official system. Rental of *ejido* land increased again, rising by the end of the decade to a level similar to that of the neolatifundist era, but the pattern of rental did not replicate that of the earlier period. The renters of the Eighties did not try to manage large amounts of land, and were diverse in social origin: they included more successful U.S.

migrants, former public sector professionals who had accumulated some capital in the era of statization and a range of other actors, some local, some from the bigger towns, who hoped to make a quick profit by sowing a speculative harvest or two of vegetables or beans. In some cases, the *ejidatarios* who had rented their land participated actively in the cultivation process, but whether or not they actually worked for the renter, the technical level of cultivation and resources invested remained closer to the standards of local peasant agriculture than to those of the larger-scale commercial producers in regional agribusiness centers like Zamora. What these new actors had in common was the cash to finance production, although they frequently failed to make the profits they expected.

The *ejidatarios* of the Ciénega de Chapala proved fervent supporters of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the electoral campaign of 1988, and most backed the newly formed PRD in the gubernatorial and municipal elections which followed in 1989, forcing the local PRI to resort to transparent frauds which provoked occupations of town halls that were only ended by the violent intervention of the Judicial Police and army in 1990. In other parts of the state, such as the sugar growing region around Los Reyes, the PRI managed to hold on to most of its traditional rural political base in the *ejidos*, despite widespread dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies towards agriculture. These differences in political responses to agricultural crisis are partly explicable in terms of differing local social contexts: the PRD did actually win the 1989 municipal elections in Los Reyes (and came close in neighboring Tocombo), but on the basis of support from indigenous communities and landless *jornaleros* and urban workers, some of whom proved receptive to the mobilizing efforts of the radical independent social movement the Unión de Comuneros “Emiliano Zapata.” The Ciénega communities clearly had a peculiarly intimate historical relationship with *Cardenismo*, although one might regard the fervor of their *neocardenista* sympathies as ironic, not merely because of their relatively unenthusiastic response to the original agrarian movement founded by Don Lázaro but because they had displayed little enthusiasm for his son during his period as state governor. Their reaction does, therefore, seem to have been against their perceived abandonment by the state and the situation produced by neoliberal policies: not only had statization brought them some tangible benefits, which were already disappearing by 1988, but the alternative represented by the capitalist transformation of the *ejidos* was more than a specter in the Ciénega, with its long history of exploitation by commercial intermediaries and large-scale capitalist operations on rented ejidal land. Those who had lived under the harsh regime of the Guaracha *hacienda* or had spent much of their working lives in the fields or factories of North America had good reasons to value the style of life represented by the modern *ejido*, even if they had resented the corruption and limited returns offered by the statized agrarian regime. Furthermore, prominent in the leadership of the *neocardenista* movement were *ejidatarios* who could be defined as a kind of “middle class.”

From families which had advanced socially but were not part of the stratum of rich *ejidatarios* associated with *neolatifundismo* and *caciquismo*, these leaders had often been active in movements to fight corrupt officials and gain better terms for the *campesinos* from BANRURAL. In this sense, their perspectives corresponded to a new style of agrarian politics focused on production issues. Under Salinas, some factions within the neoliberal state itself advocated giving positive encouragement to the development of independent production-orientated peasant organizations, in part as a way of detaching large sections of the peasantry from independent organizations pressing demands for further land redistribution, and in part in recognition of the fact that much of the old “official” apparatus of political control associated with the CNC had ceased to be effective and that peasant resistance to the more outrageous *cacicazgos* which had grown out of the process of statization was inevitable (Gordillo 1988, Harvey 1993). But the embracing of *neocardenismo* by *ejidatario* reformers in the Ciénega reflected their (as it turned out, correct) assessment of the impact neoliberalism was likely to have on their own future prospects, and their antagonism to *Salinismo* was deepened not merely by further deterioration in the economic situation but by the fact that their attempts to win local political office were continuously blocked by PRI factions which used virtually any means to retain power (with apparent support from the state capital) and even alienated many of the official party’s own loyalists (Gledhill 1995: 48-51).

In the 1990 Spring-Summer farming cycle, ANAGSA was abolished, and the new insurance arrangements provided by ANAGSA were introduced. Those *ejidatarios* who continued to sow with BANRURAL credit were not, however, told in advance what this new system would entail. Those who sowed sorghum were especially badly hit. With the government’s decision to remove sorghum from the guaranteed price system and lift restrictions on imports, 1990 would have been a bad year for sorghum producers simply because of the low prices offered by the regional *acaparadores*, who refused point blank to honor the “precio de concertación” supposedly agreed between the government and the merchants. In the Ciénega, however, it was also a bad year for physical yields, a reflection of both recent local climatic abnormalities and a further deterioration of cultivation practices because of rising costs. AGROASEMEX lacked the manpower to conduct effective crop inspections, and the young and inexperienced inspector I interviewed actually saw his task as that of castigating a peasantry whom the government was determined to eliminate. Even when *ejidatarios* received more sympathetic

treatment, few attempted the journey to Morelia necessary to file a claim and none had the cash in hand to pay BANRURAL before doing so, a requirement of the new system which was clearly unfavorable to cash-starved peasant farmers. As a result, a majority of Ciénega *ejidatarios* ended the cycle with *carteras vencidas*, which provided the government with the pretext it required to close the local office of BANRURAL, along with six others in the state, in July 1991. This marked the definitive end of state-supported peasant production of marketed surpluses, to be followed in due course by the amendment of Article 27.

PROCEDE has, however, made little headway in the Ciénega de Chapala. In the first place, the *ejidatarios* of the region have historically had good reason to feel nervous about any juridical intervention on matters pertaining to land rights, since the present structure of land tenure is based on what were, before the legislative changes, pervasive illegalities associated with the development of a market in ejidal land titles. Not only had land been concentrated in the hands of “rich *ejidatarios*” who emerged in the neolatfundist period and persons with little real claim to be considered “peasants” at all, but it had often been acquired by persons not resident in the communities associated with the *ejidos*. A considerable amount of land is also held by *emigrados* who are permanently resident in the United States. Yet at first sight, all this would seem to make Salinas’s reform of land tenure legislation attractive to the *ejidatarios*, since the new laws effectively legalize most of the past illegalities. What complicates the issue is the need to maintain sociability within rural communities in which relations are already very strained. Poorer peasants are convinced that the reform of land law is simply a device to ensure their eviction from the *ejidos*, and their experience of matters pertaining to land rights in the past gives them zero confidence in the transparency and justice of any bureaucratic procedure administered by external officials supported by *ejido* authorities. As I have already stressed, the economic position of what was once an ejidal elite has been severely undermined in recent years, making land accumulation of much less direct interest to them than in the past (though some might be willing to act as agents for outsiders), and some are clearly afraid that state intervention might yet lead to their being deprived of some of their less legitimately acquired or still contested holdings.⁹ In the absence of strong internal promoters of the PROCEDE process within the agrarian communities, to date the regional bureaucracy has failed to challenge foot-dragging tactics on the part of ejidal assemblies which have prevented any progress. This is entirely consistent with the behavior previously characteristic of the old SRA officials, who left all contentious matters to be resolved (or not resolved) within the communities by informal practice, whilst accepting payments from all parties.

The other major programs introduced by the Salinas regime, PRONASOL and PROCAMPO, have had an equally insignificant economic impact in the Ciénega de Chapala, but in this case not because of lack of implementation but because they have been implemented for virtually exclusively political ends. The PRONASOL programs supposedly designed to help marginal subsistence farmers were hijacked by local *priísta* authorities and perverted in such a way as to ensure that money does not reach the poor, or, by and large, even get invested in farming (Gledhill 1995: 51). Investments in infrastructure projects, such as drinking water, have been manipulated by *priísta* administrations to force communities to defect from the PRD rather than simply to buy votes: one small community was told that a well negotiated by its *perredista* ejidal leaders would remain capped until they had delivered a 100% vote for the PRI in the 1991 congressional elections. The gubernatorial and municipal elections of 1992 were characterized by the same vices as have more recently been given so much publicity in the case of Tabasco. Yet although direct misuse of PRONASOL resources for electoral purposes was all too evident in the municipal electoral process, which I witnessed at first hand, this was simply an extension of a long-established pattern of disbursement of PRONASOL resources within and between *municipios* on the principles of what George Collier (1994) has aptly termed “the politics of exclusion” (Gledhill, op.cit.: 50).

The experience of PROCAMPO in 1994 can be adequately summarized by the fact that the *campesinos* insist on calling the program “PRICAMPO.” Such an outcome was perhaps predictable given that the head of the SARH in the local irrigation district is a leading element in the regional PRI electoral machine, much given to lecturing peasants about the need to end paternalism. It is, however, quite clear that little happens in the state of Michoacán on purely local initiative, given the continuing strength of even what is now a divided and fractious PRD in the state. Yet it remains dubious whether

⁹ In 1990, a longstanding dispute over land between a son and brother of the most important former community *cacique* in the *ejido* of Emiliano Zapata, which I have studied for many years, took a new and violent turn with the assassination of the older protagonist by his great-nephew, who was able to escape justice and flee to the United States unimpeded because of his family’s good relations with the *priísta* municipal authorities. It was notable that the SRA official in charge of the decennial *depuración del censo* assembly which took place later in the year wisely accepted the *comisario*’s advice to keep the issue “low key”, and the intellectual author of the crime, himself a former *comisario*, prudently failed to attend, secure in the knowledge that his kinsmen and clients would defend his interests and that the rest of the community would not press the issue beyond a token eruption of shouting.

any of the programs *Salinismo* offered as compensations for the social and economic impact of neoliberal policies would have been adequate even had they not been perverted for political ends. Those *campesinos* fortunate enough to see PROCAMPO money at all did not regard the rate of subsidy as sufficient to compensate for the continuing “price-cost” squeeze to which they were subjected, let alone give them a breathing space to think about growing a different crop which would be more profitable in the long term. They were under few illusions about the implications of allowing the prices of maize and other basic grains to fall to international levels, even before the devaluation of December 1994, with its devastating impact on agricultural input prices and debt servicing costs. The reports I have received from the countryside since my last visit to the Ciénega de Chapala in November 1994 suggest that very little PROCAMPO money has found its way into agricultural production. The percentage of land sown with anything in the first cycle of 1994-95 was the lowest in this century.

If we consider the picture of Ciénega agriculture as it evolved through the Salinas sexennial, it now seems clear that this is simply the predictable outcome of a continuous pattern of decline. The one apparent “success” of *Salinista* agricultural policy was the increase in production of maize and beans which enabled the country to reverse its growing dependence on food imports in 1991 and 1992. This was a consequence of the fact that the government had maintained guaranteed prices for these staples, which improved their relative profitability. In 1991 and 1992, maize was the most significant irrigated crop in all but one of the *municipios* in the Ciénega de Chapala, with maize and beans combined accounting for 50% of the irrigated area sown (Gledhill 1995: 29). Yet what this represented was not a revival of surplus product by peasant farmers but a downgrading of the activities of commercial producers, including “rich *ejidatarios*”, who could either no longer afford to remain active in the vegetable market at all or who had been forced to contract their operations by rising costs and inadequate profitability. Salinas’s government appears to have assumed that a process of “economic triage” under the free play of market forces would not only leave medium-sized commercial farmers operational, but in a position to reinvest in more profitable activities consistent with the reorganization of the farm sector demanded by the NAFTA arrangements.¹⁰ But it rapidly became apparent, through a summer of tractor protests in 1993 by private farmers in Jalisco under the auspices of the *El Barzón* movement, that *carteras vencidas* were not an exclusively peasant problem, and the *Barzonistas* found it relatively easy to draw large numbers of peasants to meetings they organized in Jiquilpan and other Ciénega centers.

Many of the *Barzonistas* had been PRI loyalists until the private banks to which they owed money began threatening them with foreclosure, but the movement’s appeal to peasants with *perredista* sympathies was enhanced by their militant tactics in occupying banks, and particularly by the repression to which *barzonista* leaders were subjected after the movement tried to mount tractor protests in Mexico City on the day of the *destape* of Luis Donaldo Colosio as the new presidential candidate of the PRI. Nor was it simply *barzonista* deeds (or martyrdom¹¹) which struck a responsive chord among *ejidatarios*. The movement articulated a discourse that countered the government’s line on “paternalism,” which most Ciénega peasants considered both denigrating and disingenuous in the light of the events of 1991 and the AGROASEMEX affair. Embracing the role of enterprising, “responsible” producers, the *Barzonistas* argued explicitly that they were not looking for hand-outs, but demanded that the government accept its responsibility to provide a level playing field in terms of subsidies, which would enable them to operate under conditions comparable to farmers in other countries. Since the crash of December 1994, the *El Barzón* movement has broadened its base still more substantially in many sectors of Mexican society. There seem, nevertheless, to be limits to its appeal to *campesinos* in the Ciénega. The first flush of enthusiasm had given way a year later to a certain skepticism: many peasants expressed doubts about the value of allying themselves with farmers whose class position was radically different from their own and all were fearful about accepting any form of credit which would involve putting up their land or homes as collateral.

This last issue has long been central to the general hostility to neoliberal reform found in the region, even amongst better-off elements in the countryside. The latter understand the risks of small-

¹⁰ When this early expectation failed to be fulfilled, and PROCAMPO was introduced as a political and economic palliative, the intention was again to foster crop substitution and a move out of maize by more capitalized farmers. Because many commercial farmers stuck to maize and beans, this expectation was also not fulfilled, and national maize surpluses grew, forcing the liquidation of excess stocks to such outlets as the pig farming industry in 1994. The impact of drought, escalating input costs and farmer debt does, however, make a domestic food supply deficit seem possible at the time of writing, despite official denials.

¹¹ Being a victim of Judicial Police violence is a familiar one for all community leaders (including some *priistas* and apolitical elements) who have stepped over lines drawn by higher authorities, and it struck a particularly responsive note among the *perredistas*: their memories of the arrest and torturing of various local militants and candidates for public office in 1990 were still fresh, and actual assassinations of *perredistas* in Michoacán continued throughout the Salinas sexennial.

scale commercial ventures involving crops with higher costs of production and unstable markets, and are suspicious of any development model which appears to strengthen the role of transnational capital. Indeed, it is particularly among medium-sized commercial producers that one finds the greatest skepticism about the possibility of Mexico ever conducting genuinely “free trade” with the United States, a position which is based on solid knowledge of the political influence of the farm lobby in the North and the commercial strategies of North American brokers in the international food market.

It is clear, then, that whilst neoliberal policies have not gone uncontested by the peasantry of the Ciénega de Chapala, political action and affiliation to broader social movements has borne little fruit to date. There is a sense in which the tactics of “foot-dragging” evident in local responses to PROCEDE might be seen as a continuation of long-established informal patterns of resistance to state domination. This is, after all, another way in which we might view some of the earlier responses of the *ejidatarios* to statization, which in turn hark back to the forms of “resistance” practiced under the old *hacienda* regime. In their individual responses to the system imposed upon them by BANRURAL (which some described as a new form of “peonage”), *ejidatarios* diverted those public resources which trickled down to them to those purposes which they deemed most advantageous, selling a bag of fertilizer on the black market here, striking a deal with the ANAGSA inspector there. Most of the legal apparatus applied to the *ejidos* was bent or ignored in accordance with local objectives, sometimes in a way which simply reflected the fact that *caciques* held sway over the general will of ejidal assemblies, but also, on occasion, because local people regarded an illegal outcome as just by their own criteria. It is true, of course, that much of this “resistance” to improve the terms on which individual peasants were dominated and exploited actually contributed to the long-term dysfunctionality of the *ejido* sector, and that, as individuals, peasants were often turned into accomplices in their own domination when they resorted to these practices to improve their personal situations. It is, nevertheless, necessary to recognize that *campesinos* themselves were usually conscious of this fact, that peasant responses did historically have some impact on the practices of bureaucrats and political office-holders, and that many *ejidatarios* continued to hope for reform of the system, backing the local reform movements mentioned earlier even if they were skeptical about their likely results. It is therefore significant that they have proved much more antagonistic to the projects of neoliberal reformers.

Although the process of *ejido* reform has often been presented by its sponsors in the national government as a means of empowering (“productive”) peasants and getting the state off their backs, it was imposed by undemocratic and authoritarian means and is being implemented through a renewed expansion of the agrarian bureaucracy: Ciénega *campesinos* therefore view the process as a continuation of “top down” policy, motivated by the ever greater subservience of an alien national elite to North American interests, and they connect any interference in local land rights with the two focal points of their historical memory, the old *latifundio* and the agrarian situation of the United States, where “everything has its owner” and the land belongs to “puros ricos.” Yet there are a number of contradictions in their position.

Firstly, their outrage at neoliberal discourses on “paternalism and responsibility” that can be read as “blaming peasants” for the failure of ejidal agriculture is coupled with the idea that the state *is* responsible for providing them with the means to gain a livelihood. In the heyday of the BANRURAL regime, *ejidatarios* frequently complained that the credits they received were “insufficient” (*no alcanzan*) because they expected to receive the equivalent of a wage for their labor plus a “utilidad” due to them as “owners” of the land. This subjective view of the contract between state and peasant was scarcely irrational (what is the point of being granted land if one is no better off than someone who is landless?) but it did not correspond to the “rationality” which is supposed to characterize the sturdy and independent “farmer” existing in the minds of some of the architects of land reform either. An uncomfortable hybrid of ideas about the rights of private proprietors and wage laborers, it is, however, precisely what one might expect from a peasant population which had been subsumed by a Junker model of capitalist agricultural transformation, been promised economic independence, *ranchero*-style, and then in practice been driven to make ends meet by migrating to work in distant capitalist labor markets. Secondly, peasant perspectives in the Ciénega are heavily loaded with the idea that the post-revolutionary state has repeatedly made promises on which it has reneged, whilst they regard themselves as worthy beneficiaries of state aid on the grounds of their positive economic contribution to the rest of Mexican society, as producers of the food which feeds the cities. Similar perspectives are visible in other regions of Mexico which have been heavily shaped by statization (Gates 1993: 7), making the issue of the peasantry’s supposed “debts” an especially sensitive one: attempts by officialdom today to dismiss past official pledges as “demagogy” are hardly convincing in the light of continuing attempts to convince peasants that the state and the person of its President have the welfare of *campesinos* at heart at the times when the PRI wants their votes.

At the center of this problem is the way the post-revolutionary state redefined society on non-liberal, corporate and hierarchic principles (Lomnitz-Adler 1992: 278). “Campesinos” were to have their “place” in society as well as in the sectoral organization of political representation: in abandoning them in terms of economic support and adopting discourses that imply that their sector has become an

historical anachronism, neoliberalism threatens what remains of the identity and social dignity of many rural communities without offering any meaningful substitute. Neoliberalism has thus reinforced historically grounded tendencies for the peasantry of the Ciénega de Chapala to see themselves as a “community of suffering.”

The potential of this second basis for *campesino* opposition to neoliberalism to underpin collective action has, however, been undermined in certain respects by the progressive social transformation of the Ciénega communities and the impact of the spontaneous economic strategies which many households have pursued to cope with the immediate impact of the diminishing viability of farming activity. Although “repeasantization”, the continued use of at least part of the ejidal parcela to grow a small amount of crops for subsistence purposes, has yet to be threatened by any strong alternative capitalist demand for the land, the fact that so much land is now completely uncultivated suggests that migration may now have a different significance to that I described for the period up to the 1970s, when it acted in various ways to sustain the possibility of a revival of the *ejido*. I have already mentioned the changing social composition of the Ciénega *ejidos* provoked by the rise in land values in the 1970s, but another striking feature of this zone, as in many other parts of Mexico, is the concentration of older men in age profile of *ejidatarios*, a factor which takes on special significance both with regard to the reform of Article 27 and in the context of changes in patterns of international migration.

Emigration and transnationalization

The Ciénega de Chapala has long been a region characterized by net out-migration of population. The first international migrants left the local small towns and farming communities before the Great Depression, many of them gaining steady work in the industrial factories of the North (Gledhill 1991, Chapter 8). The next exodus took place after the Cardenista land reform, which left half of the former *hacienda* work-force without rights in the newly created *ejidos*. The closure of the Guaracha sugar mill and the difficulties of the 1940s drove migrants towards the metropolitan cities of Mexico, and this process, along with some movement to new zones of rural colonization, was helped along by the patronage of the Cárdenas family. The rural-urban migrants of the 1940s included many disillusioned *ejidatarios*, some of whom had been prominent “Cardenistas”, as well as landless people. The descendants of many of those who left in this period have gained social mobility through the working class on into the middle class, but my research on internal migration from the region has shown that in the long run *ejidatario* households have tended to fare better than landless households in terms of gaining more remunerative urban jobs and educational advancement. This suggests that the main social advantage of possessing rights to *ejido* land has been the chance it has offered to the next generation to escape peasant life (Gledhill 1991: 208-9). In the period when most of those who migrated to the United States did so as contract laborers under the Bracero Program, *ejidatarios* were also at the forefront, for the simple reason that they were better able to raise the loans needed to pay off the host of venal intermediaries who stood between the needy and the list which authorized entry into the United States (Gledhill 1991: 252-53). Here, however, the histories of international migration from different Ciénega communities began to diverge.¹²

Some which had been economically marginal achieved high rates of legalization, like the village of Jaripo which enjoyed the support of a native son who became a valuable political patron (Fonseca 1988). Migrants from these communities displayed a pattern of increasing permanence in the United States and moved from migrant camps into urban residential zones and progressively more urban occupations. Others contained fewer *emigrados*, and displayed a broadening of the social composition of the migrant population to include a greater proportion of people from landless families after the labor contracts ended in 1964 and most migrants became undocumented. To this day, some communities, like the small village of Cerrito Cotijaran which I studied in 1990-91, continue to follow a predominantly seasonal pattern of migration from rural Mexico to rural California and Arizona, concentrating in a few places because of the role played by foremen and labor contractors born in the community (Gledhill 1995: 106-9). Others, however, like the much larger neighboring community of Emiliano Zapata (formerly Guaracha) have a much more geographically and occupationally diversified pattern of migration, despite the fact that the vast majority of their migrants were undocumented between 1964 and 1988 (op.cit.: 124-34). The latter type of community also revealed relatively early symptoms of what have now become more pervasive tendencies towards extended absences of male migrants in the North, and increases in family and female migration.

¹² For a fuller discussion of the factors which might be invoked to explain differences in patterns international migration between communities, see Durand and Massey (1992) and my own discussion of these issues in Gledhill (1995), which offers some criticisms of assumptions made by Durand and Massey, particularly with regard to gender.

These tendencies were, however, accelerated after the enactment of the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act. The first legalizations of previously undocumented migrants under the new act took place in 1988, but the legalization program did not work out exactly as the legislation's U.S. architects had envisaged. The arrangements that they made to satisfy the farm lobby's demand that steps be taken to ensure it a continuing supply of migrant workers were seized upon by Mexican-born labor contractors and other intermediaries in a way which allowed the legalization of a new generation of young men without previous migrant experience on the basis of falsified documentation, with sons of *ejidatarios* prominent in their ranks; many of those admitted under this "Special Agricultural Workers" category were joined in the North by undocumented wives and children, and the process of undocumented migration by a new generation proceeded as before once the period of legalizations ended (Gledhill, op.cit.: 118-23). This suggests that legislative measures on the part of the United States have little impact on the underlying political economy of international migration and that the social networks established by the migrant population itself are of central importance to the way regions like the Ciénega de Chapala articulate themselves to northern labor markets.¹³ But such a conclusion seems only partly correct, when we look at the larger context in which these developments occurred and the impact of the new legislation on the situation of migrants in the North.

The IRCA legislation represented a further step down the road towards institutionalizing Mexican migrant workers as an ethnic underclass by restricting their rights to social benefits, even if it did hold out the possibility of the newly legalized "Green Card" holders eventually achieving citizen status.¹⁴ The fundamental problem facing the contemporary international migrant population is, however, as Michael Kearney has put it, that they may be wanted in the United States as labor power but they are being increasingly decisively rejected as "persons" (Kearney 1991). I have explored the specific structural features of the U.S. social and political system which underlie this problem in more depth elsewhere (Gledhill 1995, Chapter 7). Here I merely wish to record its impact on the attitudes of those migrants who remain part of the local communities in the Ciénega, in the sense that they maintain social ties and visit regularly, though many of these people are no longer simply working seasonally in the United States, but spending virtually their entire working lives at the other pole of what Roger Rouse has termed "transnational migrant circuits" (Rouse 1992). There is now regular reference on the part of younger migrants to discrimination on grounds of skin color in the United States. The passage of Proposition 187 (which occurred while I was last in the region) was seen as symptomatic of processes which were prejudicial to all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, and which fitted into a broader pattern of victimization of the *campesino* in which the government of Mexico was an accomplice by signing a treaty which excluded labor issues and served the imperialist economic project of the United States. This represents a substantial switch in local discourses about migration relative to the more ambivalent attitudes I recorded in the early 1980s (Gledhill 1991: 241-42), towards a more antagonistic stance, in which the United States is cognized in more reciprocal terms as imperial center to the Mexican "colonial Other" of Anglo imagination and the migrant sees him or herself as a member of an exploited transnational proletariat. In the case of the Ciénega de Chapala, however, whilst recent practical experience of life within the ethnicized class system of the United States has reinforced notions of the *campesino* community as a "community of suffering," an increasingly negative evaluation of the conditions and possibilities of transnational migrant life does not foster strong tendencies towards growth of new collective solidarities, beyond the development of a compensatory ethic of the human value of "The Mexican" which is completely consistent with an individualistic social practice (Gledhill 1995: 207-10). Various conjunctural factors have combined to produce this outcome: the thwarting of collective political projects of community resistance to neoliberalism within Mexico, new community tensions arising out of the legalizations under the IRCA, and new social tensions which have emerged at the northern pole of the transnational migrant circuit.

The last two factors deserve some additional discussion. The young men who became *rodinos* on the basis of false documentation generally accumulated debts with kin and neighbors who helped them raise the money to buy into the system and in making their first, undocumented, crossing of the frontier. These "helpers" have often displayed a tendency to make continuing claims on young people whom they see as unusually privileged. In a few cases, the documentation which a young *rodino* received deprived a genuinely qualified candidate in the same community of his chance of legalization, because the intermediary sold papers like time sheets to the highest bidder. Even in the absence of such

¹³ For further discussion, see also Massey, Alarcón, Durand and González (1987).

¹⁴ A majority of those who have achieved legal status since the end of the *bracero* period, in contrast to the earlier generation of emigrants, has stopped short of applying for naturalization, although this situation could conceivably change if the Mexican government accedes to the argument that allowing Mexicans in the United States to possess dual nationality is the best way of defending them against current xenophobia, as was recently mooted by José Angel Pescador, Mexican Consul in Los Angeles (*Reforma*, 10th June, 1995).

trickery, the fact that one short generation of young men had a special chance to gain the right to work legally in the United States was always bound to be socially divisive, not merely because the financial investment required to secure legalization was beyond the means of some families at the time,¹⁵ but because the upcoming generation of migrants after 1990, including siblings and close kin of the legalized, were consigned to undocumented status. The Simpson-Rodino act itself contributed to the increasing demonization of undocumented migrants, but this effect was reinforced by a range of ongoing transformations in California, still the main migrant destination in the United States. Beyond the recession caused by the end of the Cold War and loss of jobs both to Mexican *maquiladoras* and to unionized plants in other states, the situation in California has been influenced by the deeper economic and political changes: white flight to the suburbs and inner city decay, the ending of the dream of economic security and continually rising living standards for the white middle class, and the greater visibility of the apparent threat to Anglo social and political hegemony posed by demographic change (Gledhill 1995: 167-71). Even Simpson-Rodino itself had an unintended consequence for Anglo attitudes in California specifically, because of the Federal Government's failure to honor its original undertaking to fully compensate the state for the local costs of its new national migration policy (Eisenstadt and Thorup 1994: 72). Nativist reactions and anti-immigrant hysteria are, of course, nothing new in California, although it would, in my view, be unwise to view the current situation as simply a passing phase based on conjunctural economic factors, without considering the deeper crisis of American society in the late Twentieth century of which it is merely one part. What I wish to stress here, however, is not the so much impact of Anglo racism and hysteria on the position of contemporary migrants, but growing tensions within the migrant population itself.

As I noted earlier, the "modernization" of the *Ciénega ejidos* under the auspices of the interventionist state of the Seventies may be seen as a further stage in a series of "bilateral adjustments" which have forged a systemic link between the evolution of California agribusiness and parts of the land reform sector in Mexico (Palerm and Urquiola, op.cit.). During the years of the Bracero contracts, the pace of technical modernization in U.S. agriculture was dampened for a period by the availability of plentiful cheap labor, but the widespread use of *braceros* did not, in the end, put paid to the union organization of labor and, in the longer term, the export of Green Revolution technology and consequent lowering of world grain prices forced a more radical reorganization of the California farm sector. Highly technified fruit and vegetable production displaced grain and dairy farming at an accelerating rate after 1975, and with this shift, a more sedentary migrant farm worker population became desirable from the growers' point of view (Palerm 1991: 78-80). Although the demand for casual workers supplied by seasonal migration continued, a significant number of workers could now find work all-year round on Californian farms, and increasingly lived there with their families. As Palerm has shown from his studies in the United States, the IRCA played a significant role in breaking this emergent labor market stability, by adding a flood of young, legalized migrants, to the already swelling number of undocumented work seekers from a variety of rural and urban social backgrounds produced by the Mexican crisis (Cornelius 1990; Escobar 1993). The effects were more drastic than simply the depressive effect of numbers on wages, although this problem is proving serious enough in both rural and urban areas. The threat of employer sanctions and the volume of paper-work demanded by the IRCA provisions led even the best intentioned of growers to rely more on the mediation of labor contractors, at least in Southern California and the Central Valley.¹⁶ The expansion of contracting work encouraged the entry of some disreputable new businesses. Yet even established contractors with close affiliations to particular regions and communities within Mexico were forced by competition to recruit the cheapest workers available, either within Mexico or the border areas, even when this meant putting settled workers out of a job or denying work to their own regular clientele and *paisanos* (op.cit.: 113-14). Thus personal bonds between settled workers and growers often shattered as the former lost security of employment. Considerable tensions also emerged within the farm communities between "settled" workers and *rodinos*, and between legalized and undocumented migrants. Furthermore, since rural California is subject to the same processes of "white flight" to the suburbs as urban California,¹⁷ there is an increasing tendency for farmworker towns to become

¹⁵ The *rodinos* of the *Ciénega de Chapala* were recruited from poorer as well as richer communities because the region's longstanding migrant social networks were a crucial common facilitator, whereas in other regions of Michoacán, there was greater inter-community differentiation in access to legal status. Even within the *Ciénega*, however, some poorer families lost out, and this internal social differentiation is still more marked in some other communities in which I have worked outside the *Ciénega*.

¹⁶ Contractors are less significant in the zones to the north of San Francisco, where migrants often still enjoy close relationships with their *patrones*.

¹⁷ It could also be added that the expanding suburbs are tending to invade areas previously given over to farm land and occupied by Mexican migrant workers, a fact which underlies some of the more

“Mexicanized” enclaves of rural poverty, lacking adequate public services and access to the better paid agroindustrial jobs, which have moved, along with the middle class and citizen workers, to the suburbs (Palerm, op.cit.: 21).

The impact of these tendencies were prominent in my more recent interviews with migrant workers in the Ciénega. There were many complaints that trusted contractors had been “refusing” people the work to which they were accustomed, and whilst people acknowledged that work was hard to come by because of the numbers seeking it, it was clear that this was not accepted as a complete explanation. Some contractors who had maintained ties with their communities of origin ceased make visits, and even their kin were tending to leave. Some had damaged their already ambiguous relations with their clients in the period of the legalizations, but the increasing sense that profits took precedence over traditional social obligations when it came to hiring was removing the remaining traces of ambiguity. There were also many stories of violence, including murder, within the migrant communities in the North.

The impact of progressive habituation to the behaviors and values associated with the practice of everyday life within U.S. class culture aside (Rouse, op.cit.), the increasing competition for work would, of itself, no doubt have promoted individualism and envy. These problems have, however, been exacerbated by the categorical distinctions emerging between different types of migrants competing for the same jobs and the moral values assigned to those distinctions. If settled migrants felt resentful of *rodinos*, *rodinos* themselves might equally well feel antagonistic towards undocumented competitors, even perhaps towards their own kin. It was not simply that they had invested a substantial sum to gain legal access to a labor market which they had at least expected to offer them regular earnings. They could also easily be drawn into thinking that the presence of so many undocumented people would make their own lives in the North more problematic, both from the standpoint of police harassment and of abuse or worse from the rest of the “native” population.

I do not wish to give the impression that sociality has entirely broken down within the ever-growing proportion of the Ciénega de Chapala population which is now moving within the migrant circuits which link the capitalist pole of this increasingly transnationalized class system to its rural zones of labor force reproduction within Mexico. Acts of solidarity and mutual aid, even across ethnic boundaries between Mexicans and other immigrant *Latinos*, do still occur and are perceived as “right.” There is, nevertheless, a widespread acknowledgment and even a conscious objectification of the fact that “people do not help each other as much as they used to do/should do.” The need to be realistic and to look after one’s own immediate interests (more colorfully, *no hacerse pendejo*) is frequently alluded to in musings on the existential dilemmas of contemporary life. These are, as I have indicated, communities which have taken some hard historical knocks, not least from those non-peasants, including the Cárdenas family, who claimed to be able to deliver them a better life. They thus have every reason to manifest a certain “realism” in the face of calls to collective action. Yet the more insidious processes of fragmentation and division I have been discussing are consequences of the way the capitalist accumulation process is being restructured through the alliance of Mexico’s hegemonic technobureaucratic elite and U.S. capital. They strike at the very fabric of everyday social life in a way which is manifest ethnographically in petty quarrels and old friendships under strain. They do not simply undermine the capacity of people to stand together in defense of their interests, but they turn them into a different kind of people and further diminish the quality of their social life.

Conclusion: from illusions to choices

Behind the back of the renter of his ejidal parcela, a former public sector professional now active in the Zamora wholesale market, a Ciénega *ejidatario* hisses the word “capitalist” into my ear in what is clearly a condemnatory tone. I imagine that his moral outrage, for such it truly is, might have been echoed at the beginning of the Nineteenth century in the Bajío, when the landlords began to evict long-standing tenant families and passed the land which they had husbanded to urban speculators for sowings of vegetables, whilst the squatters and unemployed peons on the fringes of the estates literally starved to death because there were no longer any stocks of grain in the landlords’ warehouses (Tutino 1986). At one level, the process is the same, but it is, of course, a different world.

Short of Mexico revoking the NAFTA and opting for an entirely different approach to its rural sector than the attitude of indifference that currently prevails, there is little future for the Ciénega *ejidos* as far as most peasants are concerned. Yet the prospects of a new wave of capitalist activity at present seem distant and uncertain, and ecological deterioration must be factored in alongside economic conditions when considering possibilities for the longer term. Even the marijuana cultivation which has helped other regions not far from the Ciénega rescue something from the crisis is hardly a viable option in this open and visible landscape, although the marijuana production and cocaine transshipment

vicious examples of recent victimization of migrant workers by Anglos (Eisenstadt and Thorup, op.cit.).

business has had an important impact on politics and social life throughout the state. Furthermore, the violence associated with the drug business, and the use of the drugs business as a pretext for political repression on the part of the state, has added to the processes fostering depopulation of the neighboring highland zones.

It is true that the Zedillo administration is still facing substantial political as well as economic difficulties, and that major convulsions of national life may yet be to come as the old regime completes the process of unraveling which began under De la Madrid and accelerated under Salinas de Gortari. If, however, we stick to the facts as they are known at the time of writing, it seems clear that the older generation still sees something worth conserving in the *ejido* (and has resisted attempts to change the juridical *status quo*) whilst the younger generation is increasingly committed to work and life in the United States. Even the *neocardenista* upsurge was largely a generational matter. It did cross-cut the division between migrants and stay-at-homes to some extent, and the PRD also built itself a significant constituency in California, but it has thus far failed, as in so many other contexts, to capitalize fully on its initial achievement in the longer term (Dresser 1993).

Women, whose interests seem to have been ignored by the architects of land tenure reform, have played as important a role in sustaining family adjustment to crisis conditions in rural areas as they have played in the cities (Chant 1994; González de la Rocha 1995), not so much by seeking paid work, though this has happened, as by maximizing the returns from residual peasant assets and household economy. Yet women also have a growing stake in the transnational migrant circuits of the Ciénega de Chapala, not merely as domestic appendages to male workers and fathers, but in their own right (Gledhill 1995, Chapter 6). If we look beyond the domain of farm prices, input costs and even possible alternative ways of organizing *ejidos* as economic and social units, into the more intimate domain of family and gender relations and ideologies, it becomes clear that uncomfortable and ambiguous, but nevertheless significant, social and cultural changes are occurring, and that we need to start asking deeper questions about the aspirations of rural people if we are to understand the choices they are currently making.

Mexican agrarian policy has, throughout all of its history, but never more than today, been designed, in a felicitous phrase that I am borrowing from Neil Harvey, “for a country which does not exist.” A regular premise of that policy is that peasants live in one place¹⁸ and are content to subsist. Since very few (and mainly extremely poor) people have been “subsisting” purely as peasants in the Ciénega de Chapala for many years, it should not be surprising that they make their economic calculations in terms of considering the marginal returns to household income, security or welfare from farming activity, and that they spend a long time thinking about the pros and cons of living within different class systems. Indeed, as Escobar has noted, one of the principle impacts of the 1980s crisis was to internationalize the “opportunity structure” of virtually the entire, rural and urban, “popular sector” in the country as a whole (Escobar 1993: 75-77). It was the overall lifestyle in the Ciénega that held some people to their native region in the past, and now that the economics of choice are clearer cut than ever, it is the alternative lifestyle in the United States which is the major issue in considering whether or not relatively permanent emigration represents the best available option. I have given some indications of why local attitudes to life in the United States may be more negative today, but there is another side to the coin: it must be acknowledged that many people, and perhaps especially women, still see positive advantages in emigration and life within a radically different class culture. It is also conceivable that migrant earnings might be used to rebuild the rural communities which the state has abandoned, although the shape of such rebuilding might well be contested and the process conflictive. Yet as I recall my last memories of the Ciénega plain as a desolated agrarian landscape, and remember being struck by the way fewer and fewer people seemed to be returning for their holidays to the houses they had kept in the *ranchos* in the hills, it is difficult to escape the feeling that, in declaring and continuing to declare that “there are no alternatives,” Mexico’s neoliberal regime is foreclosing on meaningful choice, to the probable detriment of its people wherever they live.

¹⁸ Some kind of migration, often to the metropolitan cities rather than to the United States, is, in fact important in the history of *most* rural communities in Mexico, and it is common for the researcher to discover that the impoverished and aged *jornalero* to whom he or she is chatting in some field spent a decade or more working in urban construction. As Frans Schryer (1990) has shown for the case of the indigenous peasantry of the Huasteca, this process underlies changes in the nature of rural politics and class conflict which are common to a wide variety of otherwise socially distinct regions.

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