Mexican Peasant Strategies: Alternatives in the Face of Globalization[*]

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The real standard of living of much of the Mexican population has deteriorated seriously since 1976. In these decades, the economy has been dramatically transformed and people "reassigned" to new places in the productive structure. Public enterprises were shed, with transnational capital assuming a renewed importance as rector of the economy, making its impact felt in virtually every dimension of national life. Political crises have snowballed, one on top of another, aggravating the series of economic crises from which the country does not seem able to extricate itself. This history can only be understood in the context of the thorough-going process of institutional reform begun in 1985 as part of the program of neoliberal integration into the world economy. Numerous declarations and celebrations by the Mexican executive attempt to reassure people, at home and abroad, that the country in either firmly on the road to recovery or has actually joined the ranks of the first world. Even as I write this paper in late 1998, and some are (prematurely?) sounding the death knell of the extreme model of neoliberal deregulation, the team of "técnicos" that are running the economy are insisting that the country's current problems are imported from abroad, rather than home grown manifestations of serious imbalances in virtually every sector of Mexican society.

As part of the institutional reforms, the fundamental legislation guiding rural society was rewritten to accelerate the integration of the Mexican peasantry into this brave new world. The revolutionary protections won by the peasantry during the decades of revolutionary armed struggle and post-revolutionary political conflict were stripped away to oblige the individual titling of land, permitting a reorganization of rural holdings. Urbanization had overrun the limits of private property, incorporating farm lands into the cities, and reforms were necessary to make municipal management and development more manageable. In the rural areas, the reforms were expected to facilitate the consolidation of small plots into more "efficient" management units and permit the capitalization of a woefully backward economy: production in the basic food sector, the plantations, and the forests all needed to be modernized. Furthermore, the countryside was overpopulated; as the Under-Secretary of Agricultural Planning emphasized in a public lecture in 1991 in the USA, "It is the declared policy of my (*sic.*) government to remove one-half of the population from rural Mexico during the next five years."

At the end of the decade, we now find ourselves in the throes of new crises. The pundits are debating the root causes of Mexico's problems: there is little agreement as

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to whether they are primarily driven by social, political, economic factors or perhaps 'simply' by the drug lords. Whatever the answer, Mexicans are living a period of unprecedented unrest (at least in the context of the past 50 years); even as the political parties are vying for electoral victories, attempting to forge a more democratic structure, no group yet offers real leadership and the system appears to be adrift. It may not seem surprising then, that many groups are setting out to find their own independent paths for social organization and production, offering evidence of the possibility for reconstructing society as a whole in the coming years.

The peasantry and indigenous populations are now in the vanguard of this search for alternatives. On reflection, it is rather amazing that in spite of more than one-half century of efforts to remove the peasantry from rural Mexico, through discriminatory economic and social policies of many different types (including the most recent package laconically summarized in the comment of the high official referred to above), there are still more than 30 million people living in rural Mexico today, or considering these communities as their true homes, even as some are forced to work elsewhere. More surprising still is the inordinate effort that the peasantry has organized to transfer resources into rural Mexico in order to assure the survival of their families and the viability of their communities. This paper offers an analysis of this effort and a first attempt at explanation of the implications for the near-term evolution of rural Mexico.

Development in rural Mexico

When examining the transformation of rural Mexico in recent decades, we assumed that unless they were able to become successful participants in the commercial agricultural sector, peasants would be obliged to continue to cultivate their traditional subsistence crops in order to be able to guarantee an acceptable standard of living for their families and communities. There is ample evidence world wide to support the notion that food self-sufficiency among peasant communities is an essential prerequisite for their physical well-being (Barkin, Batt, and DeWalt, 1990). Even more, there are many who advocate policies of national food self-sufficiency as a prerequisite for balanced development (e.g., Food First, Thomas, 1972), in light of the process of unequal development that systematically discriminates against peasant producers, in particular, and poor countries, generally (Prebisch, 1959).

In this light, we designed a research project to examine the nutritional impacts of the switch from subsistence cultivation of basic food products for on-farm and local consumption to market oriented production, guided by the rapidly growing demand for exports and forage crops in Mexico. We expected to find observable declines in nutritional standards in peasant communities making this change. We tested this hypothesis by examining certain physiological features of a significant sample of people during an important period of crisis (1984-1996); the research did not indicate

any serious decline in gross measures of nutritional well-being,[1] and in many cases we can report improvements. The field work was conducted in four very different communities selected for their representativity of social and environmental conditions in central and northern regions of rural Mexico. Our work on the substitution of sorghum for maize during the previous 15 years (1966-1981), showed that on a national level there had been a decline in per capita consumption of beans and animal protein during a period in which the change in cropping patterns in peasant agriculture was occurring (Barkin and DeWalt 1988). The unexpected findings of our micro-level community studies oblige us to reexamine our understanding of the process of rural change and the role of a peasantry committed assure its own well-being as the State renounced its responsibility for guaranteeing social welfare, characteristic of a previous epoch. In fact, we find that the changes observed in this period of heightening crisis for Mexican society as a whole and the rural sector in particular, created a new ambience for social and economic change that requires us to reconsider the development process as a whole.

Until recently, analysts of rural Mexico have not considered what now appears as the remarkable fact: one-third of the nation has chosen to continue living in rural areas.[2] There has been considerable attention devoted to a related phenomenon, migration, but apparently no serious examination to the question of why such an important segment of society has decided to remain in their communities or migrate temporarily (or even permanently) so that their relatives might continue to make their home there. In the past, standard explanations of demographic patterns, commenting on the sizable flows of migrants to urban areas and to the USA have focused on the importance of opportunities, social welfare institutions, infrastructure, and employment. Sometimes there was even an explicit mention of the irrationality of people choosing to remain, citing all sorts of quantitative indicators to show that migrants could generally enjoy a higher level of welfare when measured by international indices if they abandoned their communities. Some accused these groups as suffering from lack of information or of "traditional" inertia that inhibited them from behaving more rationally, while others commented on the way in which receiving communities wasted the remittances . Public policy continues to be designed within this frame of reference, assuming that if conditions deteriorated substantially people would understand that it was in their enlightened self-interest to move from these rural areas.

It no longer seems reasonable to continue examining the survival of rural communities in this light. Such a large segment of Mexican society cannot usefully be categorized and dismissed as "irrational" or "traditional," if we are to enrich our understanding of rural society and collaborate with native peoples and the peasantry in their efforts to

[1] These measures include weight, height and related indicators such as body fat and gross caloric intake. The field work was conducted in 1984 and 1996 in collaboration with the National Institute of Nutrition Salvador Zubirán, with the participation of its director, Dr. Adolfo Chávez, and the researchers, Judith Aguirre and Margarita Escobar. We are grateful to INTSORMIL, the Ford Foundation and the UAM for support for this work.
[2] Our figure is significantly higher than the 24% rural population officially reported by INEGI in the 1990 population census.

forge a better life. It is this effort to construct a different strategy for survival that we think lies at the heart of our findings that the people in the communities we studied did not passively allow their diets to deteriorate as the State forced than to move from planting subsistence crops to producing directly for the market.

Resource transfers and the future of rural Mexico

Remittances from workers in the United States constitute the second most import source of foreign exchange for Mexico.[3] Although partial information from the principal financial service firms engaged in international transfers of funds indicate that they operate more than $7.5 billion, the Bank of Mexico reports receipts of less than $5 billion for this concept;[4] if we added to this flood of money, the transfers sent through the mails and brought back personally by returning migrants or visiting friends and relatives we could develop some appreciation for the significance of this source of support for people in rural Mexico.[5]

Rural Mexico also depends for its survival on transfers from community members working in other parts of the country. It is increasingly common for peasant families to send people to urban areas to work in areas of commercial agriculture, in construction, in commerce, or in other service sectors, especially in domestic service. In some cases, these workers actually settle in the proximity of these new employment centers, but assume a serious obligation to continue sending money or regularly bringing a food basket (*mandado*) home. While it would be impossible to quantify this flow without a massive and complex survey to define and measure the phenomenon, a review of existing survey data and conversations with researchers who have approached the subject indirectly suggests that the importance of this facet of rural life is hardly appreciated.

A related, but different process has been mentioned as part of the research reported by Massey and his Mexican collaborators (references): they 'discover' and emphasize the significance of the (employment and income multipliers) for transfers to rural Mexico. To the extent that the transfers are spent within the community on local food, construction, or on other goods produced within the community, their impact is multiplied by the induced circuits of expenditures by the original recipients. Of course,

[3] This statement is based on the net earnings from workers' remittances, in comparison with the net earning from other sources of foreign exchange. The difference between net and gross receipts is essential because of the high import content of many Mexican exports (including services such as tourism) and the especially high import component of basic consumption and investment that must be factored into the calculations when measuring the net contribution of the maquila industry in the border region.

[4] Although recent congressional hearings have revealed that commissions, fees and unconscionably low exchange rates amount to effective costs of as much as 25% of the cost of these services, there is no reason to subtract these charges from the balance of payments accounts, since they are accrued to Mexican firms. Their burden falls on the recipients of these transfers.

[5] Clearly, not all this money goes to rural Mexico, and substantial amounts are stolen in transit.

in an economy like Mexico, where production for local consumption is being discouraged and many rural communities are actually areas of labor shortage, the multiplier effects will be reduced by the need to import (from other parts of the country or from abroad) goods and services demanded by the consumers; in any case, their point is important when examining the developmental impact of remittances. Furthermore, while they focus only on foreign remittances, the point is generalizable to all transfers.

In an attempt to examine the significance of this flow, we attempted to determine its relative import in the rural economy. As a point of departure, we calculated that the value of rural production: about $25 billion, or 8% of the sectoral product. This includes the total value of all rural production, including export crops, commercial production for the domestic market, agricultural inputs to industry, forestry extraction, and fishing among the most significant. Obviously, the total value of production on the small-scale units in the rural communities that we are discussing is only a small fraction of the total. We have estimated the value of goods and money injected into the communities at about $10 billion. Thus, a conservative calculation of the magnitude of these transfers to rural Mexico is at least 40% of the rural product, significantly more important than any external source of aid.

Thus, the survival of rural Mexico is the result of a concerted and substantial program of self-defense. Regardless of the imprecision in the numbers, it is clear that rural communities are successfully counteracting the mandate of the global economy: they are determined to survive and preserve a different style of life, regardless of the reputed inefficiency of their traditional and modified productive systems. Our research and that of many other scholars now clearly points to the fact that in spite of the apparent advantages of urban-industrial society, and the apparent attractiveness of employment in the United States, important numbers of capable and informed Mexicans are deliberately choosing to help their families and communities stay behind, to strengthen communal and social structures along with productive processes so that future generations will have a place to return to or to stay; many of them attempt to also make it possible for them to live there as well. It behooves us, then, to explore why such a small proportion of the resource transfer is presently used for productive initiatives that the communities might undertake to improve their well-being.[6]

[6] Among other considerations, numerous informants have mentioned the political and administrative barriers to innovation by peasants. Quite frequently, new initiatives are stymied in their infancy by local caudillos who prevent their being placed in operation, who take them over, or who actually destroy them, as has been recently documented in the case of the highlands of Guerrero. In other cases, the daunting administrative red-tape and the costs of complying with tax and employment regulations prevents small-scale household production from growing into successful businesses.

A peasant road to sustainable well-being

In the communities we visited as part of our study of the impact of changes in cropping patterns, as mentioned above, most families were able to provide themselves with minimally acceptable diets, indicating their success in implementing strategies to supplement their meager earnings from farming. Surprisingly, we found less migration to the US in the northern-most community, less than five hours from the border, than in the one that was furthest away. Of course, as this example demonstrates, proximity is not a crucial determinant for international migration. The *ejidatarios* in Morelos continue to intensify their diversification into commerce, and more of them went to the nearby city of Cuernavaca for employment during the week than a decade earlier; this was also the community most visibly affected by the increasing integration of the national market as well as by the influx of vegetable imports, for several people commented on the decline in truck farming because of competition from elsewhere. In general, however, what appeared most striking about all four communities was the lack of diversification in productive activities, the result of a dramatic closing of virtually all sources of financing to small-scale farmers, regardless of whether or not they had access to irrigated lands. Thus, our finding that children's weight and height in 1996 were more in accord with Mexican guidelines than in the earlier measurements, in spite of the relative decline in prices (terms of trade) for their farm products, is vivid testimony to the creativity of these communities in facing the deepening crisis.

For those of us interested in collaborate in actions to strengthen rural communities in Mexico, these findings are quite significant. Throughout rural society activists, scholars and politicians are reporting increasing activity among communities attempting to shape their own alternatives. Clearly, the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has created an impetus for many different kinds of efforts at rural organizing that include projects for productive modernization and diversification.

The agenda of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) is significant in this regard: bringing together representatives from more than 60 native organizations, the CNI has opened a space in which the constituent groups can expect support for their local programs to reinforce traditional organizations and introduce productive innovations that will contribute to raising living standards. The immediate import of the Zapatista movement was to confer new respectability to the status of being a member of an indigenous group.[7] The cumulative impact of this movement, which only gained momentum after its first national congress in 1996, is yet to be appreciated, but the militant prosecution of a generation of outstanding land claims by the Huichols in western Mexico, the on-going struggles in Guerrero, and the quieter actions by more isolated groups throughout the country to implement programs of training and productive diversification are evidence of the renewed interest in the search for

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[7] In Mexico, the category of indigenous is self-conferred. Thus, the change from 8 million people reported as native in Bonfil Batalla's path-breaking book (1987) to the almost 15 million claiming that status in the 1995 population survey reflects the greater respectability of being indigenous, rather than a demographic explosion.

alternative strategies in the face of globalization.[8] Even the overt oppression that the Rarimuri of Chihuahua or tribes in Guerrero confront daily is now being exposed and denounced in the national press. In the jungles of Chimalapas (Oaxaca), the Zoque leadership is openly accusing specific political groups of arson in provoking, if not directly igniting some of the fires that caused so much biological and human destruction in Spring 1998 (Barkin and Garcia, 1998).

Mexico's native peoples are not the only groups attempting to forge alternative strategies for themselves. There has been a virtual outpouring of activities throughout the country, as NGOs and coalitions of community organizations implement their own programs for sustainable productive diversification as part of their response to the destructiveness of the pattern of global integration being pursued by the neoliberal policy makers and transnational capital. The contradictions and difficulties of these initiatives are more evident than ever when they strike responsive chords from middle level bureaucrats charged with promoting local development, only to find themselves stopped in their tracks by besieged officials from the higher reaches, reacting to intransigent political and economic groups intent on pursuing their own self-interest at any cost.[9]

This search for sustainable alternatives to globalization for local communities is at the heart of the task confronting academics and other participants in the attempt to understand rural Mexico. The observation that all four of the communities we visited did not simple succumb to the pressures from national economic policy by either abandoning their communities or accepting a decline in their living standards is evidence of the strength of the peasantry and its resilience in spite of decades of oppression and resistance. If we are to contribute to improving their lot, we have to search creatively for ways in which they can use their resources more productively, and apply effectively the resources that are coming from without. The last part of this paper offers three examples of ways in which three different groups have confronted these challenges.

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[8] Pablo González Casanova consistently has been one of the most articulate interpreters of the EZLN's call for the rest of Mexican society to respond to its demands for autonomy and the construction of alternative paths for local organization and growth. His "Theory of the Jungle," (*Perfil de La Jornada*, March 6, 1997) building on the result of international forum convened in Chiapas in August 1996, offers an agenda for action for many parts of Mexican society; the basic documents are summarized in EZLN, *Cronicas Intergalaticas* , a report on the gathering. His more recent article (September 9, 1998) further emphasizes the significance of the uprising in Chiapas for these initiatives in the rest of Mexico.

[9] The case of the mega-development project for the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is an excellent case in point. It is an ambitious scheme to construct an automated double tracked rail system and an 8-lane highway as part of a multi-modal interoceanic crossing with industrial projects, maquiladoras and an expanded petrochemical complex. Opposed by local groups, ecologists, and others for its disregard for the environment and the needs of the region, it reflects the ongoing struggle over the process of international integration in the coming years.

The search for autonomy

Global integration is creating opportunities for some, nightmares for many. In this juxtaposition of winners and losers, new strategies for rural development must revalue the contribution of traditional production strategies. The new strategies must insulate these communities from the global economy in some way, by producing goods with special characteristics (organic, peasant, …) or providing services that compensate then for and reinforce their responsibilities for environmental management The approach suggested by the search for sustainability and popular participation is to create mechanisms whereby peasants and indigenous communities find support to continue cultivating in their own regions. Even by the strictest criteria of neoclassical economics, this approach should not be dismissed as inefficient protectionism, since most of the resources involved in this process would have little or no opportunity cost for society as a whole.[10]

These are the regions that are being left behind, those that have many opportunities to explore creative uses for their resource endowments. Among the most important are projects administered by local community groups to diversify their productive base, using sources of renewable energy and local resources to add value with traditional technologies and practices. The opportunities to seek out new ways of organizing the natural resources base are great and the initiatives to implement such programs are gradually finding respondents interested in exploring this and other alternatives. (Barkin, 1998)

In these regions the redevelopment of the "peasant economy" is both desirable and urgent. It is not simply a matter of rescuing ancient cultures, but rather of taking advantage of an important cultural and productive heritage to provide solutions to the problems of today and tomorrow. *It is not a question of "reinventing" the peasant economy,* but rather of joining with local organizations to carve out political spaces to allow them to exercise their autonomy, to define ways in which their organizations will guide production for themselves and for commerce with the rest of the society. Once again, the technocratic identification of productive mechanisms and the cataloging of systems of indigenous knowledge (which, for example, are now the order of the day among transnational corporations looking for new sources of germplasm for their biotechnological advances), are not going to reverse the structure of discrimination, unless accompanied by effective political participation (Toledo 1998).

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[10]This is crucial. Many analysts dismiss peasant producers as working on too small a scale and with too few resources to be efficient. While it is possible and even necessary to promote increased productivity, consistent with a strategy of sustainable production, as defined by agroecologists, the proposal to encourage them to remain as productive members of their communities should be implemented under existing conditions.

In much of Latin America, if peasants ceased to produce basic crops, the lands and inputs are not often simply transferable to other farmers for commercial output. The low opportunity costs of primary production in peasant and indigenous regions derives from the lack of alternative productive employment for the people and the lands in this sector. Although the people would generally have to seek income in the "informal sector," their contribution to national output would be meager. The difference between the social criteria for evaluating the cost of this style of production and the market valuation is based on the determination of the sacrifices society would make in undertaking one or the other option.

This calls for the formalization of a autonomous production system. By recognizing the permanence of a sharply stratified society, the country will be in a better position to design policies that recognize and take advantage of these differences to improve the welfare of groups in both sectors. A strategy that offers succor to rural communities, a means to productive diversification, will make the management of growth easier in those areas developing links with the international economy. But more importantly, such a strategy will offer an opportunity for the society to actively confront the challenges of environmental management and conservation in a meaningful way, with a group of people uniquely qualified for such activities.[11]

Local autonomy is not new. Unlike today's polarized societies, the proposal calls for creating new structures to permit those communities that *choose* to live in rural areas to receive support from the rest of the nation to implement an alternative regional development program. The new variant starts from the inherited base of rural production, improving productivity by using the techniques of agroecology. It also involves incorporating new activities that build on the cultural and resource base of the community and the region for further development. It requires very site specific responses to a general problem and therefore depends heavily on local involvement in design and implementation. While the broad outlines are widely discussed, the specifics require detailed investment programs.[12]

What is new is the introduction of an explicit strategy to strengthen the social and economic base for an autonomous production system. By recognizing and encouraging the marginal groups to create an alternative that would offer them better prospects for their own development, the approach suggested here might be mistaken to be the simple formalization of the "war on poverty" or "solidarity" approach to the alleviation of the worst effects of marginality. This would be an erroneous understanding, because the key to the proposal is not a simple transfer of resources to compensate groups for their poverty, but rather an integrated set of productive projects that offer rural communities the opportunity to generate goods and services that will contribute to raising their living standards while also improving the environment in which they live.

Three illustrations of how local community projects might contribute to autonomous and sustainable development offer an understanding of the processes we are seeking to identify and promote as part of this project.

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[11]Much of the literature on popular participation emphasizes the multifaceted contribution that the productive incorporation of marginal groups can make to society. (Friedmann 1992; Friedmann and Rangan 1993; Stiefel and Wolfe 1994) While very little has been done on specific strategies for sustainability in poor rural communities, it is clear that much of the experience recounted by practitioners with grassroots groups (e.g. Glade and Reilly 1993) is consistent with the principles enunciated by theorists and analysts like Altieri (1987).

[12]Boyce (1995) offers a specific program for the reconversion of El Salvador based on the principles discussed in this paper. The proposals of groups like the IAF and RIAD offer specific examples of ongoing grassroots efforts to implement initiatives like those discussed in the text. The Centro de Ecología y Desarrollo (Chapela and Barkin 1995) is sponsoring the research program of regional development consistent with the proposed strategy in the area of the Monarch Butterfly.

1) The Biosphere Reserve of the Monarch Butterfly, created in 1986 to protect the species during its annual four month visit, has contributed to impoverish the people and their region, accelerating deforestation and increasing social conflict as public and private agencies attempt to implement local projects that take into account the more than 200,000 visitors to the region. Because the communities have not been integrated into the planning and implementation process, and because they have been excluded from the management program, international and Mexican efforts have had poor effects in taking advantage of the unique confluence of resources and opportunities. In response, the communities are now exploring the possibility of a multi-sectoral program, harnessing geothermal energy and the unique phenomenon of the butterfly for a diversified program of agroindustrial production, quality hotels and year-round tourism in a scheme owned and managed by the local communities (Chapela and Barkin 1995).

2) Like humans, pigs reduce their blood-cholesterol levels and retain less fat in their body when they consume avocados. This finding suggested the possibility of involving local communities in the avocado producing region in a program to change the diets of their backyard animals and intensify the production of hogs; agronomic and veterinary considerations dictate that only small-scale production is possible using this diet. We made contacts with a quality meat packer who agreed to finance the technical and scientific studies required to confirm the dietary qualities of this approach and determine the optimal feeding program for the pigs. Since the animals are cared for principally by women and children, and eat spoiled fruit, the higher price can be expected to have a direct impact on the welfare of the people, strengthening community organization and structure.

3) A more ambitious program involves mobilizing peasant and indigenous communities in the upper reaches of watersheds to improve their water and soil management practices. An evaluation program would quantify the benefits of such a program to water authorities and large-scale users, that would include less costs for maintenance, for drilling and extraction, and for developing new sources of supply, as the conservation efforts have proved effective in significantly increasing supplies for the large and more prosperous users as well as for the peasant communities. These communities would be compensated for their efforts through a trust fund created for the purpose, that would also guarantee quality drinking water supplies in the participating communities. In its pilot stages, this program is proving effective in increasing agricultural productivity in the poorer communities. This program would be particularly beneficial to the women, who are traditionally responsible for water collection, management and disposition, tasks that occupy as much as 35% of the working day in a average peasant community; as it is being implemented, we have observed a direct increased in participation in community governance and more cooperative efforts to resolve local problems as well as join in regional alliances (Barkin, 1999; Barkin and Pailles, 1998).

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