

LIBERALIZATION IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

Institutional and economic changes in Latin
America, Africa and Asia

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NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CENTRAL AMERICAN PEASANTRY

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INTRODUCTION

In Central America, the decade of the 1980s was marked by different attempts to achieve a transition towards socialism. The intent which presented the best perspectives for success was in Nicaragua, where the Sandinista movement was able to assume actual control of the state. However, to an equal degree the experiences of the liberated zones of El Salvador and the insurrectional struggle of indigenous peoples in Guatemala nourished hopes of a change in the model. With time, many peasants who formed part of the revolutionary movements, and particularly those in Nicaragua, formulated serious criticisms regarding the political and economic centralization of the official revolutionary project. They eventually arrived at a fresh perspective on the revolutionary model in the process of development. This explains their unexpected position regarding neoliberalism at the beginning of the decade of the 1990s.

Costa Rica, the only country of the Isthmus exempted of armed struggle within its borders, started the implementation of neoliberal adjustment at the beginning of the 1980s. Nicaragua, on the other hand, due to the socialist orientation of its government, tried to withstand economic adjustment and liberalization as long as possible. However, due to enormous external and internal disadjustments Nicaragua too finally had to proceed in 1986 with the liberalization of the domestic market of basic grains. Still more drastic adjustments were carried out in 1988, as inflation in 1987 reached an accumulated 1,347 per cent and was expected to skyrocket to 13,000 per cent in 1988. At that point, the official exchange rate of seventy córdobas for a dollar was lacking way behind the black market rate where dollars were exchanged at 40,000 córdobas. Production was collapsing in virtually all sectors. The adjustment programme tried to follow the accustomed three-staged path of recovery of the relative prices, reduction of inflation and economic recovery. The opening up of external markets and

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breaking up of the state monopoly on foreign exports and banking, though, lasted until the coming to power of the new elected government in 1990, which also started a privatization programme of state properties.

At the start of the current decade, the Central American peasantry found itself at very particular crossroads, characterized by the end of the armed conflicts, both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, in the region. Hope and optimism reigned, particularly in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and above all in the countryside which had been the scene of the conflicts, with the peasants supplying the dead and wounded from both sides. Given these circumstances, the structural adjustment measures of a neoliberal nature did not receive the expected opposition on the part of the peasantry because they coincided with new hopes for peace, reconciliation, prosperity and economic development. Optimism forged the hope of being able to reverse the unfavourable character of neoliberalism for the poor majority through negotiation, and to take advantage of the policies of privatization and open competition to bring into being their own particular interpretation of the future model, an economic project for the peasantry. This project had been nurtured, in theory as well as in practice, amid the wars of the 1980s.

That which has often been called a lost decade for the Latin American countries, was not lost from the point of view of the Central American peasantry. Rather, in the words of the Costa Rican peasant leader Jorge Hernandez, it was, 'the decade during which the most dynamic processes were developed, in terms of their political presence, insertion [in society] and integration [of the movement]' (*Central American Peasant Organizations* 1993: 7). Hopes for the future were fuelled by the idea that the correlation of forces had suffered a profound change in the countries referred to, despite the fact that the transition to socialism did not lead to the definite conquest of power or the continuance in power. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista Front of National Liberation party (Frente Sandinista de Liberación, FSLN) lost the 1990 elections to a coalition of fourteen opposition parties known as the National Opposition Union (Unión Nacional Opositora, UNO). In El Salvador, the revolutionary movement was unable to achieve power either by force of arms or via the 1994 elections. In Guatemala, the brutal repression prevented the consolidation of the liberated zones and led to an important contingent of refugees in Mexico. There the shared life in the refugee camps of Quintana Roo and Chiapas gave root to new forms of organization which in themselves came to enrich the movement for change in Guatemala now that the refugees have been repatriated.

What then is the peasant project? What are its premises and what are its perspectives for realization, even in times of neoliberalism? We will review these questions on the basis of the experience of the Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (National Union of Farmers and Ranchers, UNAG) of Nicaragua and their criticism of the official Sandinista project.

With these criticisms as a point of departure, they have taken a series of initiatives that have culminated in their own particular doctrine of economic democracy and a peasant project for development. This has captured the imagination of the organized peasantry of the Central American region which, building on the experiences of the UNAG, is carrying out its own process of regional integration. We will be looking at the theory and practice of the peasant mode of appropriation, a process involving the harnessing of resources necessary for the realization of the peasant project. We will further analyse the criticisms of centralized planning within the context of a mixed economy and demonstrate how peasant participation can alter the content of the mixed economy, reducing the role of the state until this gives way to a panorama of negotiated competition between social sectors and the government. In the same way, we will be examining some of the problems that affect the peasant project and which – despite undeniable advances in the construction of their appropriation mode – have produced tensions between the leaders and the grassroots within the peasant movement. We will argue that these problems are due to the fact that development aid capital has not adapted itself to the neoliberal logic, but continues to be channelled from government to government.

THE PEASANT PROJECT

Economic democracy

The peasant project is aimed at economic democracy, in diametrical opposition to the exclusive forms of development which have been the general rule in Central America and which have been fortified still more by neoliberalism. The agrarian reform occupies an important place in this type of democratization, emphasizing the necessity for complementing land redistribution with integral support policies which guarantee credit, agricultural inputs, technical assistance and training to the peasantry. Still more important are adequate price policies so as to assure profitability to those who have been benefited with land. The importance of a coherent price policy lies in the necessity of assuring that the effects of the reform are not undone in the medium run, giving way to a new process of marginalization in which the lands are abandoned, mortgaged or usurped. The concept of economic democracy must involve a betterment in the earnings of the agricultural sector and an improvement in the terms of interchange between city and country in favour of the countryside, especially food producers. Food security plays a central role, ending dependency on imports and donations and inhibiting their use as a means of depressing internal prices and thus undermining the incentive for local production.

A strategy for improving the earnings of the rural sector must be linked to a project for agro-industrial transformation, broadening the process of

cooperative organization to embrace the spheres of purchasing, processing, internal distribution and export. Recently, the Central American peasantry links its strategy towards economic democracy more explicitly to a project for technical development and technological outreach from peasant to peasant. This broadens the technology at the disposition of the producer, including both mechanization and the use of agro-chemicals as well as other types generally referred to as adapted technology. It also includes the concept of sustainable development, which implies a more critical criterion when looking at those technologies which involve a high component of imports. Finally, the concept of democratization is linked to the peasantry's possibilities of gaining access to the flow of national and international capital, by having this be channelled to producers through their own institutions (Núñez Rodríguez 1990; *Estrategia económica y social de la UNAG* 1991).

The peasant mode of appropriation

The crux of the peasant project lies in capturing the largest possible quantity of resources for its realization. We summarize this aspect with the concept of the 'peasant mode of appropriation'. It refers to the measures necessary to achieve control over the aggregate value produced within the agricultural sector, to increase the possibilities for retaining it within the sector, and to reduce the factors which impede such retention. In order to accomplish this, methods are needed to combat the extraction of resources from the peasant sector and from the productive units and to capture resources from other sectors of the economy or from outside. The organized peasantry of the region carries on this struggle on different levels; in addition, they maintain the intention of socializing its use. That is, they wish to make investments subject to a collective criterion so that they, too, be marked within the strategy for economic democratization.

The first form in which this peasant mode of appropriation is expressed is through the formation of cooperatives; the promotion of cooperatives is fundamental. This process must begin with the organization of interest groups, incipient organizations which are structured in order to gain control over certain resources which will serve the group's interests. The interest to be satisfied might be land, for example, giving way to organized land takeovers or to a collective demand issued to the corresponding officials so that lands be ceded to the group. Or it might be production services, giving way to the establishment of grassroots organizations which will take upon themselves the job of purchasing inputs and selling the production, or the foundation of pools of machinery, processing plants or rotating funds, all of a cooperative nature. At the level of each cooperative, the appropriation mode is found in its 'multisectoral' character – the effort of the cooperative to broaden its activities into other sectors of the economy.

the group which comprises the cooperative makes decisions about new investments in order to perform more economic functions for its members and to replace intermediaries with cooperative structures (*Nuevo enfoque* 1982).

The second form involves the establishment of a special financial structure for the peasantry, also of a cooperative character. This should be capable of attracting the savings of all sectors of society and of obtaining access to national and international lines of credit in order to channel these towards the projects that have been prioritized in the policies formulated by the bank. Given that the shareholders in this type of bank are generally farmers and directors of agribusiness, it is possible to guarantee that the bank policies respond to the farmers' interests. The savings funds that the bank attracts are channelled towards projects formulated by the peasants at the grassroots, using selection criteria which go beyond mere profitability. Within the acceptable profit margins, the bank may select those projects that correspond to the development strategy formulated by the organized peasantry, of which those producers who serve on the bank's board of directors should be faithful representatives. The notion of appropriate directors for the sector is implicit in the cooperative structure of such a bank in itself. Although only farmers and cooperatives can be members, the services can be made available to both members and non-members. Money earned through services to non-members, nevertheless, enters the bank as its proper capital. It is worthy of mention that the cooperative bank is considered the motor force of the cooperative movement (Diepenbeek 1990).

The third form is the participation that the grassroots peasant organizations and their superior representations are able to obtain in public investment and in the use of development aid and loans. The level of this participation depends on their having the capability for negotiation, but also on their technical capacity for presenting projects. By the end of the decade of the 1980s, the peasant organizations were well able to comprehend that the key of the moment lay in the investment effort. At the root of the agrarian problem at the time was the peasants' need for autonomy to determine their own development project and for a voice in the decisions made regarding the assignment of those investment resources available within the economy. They demanded that the independent and state technical advisors joined in on the investment effort by offering the cooperatives help in elaborating their own profiles and designing investment plans in accordance with the potential that these revealed (*Plataforma de laucha del movimiento cooperativo* 1989: 12).

The fourth form, speaking by now of a superior level, involves an effective form of integrating the cooperatives, their related economic entities (i.e. the enterprises belonging to peasant organizations) and the union itself in such a way as to constitute a unity or economic bloc. It must be

emphasized that this does not mean that the cooperatives and the farmers' union become one, or that all must be part of the same corporate body. Rather, this unity is aimed at unifying criteria by means of dialogue among the different parts regarding the direction in which to develop. At the same time, the activities of each component member are decentralized, allowing them to dispose of their products in accordance with their own particular criteria. As such, this unity is compatible with the existence of private property. In order to understand such a unity better, we might visualize a process in which the needs of the producers who wish to initiate their own projects for processing and marketing their products are linked up by way of their representative organization (farmers' union) with the technical assistance and national and international capital available. At the same time, the national discussion regarding economic strategy which is promoted by the same union, along with its proposals for policies and positions on the issues of food security and rural agro-industrialization, serves to give feedback and to define the framework for investment decisions at a local level, even more so because they form the banner under which the union is capable of attracting external capital. Through the vertical integration of the parts that compose the unified peasant movement, the peasants scattered nationwide can arrive at unified positions regarding cooperative strategy; the integration between the union and the cooperatives creates mechanisms for implementing this strategy, by having leaders on the different levels who serve in both structures, for example. In short, the basis for all forms of peasant appropriation and of the peasant mode appropriation is the unity among the peasantry.

PLANNING AND THE MIXED ECONOMY

Criticisms of centralized planning

The concept of a peasant mode of appropriation rose from the criticism of centralized planning with its related concentration of investments or accumulation within the state. We will elaborate on this theme in order to better comprehend the peasantry's optimistic expectation that they would be able to take advantage of the neoliberal policies to realize their own economic project. We will analyse the fundamental criticism of centralized planning by referring to Charles Bettelheim's work (1975). In the classic discussions about planning, the focus was above all on the productive part of the economy. Bettelheim imagines a situation in which all of the productive activity is concentrated in one single subject: the state. In such a situation, the flow of merchandise (raw material and intermediate products) would be reduced to zero; that is, the goods lose their mercantile character. The circulation of goods in this situation is merely an internal flow within the state, an interchange of products between dependencies of the same subje-

Bettelheim goes on to argue that complete state control and centralized planning of production is not usually possible in the countries in transition, given the level of development of the productive forces. This implies that different economic subjects will always exist, including in production.

It should be mentioned that, at any rate, there always exists another quantity of economic subjects: the consumers. Having left this reality aside, postulating that the state would know the consumers' necessities and that the level of consumption did not hold any implications for economic growth, is one of the negative elements of the classic form of socialist planning, with lasting effects on the socialist economies which existed in Europe. This type of abstraction originates from the ideas of the economist Mikhail Tugan-Baranovski who affirmed that industry would be able to proportion the effective demand for its own production; that is, that the accumulation process could take place without taking into consideration the level of social consumption (Sweezy 1970: 166; 'Debate sobre el campesinado y la transición' 1989: 40).

Bettelheim argued that there will exist the need for markets and money to make possible the flow of merchandise between the different subjects involved in production (Bettelheim 1975: ch. 2). This has consequences for the plan; in the final analysis, economic planning in such a situation, which represents the normal state of affairs, is reduced to merely reconciling the strategies of each individual enterprise with the overall state economic strategy. This reconciliation becomes the first aspect of the essence of planning.

Nevertheless, such a reconciliation is achieved not only through a process of persuasion, but also through the development of explicit mechanisms that direct the productive and investment activities of the enterprises to make them compatible with a global development strategy. Social control over the direction of development is believed to be assured in this concept of planning because the state has been invested with the power of imposing its priorities on the plan. Although it does not have control over all of the means of production, the state can determine the direction in which the economy will develop, concentrating the investment funds in its own enterprises through the utilization of price policies. The appropriation mode within the context of centralized planning, then, refers to the possibilities of implementing the plan, even in a situation where there is a lack of consensus regarding the global strategy. It refers to ways in which the organ responsible for carrying out the plan can mobilize the necessary means, as well as its technical statistical ability, to make the price policy effective, and, through skilled management of this policy, centre accumulation in the state enterprises. In this way, the plan can be realized in accordance with the global strategy formulated by the state (Dijkstra 1988: 48). We arrive, then, at the second essence of the planning process, the appropriation mode. FitzGerald states with regard to this:

Any planned economy will logically have a 'socialist mode of surplus appropriation' because the immediate economic interests of enterprises cannot be expected to coincide with those of the economy as a whole.... I am arguing here that central planning is about reconciling heterogeneous enterprise strategies with overall economic strategy.

(FitzGerald 1988: 51)

Coexistence of productive forms

Given the economic perspectives of the revolutionary movement, the model in the process of formation has been defined as a mixed economy. In Nicaragua, where, effectively, the aforementioned concept of centralized planning was applied, the mixed economy was reduced to nothing more than the coexistence of different productive forms. None the less, the character of an economic order is not determined by the variation of productive forms in existence but by the issue of decision-making power over production, consumption and distribution, which in turn depends on the ability to control the means of production and the product (Dijkstra 1988: 3-8).

The crux of the problem in Nicaragua lay precisely there, because although different social forms of production coexisted, including state enterprises, cooperatives and private enterprise, with time the state consolidated a type of organization of production and interchange in the territories which gave it 'greater control over the nerve centers of the accumulation processes' (MIDINRA 1987: 67). This 'greater control on the part of the state over the relations of interchange' was established with the explicit goal of 'capturing the surplus value' (*Recomendaciones* 1985: 23). The different forms of production were coordinated 'under the hegemony of the more advanced forms', which, according to the official view, were the state enterprises and the production cooperatives, especially that sector of them known as 'associated enterprises' (*Movimiento cooperativo* 1989: 173-82). The purpose of this arrangement was to capture the surplus value for accumulation in the state, lessening the possibilities of other economic units, including peasant production, of making autonomous decisions about the means of production and the product. That is to say, the fundamental problem with the aforementioned concept of planning is related to the lack of real active participation on the part of the majority. If the model of a mixed economy is to go beyond the mere coexistence of different social forms of production and advance towards the influence of majority groupings on economic development, this protagonistic participation should be established at all levels, especially by allowing peasant incidence in the macroeconomic and investment policies.

Peasant participation

The participation of the peasantry, even in Central America where peasants represent almost half of the population, obviously presents some insuperable problems for governments, even the revolutionary ones. The problem is well illustrated in the works of Orlando Núñez Soto (Director of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria, Centre for Investigation and Study of the Agrarian Reform (CIERA), and close advisor to Commandant Jaime Wheelock, Minister of Agriculture from 1979-90 and also a member of the National Direction of the FSLN during this same period). He understands that the support of the peasantry is vital for the social revolution (Núñez Soto 1987a: 149). The legitimacy of political power can be measured by how well it represents the popular interests in general (Núñez Soto 1987b: 61). But, in contrast to the working class and its 'proletarian project' or 'proletarianization' (Núñez Soto 1987a: 112, 173, 226), the peasantry forms part of a 'residual bloc' (Núñez Soto 1987b: 63). It is true that they cannot be ignored (*ibid.*: 63-64) because they are or could be a majority sector. It may be necessary to maintain the alliance for tactical reasons. At moments of defending power, it may even be necessary at times 'to satisfy the immediate needs and demands of the masses at the cost of economic investment' by 'holding back the advance of the project' (*ibid.*: 66).

Another analyst sums up this dilemma in the following way: if the peasantry is not included in any way, there is a risk of 'losing the willing support of the masses, losing the role of vanguard and the role of leader' (Marchetti 1987: 107). In contrast, if the peasants are fully integrated, there is a risk of 'sealing the process with a very capitalist ink and with the letters of rural backwardness', since their demands or immediate interests may very well go contrary to the proletarian project (*ibid.*: 107). Therefore, since the 'mass movement' in Nicaragua, a country of peasants with some urban middle-class sectors, is not predominantly composed of workers, O. Núñez Soto holds that the guarantee of the project's remaining on a socialist course depends, among other factors, on the predominance of the state in the accumulation process (Núñez Soto 1987a: 77-8).

Concertation

In the face of this predominance of the state and of an accumulation concentrated in the state at the expense of the peasantry, the latter group unleashed in Nicaragua a participatory policy-generating process which culminated in the definition of their own particular development strategy. Their economic project, which can be summed up in the objective of economic democracy, has captured the imagination of the region's peasantry. In order for it to achieve concrete form and in order to construct a

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peasant appropriation mode, a political and organizational strategy has been defined that is characterized by the processes of 'reconciliation' and 'concertation': *reconciliation* between peasants who fought on opposing sides with the goal of building class solidarity; and *concertation*, a term used to indicate the attainment of a negotiated consensus for action, between the peasantry and the wealthy strata of farm producers, with the goal of building unity among all rural producers. Concertation must also be achieved among social sectors and between these and the government with an eye to policy definitions, in order to give shape to a mixed economy with popular participation.

Wilson Campos, coordinator of the Asociación de Organizaciones de Productores Agropecuarios Centroamericanos para la Cooperación y Desarrollo (Association of Central American Peasant Organizations for Cooperation and Development, ASOCODE) observes:

We will come to an agreement and we will generate a peaceful way of living together where the direction of society is not in the hands of the state, but of economic groups which exert pressure upon each other and arrive at concertation. [I would underline at the same time that] social concertation is not necessarily a process effected only between the social sectors and the state. It may well take place among productive sectors and we have advanced in the employment of this alternative. Some of the labour unions have called us Social Democrats and traitors, but one of the lessons that we learned from the war in Central America is that no one sector should dominate the social process.

(Campos 1992: 4-7)

Premises

The mixed economy which effectively delegates decision-making power to the different social sectors, can be viewed as a process of negotiated competition between sectors in similar conditions (Tirado 1988). Peasant participation, then, reduces the role of the state in the economy, which is precisely the point where the premises of the peasant project converge with those of neoliberalism. The state is relegated to the task of guaranteeing macroeconomic stability. FitzGerald sums up these perspectives in the following way:

In a longer term perspective, the new scheme of a mixed economy implies another accumulation model and a different form of planning. ... It requires a more active role on the part of the state bank and the trade and popular organizations, which are then converted into the kingpins of the planning process, from 'above' and from 'below' respectively.

(FitzGerald 1989: 42)

In the case of planning from above, it would be perhaps more accurate to speak of monetary and economic authorities, utilizing among other things the lever of credit. We would add that within the financial system a separate producers' bank can play an additional role for the agricultural sector similar to that anticipated by FitzGerald for the economy as a whole in the case of the state bank. The technical and statistical knowledge is decentralized and based on the quantitative evaluation practices of the economic subjects (*Propuesta* 1988). Price controls continue to be important so that the decisions arrived at through concertation are not undone and in order to guarantee, through skilled management, economic stability for the producers. Within this type of mixed economy, though, there exists no set blueprint for the future; there is no guarantee that in the end the producers can make concrete those projects that they have defined as strategic. Still, the unions, as we will see below, are preparing to play their role.

None the less, from the point of view of the peasants, the state is also called upon to assume certain facets of economic life and to back up their initiatives for maintaining themselves as a force on the economic scene at moments when they are weak. That is, according to this conception, the state has the responsibility for preventing the marginalization of the producers.

THE APPROPRIATION MODE

Peasant unity

Following the signing of the Peace Accords by the region's Presidents in Esquipulas, Guatemala in 1987, the chiefs of state initiated a series of summit meetings aimed at resolving the armed conflicts and promoting the economic and political coordination. With the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua, the different heads of government began to move more definitely in the direction of economic and political integration. The reorientation of economic policies was profoundly influenced by neoliberalism: liberation of prices, reductions of import taxes, allowing international competition in the internal consumption markets, elimination of subsidies, promotion of agro-exportation, restrictions on credit and public investment, privatization of state enterprises and an end to agrarian reform.

Obviously, these measures signified a particularly brusque change in the case of Nicaragua. The position of the UNAG in the face of these changes, nevertheless, was unexpectedly positive. This influential union, founded in 1981 as a branch of the Sandinista Front in the countryside, had developed by the mid-1980s a strong criticism of the state monopoly in banking and export trade, as well as its criticism of the price controls on domestic trade and the lack of real peasant participation in policy definitions. Using the rhetoric of neoliberalism and taking advantage of the new government's

need to prove its legitimacy, they gave their support in the concertation sessions to the official proposals for the shrinking of the state apparatus, the liberation of foreign trade, the reform of the financial sector, and the joint elaboration of a development strategy. In exchange for this, they demanded the democratization of the economy and guarantees for the agrarian reform. Together with the labour unions, they also achieved an agreement whereby only 30 per cent of the state enterprises in the agricultural sector would be returned to those who had owned them before the Sandinista expropriations, while 21 per cent were to be turned over to peasants who had been commanders and soldiers of the counter-revolutionary army, 17 per cent to ex-officers of the Sandinista army, and 32 per cent to the workers on these same state enterprises. In this way, a quantity of land equal to one-quarter of the total area affected by the agrarian reform since 1979 were redistributed in only two years (Blokland 1992: 90-1; 'El rompecabezas de la propiedad' 1992: 19).

Privatization, according to UNAG, represents an option which allows the sector to conquer the processing and marketing means necessary for their appropriation mode. This demands the transfer of such installations outside of any official bidding processes, that is, by negotiation. Their first achievement in this respect was the acquisition of the slaughterhouse Carnes Nicaraguenses (CARNIC), the largest in Nicaragua, with an annual capacity for 100,000 head of cattle. CARNIC was transformed into a cooperative owned and managed jointly with the installation's workers. In this same period, UNAG invested in the coffee processing plant in Matagalpa which was a central pivot in their plan to establish themselves as the largest single coffee-exporting firm in Nicaragua; in fact, they were able to purchase and export 12 per cent of the coffee harvest of 1991-2. The cooperative enterprise Empresa Cooperativa de Productores Agropecuarios (ECODEPA), founded in 1986 as an importer and distributor of farm supply merchandise, was reorganized in 1990 as a multisectoral cooperative, expanding their field of action to include industrialization, services and the channelling of the savings of members of cooperatives. In subsequent years the progress of this strategy can be observed in the new installations which have been established, the founding of the rural savings and loan cooperatives, and more recently the opening of the Banco del Campo (Rural Bank).

We have considered it necessary to offer a particularly extensive treatment of the Nicaraguan case because it set the tone for the organized peasantry in the rest of the countries, in terms of their position in regard to neoliberalism. Operating from similar premises of unity among peasants, concertation with other rural sectors, and the concertation of the whole sector with the government, the other peasant organizations of the region also became convinced that they would be able to take advantage of the policies of integration and economic liberalization for developing their own peasant project.

Although the organization of the peasantry in associations and cooperatives is a very recent phenomenon in Nicaragua, dating from the FSLN triumph of 1979, its influence in the region has been great. This is in part due to the fact that in 1984 UNAG established an active alliance with donor groups from the northern countries of Europe, particularly the Swedish Cooperative Centre. This has helped to reinforce with concrete actions the active role that UNAG wished to play internationally. The Swedish aid also gave a new impulse to the Confederación de Cooperativas del Caribe y Centro América (Caribbean and Central American Confederation of Cooperatives, CCC-CA) and in this way to the affiliation of cooperative organizations of the region with the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). Daniel Niñez Rodríguez, President of the UNAG since 1984, occupied the presidency of the CCC-CA in 1989, and in 1992 was elected President of the regional ICA. From 1990 onwards and following in the path of the integration efforts between countries, the peasant movement has reinforced its own integration process. In coordinating meetings held during 1990, the leaders of the Isthmus elaborated a document titled *Development Demands Concertation* emphasizing the need for political and economic concertation, the push for agrarian transformation, respect for the distinctive cultures, and the effective participation of the small and medium producers (*Central American Peasant Organizations* 1993: 7).

In 1991 the first regional peasant conference was held to discuss the future structure of peasant coordination. A productive proposal was approved for the tenth presidential summit, which was accepted and integrated into number 35 of the summit's final declaration. In December of 1991, ASOCODE was founded with its seat in Managua, Nicaragua, as a definitive coordination structure subordinated to the national organizational processes. The principal task of ASOCODE is to facilitate and support the national efforts for peasant coordination and concertation in all of the countries of the Isthmus. An initial count of all the affiliated organizations indicates that ASOCODE represents 1.4 million producers of the Central American region, including Panama and Belize.

In the first year since the founding of ASOCODE, national coordinating bodies were created in Belize, Panama and Guatemala, product of the promotion and emphasis on concertation within the agricultural sector. In Costa Rica and El Salvador this process had taken place previously, while in Nicaragua the UNAG was already functioning as a confederation of different organizational modalities, with the Federación Nacional de Cooperativas Agropecuarias y Agroindustriales (National Federation of Agro-Cooperatives, FENACCOOP) included under its wing. At this time the establishment of the Coordinadora Nacional Campesina (National Peasant Coordinating Commission, CNC) was also achieved in Nicaragua, product of a spectacular process of reconciliation initiated by Daniel Niñez, President of UNAG, with those peasants who formed part of the

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counter-revolutionary army (Nicaraguan Resistance). This CNC served more as an expression of the level of reconciliation that had been achieved in Nicaragua than as a functioning organism in the sense that its name might indicate. The Presidents responded to the consolidation of the Association by recognizing in the final declaration of their Thirteenth Summit in 1992 the right of peasant and other organizations to assume a participatory role in the design and execution of agricultural and food production policies (*Central American Peasant Organizations* 1993: 7-13).

Recently the integration of the popular movement has made yet another advance with the establishment of the Iniciativa Civil de Integración y Cooperación (Civil Initiative for Central American Integration, ICIC), which includes the aforementioned organizations ASOCODE and CCC-CA, but also the Confederación Centroamericana de Trabajadores (Central American Confederation of Workers, COCENTRA), the Central American Concertation (Non-Governmental Organizations, NGOs), the Frente Continental de Organizaciones Comunes (Continental Front of Common Organizations), the Confederación Centroamericana de la Pecuaria Empresa (Central American Confederation of Small and Medium Industry, CONCAPE) and others.

The cooperative movement

The peasant movement's tendency towards unification in the region is undeniable. This is of great importance in laying the foundation for the peasant mode of appropriation. We can also see progress in other aspects, notably in the cooperative movement. According to data from the Organization of American States (OAS), in 1963 there were no more than 387 cooperative enterprises of any kind with 53,532 members in all of the five Central American countries and Panama. In 1986, the number of cooperatives had increased to 7,589 with a total of 1,033,900 members.

The growth was spectacular in Nicaragua, where in 1963 there were only 43 cooperatives, against 3,570 in 1986. As in Honduras and El Salvador, the increase in Nicaragua was a result of the impulse towards cooperative organization given by the agrarian reform. As a result, 65 per cent of the region's cooperatives are agricultural, although at the same time these cooperatives have relatively fewer members, representing only 26 per cent of the total number of cooperative members, taking into consideration all the different forms of cooperatives.

The agrarian reform in Honduras was begun in 1962 but promoted with greater emphasis in the decade of the 1970s. A total of 383,850 hectares, representing 14 per cent of the total area of farm production, was reasigned, forming in this way 2,650 units with 63,000 participants; 29 per cent of these production units are registered as cooperatives (Ruben and Fúñez 1993).

In Nicaragua, the Sandinista government intervened in 1,592,000 hectares, equivalent to 28 per cent of the land area dedicated to farm production. With these lands they consolidated a state area that in 1989 comprised 664,000 hectares; at the same time, 77,430 people were benefited with the remaining 928,000 hectares. The beneficiaries organized themselves in production cooperatives of a collective nature. In addition to this, the cooperative movement in Nicaragua received a push from the broad expansion of credit. The banks extended their credit coverage to the point where the number of loan recipients increased nearly three times between 1978 and 1981. This level was maintained until 1988 when the Sandinista government began to apply a series of structural adjustment measures (Blokland 1992: 90-1, 117).

In El Salvador, the agrarian reform was launched via decrees through which the peasantry eventually recuperated 282,225 hectares, equivalent to 19 per cent of the land; in this way 81,000 families were benefited by 1989 (Goitia 1991: 172). The popular movement was able to overcome its initial opposition towards a reform project of a counterinsurgent nature. The cooperative members themselves were able to reconstitute their representative federation and in 1988 the *Confederación de Federaciones de la Reforma Agraria Salvadoreña* (Confederation of Salvadoran Agrarian Reform Federations, CONFRAS) was founded with an initial membership of 89,000 people representing 161 cooperatives from four federations. Following this, another four federations were affiliated, so that today CONFRAS includes 346 cooperatives, including some cooperatives from the traditional sector as well as the agrarian reform cooperatives.

In Costa Rica, the number of production cooperatives is more limited: 155 with 48,200 members since the agrarian reform was applied on a lesser scale here, involving some 6 per cent of the land. In Guatemala, where the most important attempt to carry out an agrarian reform was frustrated in 1954, there are 462 cooperatives in existence with 50,000 members (Goitia 1991: 173).

Despite the advances, there was a notable tendency towards decollectivization at the end of the 1980s. It was initially expressed in Nicaragua by opposition to the formation of the state area and in peasant pressure that the state farms be turned over to peasant groups. This aspect of the decollectivization process culminated with the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, after which first the outgoing Sandinista government itself and later the UNO government reassigned the state farms. The reassignment of land on the part of the Sandinista government was carried out in a hasty manner, in the period just before they handed over the reins of government. Those benefited were generally the high army officers and government officials. This period is referred to as '*la piñata*' in reference to a popular children's game in which a papier mâché doll is broken open, producing a rain of sweets. Simforiano Cáceres, UNAG leader, has referred to those benefited -

in particular the colonels of the Sandinista army - as 'the untouchables' ('*El rompecabeza de la propiedad*' 1992: 17).

We have already made reference to the fact that in this reordering the peasantry achieved a new deepening of the land distribution process, although the emphasis placed by subsequent governments to redistribute lands while maintaining the integrity of big landholdings favours the emergence of a new landholding class of former army commanders, trade union and cooperative directors. Anyhow, this phase of the decollectivization process did not weaken so much the advances previously reported. Nevertheless, in Nicaragua and other countries with an important reformed sector, the tendency towards decollectivization was expressed on a later occasion by the growing individualization of production in the agricultural cooperatives, the increasing peasant pressure to divide up the farm lands, and even the sale of lands received during the agrarian reform. This phenomenon has been observed with great concern, and at different times prominent peasant leaders have opposed it. In the opinion of CONFRAS of El Salvador the agrarian policy of the government was marked within the framework of neoliberalism and pointed exclusively towards the parcelling out of the cooperatives' lands. With this policy, they aimed to effect an organic dismantling of the cooperatives, converting them into more manageable associations of individuals and forcing them to turn back the clock towards family subsistence production (*Proyecto* 1993).

In a similar vein, the Honduran School of Economists took a negative view of the Law for the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector because it facilitated 'the sale of their lands and other goods by the cooperatives, putting the stability of the movement in danger' (Ruben and Fúñez 1993). A quantitative analysis of the phenomenon however, although not a complete tally, shows that it may involve some 3-5 per cent of the reformed land in Honduras (ibid.). Generally the tendency is related to the lack of a complementary policy that would permit the transformation of the reassigned farms into viable enterprises. 'The property problem is a problem of people without economic potential and without investment potential', expresses Simforiano Cáceres, leader of FENACCOOP ('*El rompecabeza de la propiedad*' 1993: 17). Cases of former owners who threaten the poor in order to take a small parcel away from them are rare, and the cooperatives that are under menace 'are few in number' according to Cáceres (ibid.: 17).

It is worth asking, then, if in the long run the opposition to the process of parcelling out the cooperative land and to its ultimate consequence, the sale of land, has not been exaggerated; forgetting in the process that decollectivization is related to the fact that the members of the cooperatives in the region oppose the above-mentioned emergence of a new landholding class. It should also be noted that this cooperative movement is passing over into another stage that is characterized by an attempt at economic recovery and to gen-

erate economic potential for the rural poor. In the former stage, the collective character imposed on the agricultural cooperatives fulfilled important functions: (a) it incited those demanding land to organize their demand; (b) it assured the defence of the conquered land by the new ownership group against any attempts of counter-reform (particularly important in the case of the countries at war); and (c) it guaranteed that the land would remain in the hands of the social strata to be benefited, since it permitted members to enter and leave the cooperative without affecting the quantity of reformed land, which continued to belong to the agrarian reform sector. However, in a later stage, the members opt to transform the farm into the source of their family progress. Towards this end they seek to parcel out the collective lands and have each member's parcel inscribed in their own name, since this permits family investment and the incorporation of the part-time labour of women and children into the work routine. In this stage, the concern of the peasants no longer centres on the acquisition of land, but revolves around the objective conditions for making it produce and for being able to obtain some profit from it. This coincides with a greater emphasis in organizing production services. In this phase, the peasantry works to organize cooperatives which can serve them in matters of credit, inputs, processing and marketing of their product. The censuses of cooperatives show that, effectively, the 8,044 cooperatives that existed in the region in 1989 had diminished to 5,366 in 1992-3, due to a 45 per cent decline in the agricultural production cooperatives. On the other hand, during the same period the number of credit and service cooperatives increased (*Realidad* 1994: 50-8).

This reality demonstrates that we are in the presence of a restructuring of the cooperative movement in the region, moving from being a sector with a strong productive inclination to one characterized by credit and service activities.

(*Realidad* 1994: 57)

Given this evolution, references such as that of CONFRAS to 'dismantling the cooperatives' and conversion to 'manageable associations of individuals' may say something about the intentions of the Salvadorean government, but do not reflect the reality of the situation, which is that the peasantry is constructing other complements to their appropriation mode. Perhaps this reality can be better described as CONFRAS itself did in another section, i.e. as a challenge for the cooperative movement to be able to convert their protagonism as a popular movement during the war into an economic and productive protagonism in this period of peace (*Proyecto* 1993).

Final observations and conclusion

In summary, important advances were made during the period referred to, in terms of the recuperation of the land and to the benefit of 12 per cent of

the peasant families. This in itself served as a basis for strengthening the peasant movement in a political and organizational sense. As a result, the peasant organizations are now recognized as representative forces by their governments and in the majority of the countries mechanisms for dialogue and concertation with regard to policy implementation have been established. In the area of economics, we can observe in the last few decades the expansion of the cooperative movement in the agricultural sector and in others, partly as a result of the actions of the organized peasantry. One indication of this is that 21 per cent of the peasants belong to cooperatives (Baumeister 1991: 226). The cooperative sector represented in the CCC-CA, which includes agricultural and service cooperatives as well as those of urban origin, represents between 30 and 35 per cent of the regional Gross National Product (GNP) ('La integración desde abajo': 45). Cooperative enterprises in Nicaragua and El Salvador manage around 15 per cent of the coffee exports, one of the most important branches of foreign trade (Hansen and Romero 1993: 9). The Banco del Campo as the financial expression of the organized peasantry, together with the important experiences in local savings and loan associations promoted by the NGO's in Nicaragua, form the germ of a popular system of financial intermediation. In this way, the progress of the peasantry towards the construction of their own appropriation mode is undeniable.

PEASANT DISILLUSIONMENT

New demands on the cooperative movement

In closing, two problems should be pointed out which lie in the way of further progress and the consolidation of the appropriation mode. Due to the complexity of national and international economic relations, a cooperative organization as a local phenomenon no longer has the possibility of maintaining itself without representation and backing from a superior level from the beginning. The predominance of international interactions, open economies and international competition produces a situation where the local cooperatives alone do not have sufficient force to counteract their submission to the market (Diepenbeek 1988: 46-7), or to be able to defend themselves from the manipulations of the wealthy in search of ways to consolidate their power (Griffith and James 1981: 66). Cooperatives established in the Central American countries must begin operations on a larger scale than did those in Europe during a comparable stage of development. It is no coincidence that organisms such as ECODEPA and the Banco del Campo in Nicaragua have established themselves first as national enterprises which must disseminate and broaden their operations and social base, instead of being constituted from local organizations which over time have consolidated themselves into superior structures. These cases occur because

it is the only way that they can stand up to the external forces. The result is not necessarily different from an organization born at the grassroots level; the important thing is the capacity of the peasantry to control its own destiny (Szekely 1977: 1484).

By necessity, these large structures should involve producers of different strata, including the wealthy, since their initial establishment requires a large investment which can only be obtained with the inclusion of those who have capital. This is, in effect, the economic base of the concentration process. Moreover, in order for ECODEPA to be created, for example, the existence of UNAG was necessary. In an economic context adverse to this type of private initiative, as was the prevalent climate in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s, the farmers' union provided the decisive support necessary for bringing the idea into being (Kjeller 1986). It is for this reason that the concept of peasant unity which forms the basis for the appropriation mode postulates the integration of both the cooperatives (economic branch) and the union (the political branch of the peasant movement).

External capital and neoliberal logic

The second problem arises in the process of carrying out the explicit objective of socializing the use of the resources captured or retained through the functioning of the appropriation mode. Under the circumstances described in the previous paragraph, how can the domination of the cooperatives by the wealthy producers be avoided? That is to say, economic democracy requires the establishment of some large cooperatives with considerable initial capital, but it also requires measures that guarantee the participation of the small and medium producers.

The slaughterhouse CARNIC, which UNAG acquired as a result of the privatization process, could perfectly well continue to operate on the basis of the programming of the large producers, with some sporadic additions from other production cooperatives. In order to broaden the small producers' access to this facility, supply networks should be structured between the communities and the country's capital, and there should be an organized attempt to purchase the small producers' cattle. This signifies a great effort and also an enormous investment. However, this need for investment funds comes up against the logic of the flow of international capital, which is directed at the government. Despite all the neoliberal rhetoric about the necessary shrinking of the state apparatus and the role of private industry, this flow of capital continues to be directed from government to government only, or from intergovernmental organisms to governments. The governments of the region pass on neither these funds, nor their own investment funds to the cooperative sector, save in a very minimum percentage: the cooperation from all sources received by the cooperatives of the region has been a mere US\$27.9 million in 1992-3 (*Realidad* 1994).

On a world level, a mere 13 per cent of official aid is channelled directly through the NGOs of the wealthy countries to finance projects of the civil society in the developing countries. Our own calculations indicate that a maximum of 15 to 20 per cent of this flow goes to peasant organizations in all of their different expressions. That is to say, only some 2.6 per cent of all official external aid is directed to the peasant organizations.

With time, criticism of the neoliberal model has increased among peasant leaders, so that by the middle of the 1990s even the leaders of the big landholding export-oriented farmers' associations of Nicaragua, together with others from the more genuinely peasant sectors came out to head the protest marches against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the neoliberal policies. Obviously, the opposition to these policies was fiercer in Nicaragua, because over the period 1991-4 Nicaragua saw its per capita income drop by 12 per cent, whereas Costa Rica, for example, showed an increase over that same period of 10 per cent, like the three other Central American countries which showed increases ranging from 1.3 per cent in Honduras to 9.6 per cent in El Salvador. Despite the manifestations of the peasant leadership against neoliberalism, the hope of being able to utilize the neoliberal logic in order to mobilize support for the peasant project remains prevalent.

The opposite is true at the grassroots level of the peasantry where the disillusionment is general, given that their possibilities for realizing their personal projects of family well-being have proven to be null in the face of low prices for their products, credit restrictions, reduction in public services, tax increases and the resurgence of violence in the countryside, this time of an economic nature with emphasis on assaults, banditry and cattle rustling. To this, one must add that the peasant movement has not been able to structure branched networks linked to the large cooperatives in order to guarantee that the small and medium producers actually obtain some advantage from the movement's increased capacity for exportation, processing, financial intermediation and marketing. Above all this, the land problem persists and continues to affect hundreds of thousands of peasants.

In the middle of the decade of the 1990s then, there has been a great divorce between the peasant grassroots and their leaders. This is directly related to the lack of socialization of the achievements made in the construction of peasants' own economic project and the reluctance of those who finance development to reorient their capital flow towards peasant projects, in the way that the neoliberal logic itself would indicate.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we can derive the following conclusions from this review of the peasant project in the era of neoliberalism. The neoliberal policies satisfy the needs of the peasant project in two major aspects: they bring

back economic dynamism enabling economic recovery, as can be learned from the increases in per capita incomes after 1990 in most Central American countries; second, they give room for economic groups like the organized peasantry to take its share of the cake, especially because neoliberal policies respond to their demand that the state should draw back from economic affairs, retracting its influence over the 'nerve centres of the accumulation process', which it used to manipulate in order to channel off surplus value at the expense of the peasantry.

However, in a neoliberal system this contraction of the state is accomplished through privatizing enterprises and diminishing public services, often the rural ones. The correlative premise of the peasant project was that the changes would be accompanied by a reorientation of the state functions, in which the state would be required to adapt to the new economic logic by assuming a role in strengthening the position of those groupings which suffered the greatest difficulties in inserting or maintaining themselves within the newly reordered economy. That is, that the state would assume the job of avoiding new forms of marginalization. This has in no way taken place.

Moreover, half a century after Bretton Woods, international organizations and governments continue to channel development aid and loans to governments, instead of serving the private sector, largely composed of small and medium producers. Nor do these donors pressure the recipient governments to adapt to the logic of neoliberalism by giving priority to these sectors in their investment programmes. This presents a serious obstacle to the full realization of the peasant project, i.e. to the democratization of the rural economy, and has led instead to new contradictions between leaders of the peasant movement and the rank-and-file. Should the resulting disillusionment continue to increase – and this is most likely to occur in Nicaragua – it could well form the basis for peasant uprisings.

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