

PEASANT POLITICS IN  
LATIN AMERICA :  
Case Studies of Rural Mexico

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*STRUCTURES OF DOMINATION AND PEASANT MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA.* By PETER SINGLEMANN. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981. Pp. 241. \$20.00.)

*A LEGACY OF PROMISES.* By GUILLERMO DE LA PEÑA. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Pp. 289. \$25.00.)

*THE FIRST AGRARISTAS.* By ANN L. CRAIG. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983. Pp. 318. \$28.50.)

The study of peasant society and agrarian politics has become an increasingly active field of academic research over the past several decades. Such research has been mainly concerned with examining the economic changes underlying the many agrarian-based political upheavals found throughout the twentieth century, starting with the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and continuing at present in such countries as Guatemala and El Salvador. Latin America in particular has been chosen by many North American scholars as a geographical region for developing or testing different hypotheses concerning the political behavior of the rural inhabitants of the so-called Third World. The kind of research being done in this area is becoming increasingly specialized and sophisticated. This trend becomes especially evident when one examines the many recent studies dealing with Mexico, a country whose agrarian problems and political system have been more thoroughly investigated than any other region in Latin America. Such recent studies, which frequently focus on hitherto neglected or less known areas, are providing the basis for new interpretations.

The examination of peasant politics as a field of study is also strongly interdisciplinary. Political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians tend to address themselves to the same issues, and they have been inspired by the same group of scholars who preceded them. For instance, nearly all authors read and quote from the works of Barrington Moore (1966), Eric Wolf (1969), and Jeffrey Paige (1975), all of whom have compared peasant-based revolutions in various parts of

the world during different time periods. At the same time, scholars from different disciplines are constantly returning to classical works dealing with agrarian change in Europe in the nineteenth century. Such cross-fertilization or collaboration among different scholars is obvious in the three books under review in this essay. Despite differences in the level of analysis and techniques used in the actual data collection, political scientist Ann Craig, anthropologist Guillermo de la Peña, and sociologist Peter Singelmann all perform historical analysis and use it to comment on the contemporary situation in the countryside in Latin America. All three authors are concerned with tracing linkages between local, regional, and national levels. Each of them also analyzes the development of agrarian struggles between peasants and landowners in terms of the gradual breakdown of traditional patron-client bonds that accompanies the process of economic modernization or the continued penetration of capitalism in the countryside. Likewise, all three are interested in looking at how the process of cooptation and manipulation of the peasant struggle results in new ties of dependency involving the modern state. Where these authors differ is the extent to which they choose to focus on the local social system as opposed to the broader national social system and whether or not they are more concerned with presenting new data or with developing broad generalizations based on studies already undertaken by previous researchers.

Peter Singelmann's *Structures of Domination and Peasant Movements in Latin America* is the most general of the three works under discussion. A historically-oriented sociologist, he draws extensively on social exchange theory in order to account for changes in the relationships among peasants, landowners, and other social classes described by previous writers. He uses this framework to develop a synthesis of previous theories of peasant revolutions, including that of Theda Skocpol (1979). Singelmann is primarily interested in what happens on the local level. He believes that microstructural propositions "tend to have a greater potential for generalization," while recognizing that micro- and macrostructural phenomena are interdependent (p. 9). After a general review of the literature, including a discussion of network theory and models of "traditional" peasant behavior, Singelmann discusses various aspects of both vertical relations between peasants and landowners and horizontal relations among peasants themselves. These chapters precede his presentation of an alternative model of peasant behavior in chapter 9. This alternative model consists of six formal propositions about peasant behavior. The third part of *Structures of Domination* (seven chapters) converts these six propositions into thirteen hypotheses concerning the transformation of patron-client relations as landowning patrons lose their virtually absolute monopoly over institutional coercion and economic resources. Many of these thirteen hypotheses, which are

couched in terms of relationships between independent and dependent variables, comprise a more precise and systematic reformulation of the insights of previous scholars into peasant political behavior. Singelmann points out that these hypotheses were formulated "to state associations between constructs, not empirical indicators," that no systematic quantification was attempted, and that the evidence was selected from well-known peasant movements in Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, and Guatemala (p. 120). For a more precise idea of the nature of these formulations, consider proposition three as an example: "In patron-campesino relationships, campesinos will actively seek improved outcomes in these or alternative relationships" (p. 120). From this proposition, for example, Singelmann develops his sixth hypothesis, which states that the likelihood of peasant movements increases as the paternalistic benefits from the patron-campesino relationship decline for the campesino (p. 136).

While Singelmann's book deals with the economic, political, and psychological dimensions of peasant behavior in a sophisticated manner, his propositions and hypotheses are derived from historical or sociological accounts that tend to use a bipolar model of rural society. This bipolar model might well fit the traditional quasi-feudal hacienda system described in chapter 4, but such a model would scarcely be applicable to many parts of even "traditional" Latin America. A discrepancy thus exists between Singelmann's general theoretical framework, which is based on a sophisticated social exchange theory, and his rather simplistic analysis of the class structure of rural Latin America. For example, his comments on prerevolutionary Mexico, from which he draws many of his examples, present the picture of a polarized rural class structure, characterized by a handful of *hacendados* exploiting a mass of equally downtrodden peons, sharecroppers, and Indian communities. Singelmann thus seems to subscribe to an interpretation widely held by many historians and official spokesmen of the Mexican Revolution alike. His references to postrevolutionary Mexico, dealing with the partial successes and failure of peasant movements, likewise seem to support an analysis of contemporary Mexico that portrays a fairly homogeneous peasantry subordinated to the state and to urban politicians. Examples from other countries reinforce this polarized image of peasants pitted against either huge landowners or a new urban elite.

Recently, a number of writers (including the author of this review) have shown how a rural middle class of small landowners, rich peasants, and capitalist tenant farmers had already appeared long before the Mexican Revolution. This class, which included the *rancheros* (once incorrectly depicted as a type of subsistence farmer), has played an important role in the turbulent events of the twentieth century. Such

analyses of a more complex, if no less exploitative, class structure raise the important question of whether such intermediate rural strata should be labeled as clients or as patrons, as peasants or as bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, while one can criticize Singelmann's analysis of the class structure of rural Mexico or any other Latin American country, his propositions, if phrased in a more general manner, could be applied to many types of patron-client relationships or to the interaction of other social classes at the local level. When thus applied in a flexible manner (that is, by specifying who are the patrons and campesinos in any particular situation), Singelmann's hypotheses could explain the changing balance of power between, for instance, poor peasants and commercial landowning farmers (known as *pequeños propietarios*) or between *ejidatarios* and the rural credit bank in rural Mexico. Indeed, my own case study of Pisaflores (Schryer 1980), which deals with the emergence of land invasions in the 1970s, confirms Singelmann's sixth hypothesis described above. Despite incorrect interpretations of specific historical events and an overly schematic model of the class structure of agrarian societies, *Structures of Domination* does provide a useful set of propositions for analyzing agrarian politics on the local level. At the same time, his use of fairly standard, but now outdated, studies also illustrates the need for more detailed in-depth case studies and a greater emphasis on regional variations. This lacuna is being partially filled by books like those by de la Peña and Craig under review here.

Guillermo de la Peña's *A Legacy of Promises* is almost too broad to fit within its own category of an anthropological monograph because it tries to cover the entire past three centuries of the Morelos highlands of Mexico. The historical part of the analysis is uneven for two reasons. First, little information is provided for the important nineteenth century, although this dearth is understandable because of the lack of good historical material on this period. Second, de la Peña's treatment of the earlier colonial period, unlike his own anthropological analysis of contemporary Morelos, is largely based on secondary, rather than primary, sources. Moreover, he tends to generalize too much about the entire highland region on the basis of data primarily collected in just one village, Tlayacapan. Despite these minor flaws, however, de la Peña succeeds in combining several levels of analysis ("historical and contemporary, macrosocial and microsocal") through his detailed examination of the articulation of the village and national economy and the relationships between local, regional, and national power holders (p. 250). A common theme running throughout *A Legacy of Promises* is the ubiquitous influence of the Mexican state. His case study illustrates particularly well how this national state affects the lives of people in rural areas. His case study also provides real insight into the manner in

which individuals belonging to different social classes in such rural regions adapt and respond to the uneven development so characteristic of modern Mexico.

After two short introductory chapters that provide the setting for his case study, de la Peña traces the history of the region up to the middle of the twentieth century. He shows how the economy of the highlands was inexorably linked to that of neighboring valleys because the highlands of Morelos provided seasonal migratory labor as well as grain surpluses for the sugar haciendas in the more prosperous lowlands. The dynamics of local politics and the evolution of local ceremonial life are also explored. The fifth chapter provides a transition between the historical and contemporary parts of the monograph. Here the author deals with the region's response to the rapid economic growth and industrialization of Mexico as a whole, which started in the 1940s. During this period, rapid population increase and the introduction of new technology, together with new patterns of migration, led to a diversification of the local agricultural economy, exemplified especially by the spread of commercial tomato production. According to de la Peña, the general outcome of all these changes has been "both more wealth and more poverty" (p. 145). He further shows that the risks involved in local agriculture, together with a low level of capitalization, have facilitated the manipulation of personal links based on kinship and trust. The next two chapters, which deal with the dynamics of agriculture and contemporary rituals, present detailed case studies of different peasant farmers to illustrate the logic of decision making involved in their growing and marketing of corn and tomatoes and their participation in local ceremonies. De la Peña demonstrates that fictive kinship, the extended family, and other seemingly "traditional" institutions continue to play an important part in the adaptation of Morelos highlanders to the modern world. The final chapter deals more directly with politics by examining various factional disputes that involve both priests and local politicians.

De la Peña's case study could be used to illustrate further Singelmann's thesis of the way in which old patron-client bonds become transformed into their modern functional equivalents in the process of "modernization." Local politics in the Morelos highlands are a good example of a new kind of dependency by local actors on political patrons in Mexico's highly centralized one-party system. Indeed, Singelmann and de la Peña, whose books both appeared in 1981, share a similar theoretical perspective. Each of them utilizes Peter Blau's brand of exchange theory in order to analyze the behavior of peasants on the local level (Blau 1964). Both also combine Blau's theory with a broader Marxian perspective when dealing with the ways in which the large society and the state impinge on local communities. Unfortunately, de-

spite a basic similarity in their overall approaches, they use different brands of technical jargon peculiar to their respective disciplines. Singelmann refers to the literature in social psychology and coins his ideas in terms of a series of formulations, propositions, and hypotheses (in numerical order), while de la Peña relies on such terms as *social field* and *power domain*, which have been formulated by political anthropologists specializing in the study of complex societies.

In comparing the two books, Singelmann's abstract theoretical framework is more concise and sophisticated, while de la Peña's analysis of actual peasant behavior is far richer and more insightful. In his portrayal of village life in all of its complexity, de la Peña shows that vertical relationships, or patron-client bonds among different strata of the peasantry, may well appear in the guise of "horizontal" reciprocity, regardless of the presence or nature of external patrons. His study also throws doubt on Singelmann's proposition that the increasing strength of horizontal linkages are directly proportional to the decline in vertical ties.

The area studied by Ann Craig, the Altos de Jalisco, differs from the Morelos highlands examined by Guillermo de la Peña in reputedly being one of the more conservative regions of rural Mexico. An area that did not experience violent peasant uprisings at the time of the Revolution, it is also a region characterized by smaller or medium-sized properties often referred to as ranchos (in some ways similar to the area where I did my research). Craig's *The First Agraristas* deals primarily with the development of an agrarian reform movement rooted in "non-violent politics and the work experiences of those who petitioned the government for land" in a region generally not associated with the implementation of land reform in response to grass roots pressures (p. 6). Like de la Peña, Craig focuses on the links between local, state, and national leaders and the way in which the national political system utilized and manipulated the local agrarian movement in order to consolidate its own power. Following both Singelmann and de la Peña, she also examines how such factors as increasing contact with the outside world (especially through seasonal migratory labor) facilitate political risk taking by local peasants or small-town artisans. While *The First Agraristas* includes a broader analysis of the political economy of the region under investigation, it lacks the kinds of detailed information on the social structure, culture, and microeconomics on the village level found in an anthropological account such as de la Peña's study. As a political scientist, Craig focuses to a much greater extent on the biographies of local political leaders and on what roles such individuals played in the local, regional, or national arenas. In this area, her methodology, which involved extensive interviews with veterans of the local agrarian movement (including those no longer living in the region),

fills in some vital details not usually found in the studies of more conventional historians or anthropologists doing archival research and fieldwork.

The first two chapters of *The First Agraristas* present an overview of the economy and history of the Altos de Jalisco and specifically of the Lagos de Moreno *municipio* where Craig conducted her research. The third and fourth chapters discuss the way in which land reform petitions were first initiated and then implemented under the Cárdenas administration. Chapter 5 deals with the life history of José Romero Gómez, the master carpenter who became the leader of the agrarian and labor reform movement in Lagos de Moreno. The following chapter presents shorter sketches of the lives of various members of the peasants in the Vieja Guardia Agrarista. Those individuals actively participated in the land reform movement as leaders of their own villages and soldiers in the battles against local *cristeros*, who opposed an anticlerical government. The book ends with some general conclusions, including factors inhibiting, as well as facilitating, peasant political mobilization. Her main conclusion is that the land reform movement would not have succeeded in this region had it not been for “the interdependence of local mobilization and external support” (p. 239).

*The First Agraristas* presents new insights into Mexican agrarian politics. For example, one of the factors that particularly favored political activity by local peasants was their experience as migratory laborers in the United States, an experience that provided them with new perspectives, weakened old values, and also gave local peasants such practical skills as reading and writing. This return of local migrants who had spent time in the United States can be compared to the situation described by de la Peña in the Morelos highlands, where return migrants also became local politicians as well as successful farmers. A slightly different emphasis in the two books when dealing with the role of migratory labor raises the additional question of whether experience as migrant labor in the United States may both breed local rebellion against landowners and lead to the formation of a more privileged strata of the peasantry, which may in turn bring about tension between wealthy and poor villagers. This issue of possible class conflict within peasant communities needs to be explored further.

On the whole, the findings of *The First Agraristas* are again largely compatible with the kind of generalizations made by Singelmann (Craig in fact cites one of his articles in her bibliography), and they illustrate the close interlinking among disciplines in the field of peasant studies. But while Craig’s book illustrates the arbitrary nature of the boundaries among different academic departments, it also shows the advantages of unity within diversity. The three books discussed in this essay thus demonstrate that different approaches and methods his-

torically associated with particular academic divisions can contribute to a fuller understanding of the process of socioeconomic change and its political manifestations in rural Latin America today.

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