

## DEMOCRACY AND THE PEASANTS

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## 1. Introduction

Amartya Sen recently astutely remarked that one of the important things about the terrible history of famines is that there has never been one in a country with a democratic form of government or a relatively free press.<sup>1</sup> A consistent theme among a variety of works on social change and political modernisation is also the assertion that, throughout the world, democracy as a *regime* only appears in urban societies with high levels of literacy and high per capita income. And in experiences of famine and disaster it is peasants who are the first to die and who suffer the worst of the impact. Dictatorships do not help them. In many national contexts, neither does political democracy. Is this an unfortunate coincidence, or is there some relationship that explains this adverse association of circumstances, in which peasants appear as the victims?

Undoubtedly there is not. Not, at least, as regards modern political democracy and the particular experience of Central (or Latin) American societies. Political democracy was probably able to embark upon its construction, to begin its sinuous historical course, without the contribution of the peasantry. This is what has happened in modern history and the title of this essay introduces as a theme, an obvious theoretical confusion which will be clarified only later.

Political democracy, also called liberal democracy, is a component element of Western modernity; of the urban, literate culture of town-dwelling men who claim, obtain, and exercise rights as citizens. The history of social struggles abundantly documents the way in which political, liberal democracy was a secular historical construction, not in the elementary sense of temporality, but as the result of bitter class conflicts, of urban classes opposing an in-

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dustrial bourgeoisie, against which they won and lost.

Notwithstanding all the above, which is the Eurocentric reiteration of an experience which cannot be repeated, in the present experience of contemporary societies *no democracy can be constructed or can function if it ignores the peasants politically*. It is a fact that, in the large Western democracies, the peasantry is a minority and is moreover a modern producer fully incorporated into the market. Both these circumstances facilitate its active exercise of citizenship. But the previous contradiction is also true, principally in conditions of underdevelopment, where the peasantry continues to be the majority and yet still retains many features of cultural marginalisation and socioeconomic penury. The maxim holds good, and not just as a hypothesis: *there can be no political democracy without some form of participation by the peasantry*.

Today's political democracy must incorporate the peasants: first, as voters (illiterate or not), by giving them legal recognition, and then as citizens, by facilitating their participation in public life. The condition of being peasants, their functioning as subsistence producers, their egalitarian dreams, their often long-held hopes, their conflicts and their demands, *are part of the political life of a society*, and if that society is democratic, it cannot fail to acknowledge their presence and their pressures, or to take an interest in the results of those pressures. This is so not only because sheer numbers, in demographic terms, count and have legal force in democratic conditions, but also because in such conditions quantity translates into quality. One might say that a society cannot be democratic if 40 or 50 per cent of its population can not register a political interest. Put another way, in the inverted logic of electoral culture, the participation of the peasants confers legality and their obedience constitutes an important source of legitimacy.

## 2. Can there be democracy without peasants?

As a category in social science, political democracy can today exist on at least three levels for the purposes of analysis. First, it is an *ideology* in the broad sense: it consists of an ensemble of ideas and values concerning the political order which act as a guide for collective political behaviour (Bobbio & Mateucci, 1981). Second, it is a *legal type of government*, when it results from planned mechanisms for selecting functionaries whose jobs are to manage the public sphere. In this sense, we can speak of a *democratic government*. Finally, it is also a model of *political regime*, when the institutions

belonging to it acquire more and more stability and political competence, equal opportunity for the opposition, the extension of citizens' participation and the enjoyment of all civil rights are assured. Here we can speak of a *democratic regime*.<sup>2</sup>

There is no *family* relationship between the latter two levels — government and regime — but in the current experience of Central America this distinction and the historical relation between the two conditions is relevant. In effect, since the beginning of the 1980s, the way has been opened for electoral processes of different kinds, all without fraud in the vote-counting or violence in the administration of the elections. Pluralism, limited competition among parties and the presence of civilian candidates and the like, have enabled the emergence of *democratic governments*. First Honduras (1981) then El Salvador and Nicaragua (1984), and later still Guatemala (1985) have seen the election of civilian governments supported by parties of the old opposition (except in Nicaragua). But it is clearly a misapplication of the common meaning of the word to speak of having arrived at democracy, when even by the most rigorous exercise of optimism one can scarcely call any government in Central America democratic. With the exception of Costa Rica, the establishment of a democratic *regime* is a distant goal, even in Honduras. A democratic government can turn into a democratic regime. But not always, nor necessarily. Neither is the democratic nature of the latter concept irreversible.

As a historical phenomenon, liberal democracy requires a complex civil society, a developed market, a public space where different class groups appear and enter into conflict, organise and negotiate their interests. Economic growth diversifies the structure and creates conflicts and ways of resolving them. A more economically developed society has better social bases on which political democracy can prosper. But no democracy sets itself the task of expropriating the market or suppressing social inequality. On the contrary, the functioning of democracy even presupposes a capacity for masking profound class differences, all the more so in the case of peasant societies, that is, societies where peasants are an important or majority sector.

In underdeveloped societies, if we agree to qualify these as agrarian-based societies in which agriculture predominates, political democracy is *initially* incompatible with the social character of the economic structure: on the one hand, because of the presence in the population of a mass of peasants whose social existence is an expression of the greatest inequalities in the socioeconomic structure and reveals the perennial absence of legal or political protec-

tion;<sup>3</sup> on the other, because control of the land (or of water and forests) by landowners determines their control over producers, and this domination impedes or limits any free exercise of citizenship. And also because, in agrarian societies, merely to have control of the land lends prestige and privilege.

The most stable political democracy is the one which assumes such socioeconomic inequalities and is best at concealing them without violence. If democratic resources develop, what the structure of exploitation (the market) establishes is masked by the structure of political power (democracy). For a long time the problem was that in these societies the landowners did not need to disguise the manner in which they extracted their surpluses or to hide the nature of their control. In other words, it is not that the oligarchy were malign in their authoritarianism. They simply did not need democracy. In turn, the peasants claimed land, water, forests, farm animals, access to markets, but not political democracy. It wasn't that they were servile by nature. It was just that they didn't need political participation.

I remarked above that there is *initially* a structural incompatibility between agrarian society and political democracy. With the broad generalisation of formal democracy and the advance of social struggles in the world, the attractiveness of democracy and the conditions for its establishment become easier. Change is produced with an increase in the visibility of the peasants, who are bearers of social claims and economic demands which can only prosper in the permissive atmosphere of democracy. After a certain moment, their protest takes on a political dimension and the social struggles of the peasantry crystallise directly as struggles for participation and democracy. This is where the peasants' contribution to democracy really begins.

### 3. The peasants and the political crisis

That is what happened in Central America, where the demand for democracy was shaped by, or arose out of, the critique of the oligarchic political order. The social bases of the landowning order were eroded as soon as the struggle began for reform of the agrarian structure, democratic freedoms, or the legitimate state, because those involved were the peasants, unprotected, discriminated against, and brutally exploited. This happened after the period following the Second World War, when the demand for democracy was merely part of the struggle against the dictatorship

— the *assault on autocracy* — which was of course always a demand of middle-class intellectuals or enlightened workers. This, the democratic ideal, was satisfactorily defined as a simple negation of the authoritarian political order.

When we look at the conditions for the transition to electoral democracy in Central America, we must remember the depth and the nature of the social crisis, because it is in that crisis that the peasants play a key role.<sup>4</sup> It was their sociological incorporation as a class, together with other political forces in Guatemala and El Salvador, that constituted the major destabilising factor. In Nicaragua, the peasants were not, of course, present in sufficient numbers in the Sandinista units that overthrew Somoza.<sup>5</sup> The rapid urban insurrection in 1979 successfully replaced the prolonged peasant war that had been going on since 1961. But the most important of the Sandinista policies, the one which still persists and which will have irreversible effects, is the agrarian reform and its consequences, together with the resulting peasant organisation.

Since the crisis in Central America was, first of all, political in nature and since it was in the political sphere that its solutions were found, the crisis developed, above all, as a disintegration of the power structures in the agrarian, export-orientated, peasant-based society and to a far lesser extent in the urban, industrial, worker-based society. I cannot help repeating that in my opinion there is a confusion here between two conceptually distinct processes: one is the old crisis of oligarchic power, which has not been resolved, in the three countries we are considering, by modernising the rural land tenure system; the other is the emerging crisis of the capitalist order itself, as a result of violent forms of confrontation and the nature of both the state's response and popular participation.

In other words, the popular masses who rose up in arms were no longer fighting for a local election, a patch of land, or a better wage. The challenge was total, against the state itself. What had been an ancient discontent against the landowners turned into a confrontation with the bourgeois state. The popular forces, preferably including peasant groups, shifted their battle front as a result of the dynamic of the conflict, and converted it into an anti-capitalist movement. It is good to remember this, because it has long-term implications for the conditions for reconstructing the political order.

This shift, not necessarily foreseen by many of the participants themselves, raises the issue of the character of the popular subject in the revolutionary crisis in Central America, in which the central question is what role the working class and the peasants play in societies where the latter are in the majority and the former group is

small and inexperienced. How can peasant organisation and protest take place in times of deep political crisis, in societies with a broad agrarian base, where the most antiquated sectors of the landowning class are still influential, and where, for that very reason, protest and discontent cannot be directed through channels and spaces open to democratic participation? Societies, moreover, where, although in the majority, the peasants, disorganised, under surveillance, have been robbed of all experience of participation, in a militarised rural society where violence goes unpunished and where they share high levels of impoverishment and material and cultural deprivation with other social forces in a similar condition of brutal political subordination? Here there is no room for civic participation, and entry into political life occurs as a violent response to the violence which tries to keep them out. It is a counter-violence on the part of the peasants, but it is inevitably asymmetrical, always at a fatal disadvantage.

#### *Revolutionary experiences*

If the truth be told, it was in the rural context and through the agency of the peasantry that the social forces of this society took definite shape as a *subversive dimension*, in the strict sense of a dimension which alters the *natural* order that rests on the tacit immobility of that population. The very act of corporate organisation of the peasants became political, even before it was oppositional. And in consequence, their military mobilisation was in a profound sense politically disastrous, a mortal challenge. To all the reasons hitherto mentioned, we could add that the fear of *rebellious Indians* certainly always disturbed the dreams of the landowning classes in Guatemala and El Salvador. In fact, they have always lived with the anxiety of a vaguely perceived threat, recalling, no doubt, that fear is the other side of violence.

This explains why the *paramilitary apparatus* appeared in Central America before the popular resistance was organised. The tradition of control, surveillance, coercion, and arbitrariness, invoked to keep order in society by prevention, goes back a long way, and the operation was at different periods a private one carried out by the landowners or a public one carried out jointly with the armed forces (McClintock, 1985; Torres-Rivas, 1987: 45). Strictly speaking, present-day counterinsurgency activities were fed by a long history of horror and violence against the rural population: sometimes under the cloak of combating vagrancy or disciplining the workforce, sometimes to dispel the enemies that a monopoly over the land

tends to create, and always in the process of conscripting peasants. The paramilitary structure in these countries has always been based in the peasantry and used to punish them; in the past the process was empirical, now it is a deliberate technique of a military power that spreads its control into the interstices of society, invigilating it from top to bottom and thus extending the public sphere into society's private spaces.

Here are some examples of parastate and paramilitary bodies:

- The *Jueces de Mesta* in Nicaragua, a kind of local magistrate; from the Zelaya period (1889) onward and particularly under Somoza, they operated as spies, informers, and arrested agents at village level. After 1950 they were attached to the National Guard;
- The *Military Commissioners* in Guatemala, also originating from a Liberal regime. They were used by the army in the Barrios period (1876) to carry out forced recruitment of indigenous men into the army or to work on the coffee estates. After 1960 the system of Commissioners became a simple instrument of local control within a broad national network of spies;
- The members of *ORDEN* in El Salvador. ORDEN carried out the same functions as its counterparts in Guatemala and Nicaragua, and although it was only founded in 1960 (after the *fruitless war*), it had direct antecedents in the Civil Guard, created after 1932 when the landowners' distrust spilled over into sheer panic. ORDEN became a vast network of irregular forces and the basis for an extensive system of military intelligence with policing functions; it even became an electoral resource for the PCN (National Conciliation Party).

Side by side with the armies, which grew in the 1960s in terms of technical equipment and human, financial and ideological resources, a modern paramilitary structure was built whose *raison d'être* lay in the peasantry's unrest. From within these iron bands of control and in the face of fierce repression, the peasants of Guatemala and El Salvador began to mobilise in the 1970s. However, we cannot examine these phenomena here, for that is not the aim of this study.

I said above that the encounter between a radical political leadership and a large mass of discontented peasants was fatal for the landowners' political order. We can cite, as a telling — but by no

means unique — example of this, the way the strength of the Popular Revolutionary Bloc (BPR) in El Salvador or the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in Guatemala originated in the (otherwise classical) fusion of an urban revolutionary impetus (including organisation, leadership, ideologies, etc.) with the already unleashed flood of deep-rooted, massive rural unrest.<sup>6</sup>

Let us look quickly at the extraordinary significance of these two experiences. In both of them, the organic and ideological path taken by the peasant organisations reflects or reproduces closely interwoven aspects of the society's political history: they arise as a result of, and resisting, military repression; they bring together different elements of the peasantry, basically the poorest semi-proletariat; they organise with the help of Catholic activists; they seek unity with other groups of the rural poor and combine deep despair with high fighting morale. And they participate in a project which transforms a corporate organisation into a political one.

In July 1975, the Christian Federation of Salvadorean Peasants (FECCAS) and the Union of Rural Workers (UTC) joined the BPR, which later became part of the FMLN. This was the first time that organised peasants had established a strategic alliance of national scope, one that transcended the particular interests of the peasantry, politicised its programme, and polarised the conflict.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, it transformed the traditional parameters of struggle, radically and qualitatively, and lifted them into a new dimension, that of a war against the system.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in Guatemala, after several partial and localised attempts, the Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC) arose in April 1978 as a union between small groups organised by Catholic activists and priests. In February and March 1980, the CUC organised the largest ever strike of seasonal agricultural workers on the sugar plantations along the south coast of the country, and became the country's largest peasant organisation. Its history has not been analysed in sufficient detail (Jiménez, 1985: 293; Bran, 1985: 9-27). Around that time it forged political links with the EGP, and from then on its telluric force was converted into part of a national, political-insurrectional movement which left the old peasant demands far behind and proposed, as its immediate objective, control of the state.

The participation of other peasant organisations in the insurrectional struggle in Guatemala and El Salvador was achieved in a variety of ways, but in every case using the hitherto unknown tactic of joining forces with political organisations, radical in their programmes and their forms of handling conflicts. The endpoint in each case was the building of a long-term strategic unity, represented by

the FMLN and the URNG. The Guatemalan experience has a greater historical significance because it incorporated indigenous peasants on a mass scale for the first time. And when they mobilised, supported by their cultural traditions and their close links of linguistic identity, they did so as a community with torrential force. But they always had a defensive attitude, and the image of indigenous armies defying white (*ladino*) power is incorrect.

However, the social struggles of the 1980s in the Guatemalan countryside constitute the most impressive manifestations of indigenous rebellion since the Conquest. It must be said that this rebellion was of a different nature, not strictly military. Some groups from the communities of the Ixil Triangle, for instance, practised a war economy, growing and producing food for the guerrilla detachments. Mostly, they were civilians and out of the line of fire. For that reason the army's strategy against them was disproportionate, genocidal in effect, especially as it was presented as a military success. Is it really such a splendid military victory to kill the wives and children of the enemy?

Nonetheless, even though it is true that the peasants did not act alone and that the presence of exogenous forces was decisive in their becoming a revolutionary force, it was the nature of political and social control, the pattern of authority and the ideological components of the dominant groups that finally determined the popular response and was the decisive factor on the ground. There is an echo here of Hegel's observation that masters and slaves shape each other because they resemble each other. The political potential of the peasantry depends, therefore, on the nature of their political subordination. It was the reactionary behaviour of the landowning order that radicalised the expressions of popular and peasant discontent.

The 1970s saw a progressive loss of control in the face of the organisation of popular protest, paralleled by the level of generalised repression. The landowners helped to create a revolutionary situation, and, as Mintz says (1974: 324), it is revolutionary conditions that turn peasants into revolutionaries. In the name of the peasants and with their active presence, protest was radicalised and the popular war advanced and was sustained.

The experience of Nicaragua belongs — albeit less precisely — to what we could call the *fusion model* produced in Guatemala and El Salvador. In February 1978 the FSLN created a political front, the United People's Movement (MPU), in which several social organisations came together, among them the re-formed Rural Workers' Association (ATC), which represented the rural semi-proletariat and

the poor peasants. These sectors were thus incorporated into the broad social coalition, national and multi-class in scope and led by the FSLN, in which they took part in the struggle against the dictatorship. Before this, the peasants had joined forces with the FSLN via the gradual incorporation of individual peasants into the FSLN and which thus so, had reached significant levels. Peasants were always in the fronts of combat; they felt the fierce bite of Somoza's repression, and in the final phase of the insurrection they collaborated in the fighting and in the creation of the Sandinista Agricultural Communes (CAS) which later became the basis of the Agricultural Cooperatives (ATC, 1980; Menjivar *et al.*, 1985c: 419).

*To sum up, this ensemble of disparate experiences made up the antecedents of the so-called transition to democracy which was attempted, contradictorily and by means of elections, in the same period of struggle, and which is continuing now under different forms.* I say *contradictorily* because at the same time as there was war and mass political violence, there were also elections and participation by the citizenry in party politics. Could the peasants have voted and elected in such conditions?

In fact, this was fundamentally a fratricidal war, for it was a war between peasants, fighting against each other without recognising each other as peasants. At this point, I should make it clear that under the ambiguous title of *peasants*, because of my focus in this work, I have included, first, the rural semi-proletariat, those who were partially expropriated in the 1960s by the modernising boom in cotton, sugar, and cattle; then, the marginal smallholders (*parcelarios*) and the poor and middle-sized peasants; and the poor strata who are not rural workers, the members of indigenous communities and other inhabitants of the underdeveloped rural milieu. From this mass, who form 60 per cent of the population of Central America, came the soldiers of the armies, the Nicaraguan mercenaries, the guerrilla detachments, the millions of emigrants, refugees and displaced people driven out by violence, and of course the civilian dead, who at a rough reckoning number around 250,000 victims.

#### *Reformist experiences*

In Costa Rica and Honduras, for different reasons, the peasant movements have had, at certain moments in the 1980s, some opportunities to wield influence and power. The conditions of the peasants' participation in political life have had *democratic effects*. That is, they form part of the contradictory process of constructing

democracy. Experiences of this kind have also occurred in Nicaragua and El Salvador, in the same period, but because these scenarios have been seriously distorted by war their significance has not been translated into democratic effects as has happened in the other two countries.

These experiences of peasant organisation and participation I describe as *reformist*, because of several simultaneously existing circumstances:

- The claims of the organising sectors related to the state and were therefore raised as political issues. This implied from the outset that the organisations concerned broke with the peasant traditions of local isolation, of demands which were vulnerable to being processed through the political system, and of organising methods that occurred in the spaces provided in the established order.
- The possibility of peasant organisation and pressure came about as a result of adjustments in political legitimation; that is, the opportunity was constructed from above and the actions based on it moved within the framework of restricted political alliances.
- The nature of the demands, the opportunity for making them, and the methods of struggle employed never reached the extreme point at which social conflict became coterminous with total conflict.
- Finally, I describe these peasant movements as reformist precisely and especially because they appeared in *reformist contexts*, that is, without political ruptures; although even in these circumstances it is possible — and indeed it has happened — for repression to be unleashed against the movement.

The strength of the peasant movements in such conditions is cyclical but evident, and that is exactly what enables them to acquire a certain amount of influence on — or as — institutions. The reformist, participatory model implies a bargaining capacity on the part of the peasants that is obtained through an unquestionable mobilising ability of national scope. But it also happens that this *threat* is instrumental, and is accepted or even stimulated by the government or leading political forces. It takes place within the established order. The participation of the peasant leadership has an immediate cost, and the peasants nearly always act, sooner or later,

as a manipulable mass, in elections or in times of crisis, or are used as a tamed weapon, as a backup force, under control. Peasant movements of this kind, unlike the others, always have an economic rationale, and the claim is settled in those terms.

In the specific case of Costa Rica, some outstanding features of the political climate of the 1980s confirm what I have just suggested. First of all, it was the end of the great (or small) banana workers' strikes, which marked the beginning of the country's social struggles (Menjívar *et al.*, 1985a: 451; De la Cruz, 1985: 134). The agricultural plantation workers lost qualitative importance as the big transnational banana company was replaced by numerous local growers, and also because where they remained, the trade unions were transformed into the kind of solidarist associations that flee conflict like a scalded cat.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this, *solidarismo* has to be viewed as a factor favourable to democratic stability.

According to Mora (Mora, 1992), 1950-78 was the period in which conditions of modernisation of production were created which favoured the integration of significant peasant sectors. Leaving aside the important stabilising effect this had on democratic politics, agrarian modernisation continued to produce fragile movements which, appearing cyclically, expressed and summarised discontent in Costa Rica. But, because of the social and geographical limitations of this unrest, it did not acquire organic forms or achieve destabilising effects.<sup>10</sup>

The Costa Rican example is paradigmatic of reformist peasant movements, although the economic crisis and the attempts to palliate it have impoverished the peasantry in many ways. As in the rest of Central America, the crisis in export agriculture has hit employment and income among a peasantry which is in this case well integrated into the market. Policies aimed at stability and adjustment and their corollary, the so-called *non-traditional agriculture*, while defining new rules of integration into the market, have had a negative impact on the poorest peasants. The abandonment of basic grains and the reorientation of agriculture towards non-traditional products, which are the principal elements in modernisation, are a false lure which has in the end had only negative effects on the fortunes of poor people in the countryside.

Peasant organisation in this context also has a specific dimension in that now it is the small and medium producers who are taking the initiative: in cooperatives, as in the case of the small coffee-growers, or via a non-trade-union organisation such as UPANACIONAL, the National Union of Small and Medium Farmers. Since 1981 UPANACIONAL has organised almost half of all the social

forces in the countryside, using innovative methods of pressure. These organisations demand, for instance, *good prices and credit* from the state, demands which have a modern, integrative, capitalist aspect. Rural conflicts in Costa Rica are occurring in a modern arena, where the issues are economic or concern social democracy; that is, where those who protest are doing so as citizens rather than as peasants. The fact that they are not satisfied does not make the mechanism for pressure and response any less democratic and does not indicate that there are limits to the state's integrating capacity.

These experiences of the peasants provide another remarkable example of Costa Rica's democratic stability (in contrast to the demands of the Guatemalan or Salvadorean peasants for the right to life or work). The kind of demands made by UPAGRA, UPANACIONAL or the peasant unions presupposes, above all, full integration into the market and thus a movement related less to surplus value than to profit. A movement, that is, which requires other, more capitalist mechanisms of extraction and distribution of surplus. Where Guatemalan peasants are fighting for the right to be exploited, Costa Rican peasants are fighting for the right to be less so. Certainly, the discourse of social integration is more modern, more democratic.

At the risk of being tautological, let us say that the reformist nature of peasant mobilisation in Honduras results from the reforms in the agrarian structure that took place in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Mass land occupations in the 1960s, unparalleled in Central America, were a mechanism that forcibly *legalised* peasant organisation and helped to redefine Honduras' political system. These occupations were followed in the 1970s by the so-called *peasant campaigns*, and all this contributed effectively to the redistribution of the land and the building of well-structured, nationwide organisations. Armed with methods of direct pressure, by means of varying alliances with trade-union and political groups, the peasant organisations won important social and political victories. There was repression and violence from the landowners and the state, but there is no doubt that peasant mobilisation in Honduras contributed to a less authoritarian definition of political life.

None of this is reformist in any way similar to what we have described in Costa Rica. Nonetheless, what gives the Honduran peasant movement its reformist character is that, despite the occasional violence of its land occupations, campaigns and hunger marches, it was never capable of smashing the established order. On the contrary, the (relative) success of the peasants' large claims contributed to political stability. This was due not only to the

capacity to exert direct pressure on the part of the base but also to the ductile and malleable nature of the political power structures of the time, which sought alliances with or support from peasant leaders and organisations for their own political purposes.<sup>12</sup>

The history of decay of the key centres of the Honduran peasant movement can only be explained by the politicisation of its leadership and the temptations of power; which, in turn, can be explained by the victories the movement had succeeded in spearheading. Thus, a movement that was at times revolutionary at grassroots level turned into a reformist movement concentrated on the leadership. Against the grain of their original intentions, the Honduran peasants contributed to the military reformism of the 1970s, and thus to the legitimisation of their presence as a political actor.

In the 1980s, years of crisis and violence in neighbouring countries, the fortunes of the peasant movement began to change. The country was drawn into conspiracy against the Sandinistas and had to play host to mercenary forces organised by the United States and to its own military forces, who built military bases and wearied international opinion with their military exercises. It had also to receive migratory flows of peasants and refugees fleeing for their lives from their traditional homelands. The sense of being an occupied country at war, and the concomitant economic crisis, dealt heavy blows to the peasant movement and reduced its visibility in those years.

In these increasingly adverse conditions, there were important actions, such as that of May 1987, which led to the occupation of land, roads, and buildings and in which over 100,000 peasants took part; or the creation of COCOCH, the Coordinating Committee of Honduran Peasant Organisations, which was formalised at the 1st National Peasant Congress, held in Tegucigalpa in November 1988. The Agricultural Modernisation Law gave only marginal advantages to the peasants, who were not able to block it. The fate of the peasant movement is bound up with the dilemma of democracy in Honduras. If state violence grows in this decade, the 1990s, the political future of the country looks considerably like the past history of neighbouring Guatemala and El Salvador.

#### 4. The peasant road to democracy

The construction of democratic societies (such as is happening in four of them) in Central America today requires a particularly new social structure that will provide legitimacy and the base and foun-

ation of the democratic political order. There are several reasons for this. At the most general and immediate level, in post-authoritarian societies, the replacement of despotic and arbitrary military governments, for whom the maintenance of the political order was based on the excessive use of force, by civilian governments elected in accordance with previously established legal procedures, is an important, but preliminary and provisional, step. *The legality of the mandate is only the sufficient condition.*

Secondly, the political crisis from which Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador are emerging was essentially an act of peasant rebellion springing from a profoundly unjust social order. Therefore, the incorporation of the peasants into political life must of necessity follow on from their participation in the armed struggle. Thirdly, civil war and political violence have not led to the disappearance of the conditions that provoked them — inequality, exploitation and contempt of which the majority of the people were victims — but have reinforced them even more. *Confronting all these challenges is a necessary condition* for the democratic mandate, while taking them on in order to try to solve them is the major source of legitimacy of the political system in this post-crisis period.

The difficulties are enormous. We are aware that a democratic political order cannot rest on the basis of a popular defeat, but we must also consider the fact that no proposal for democratic organisation in these societies can succeed unless it faces up responsibly to the originating causes of the great disorder of the 1980s, at the centre of which — to reiterate the point — was a numerous and decisive peasant presence. In other words, what is now on the agenda in Central America is a long process of democratic construction which bears this essential contradiction at its very source.

The social bases of the injustice that provoked the armed rebellion have not been replaced, but they have been seriously wounded. And if it is true that the revolutionary political forces that carried out the rebellion have been (partially) defeated, it is also true that the (partially) victorious dominant groups have not managed to strengthen the mechanisms of their political control, but have been forced to change them in adherence to electoral democracy. There is the impression that, in the process of redefinition of the political system, a silent and unexpected revenge on the landowning oligarchy is going on.

As a result of this social conflict and the almost uniform manner in which it has tended to end in negotiation and compromise, dominators and dominated, peasants and landowners are being transformed along with the whole society. Immediate examples and

consequences of this process abound. The most visible is the return to electoral democracy, which is the focus of our interest in this article. We have already seen how, importantly, agrarian reform upset the old rural order with almost equal intensity in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Was it, perhaps, the oligarchy who wanted land redistribution and universal suffrage? Or was it the peasants who were pushing for representation in a political party and freedom of the press?

New efforts at peasant organisation are being made in the 1990s in the contradictory climate of electoral democracy and the *late-liberal* economics of market supremacy. Sometimes one might suspect that not much progress is being made in civil society and that the peasant organisations do not have the competence to turn themselves into a social force capable of carrying forward a political plan for developing the rural world. Electoral democracy does them no harm, but the peasant who votes is seen as less important than the peasant who produces. For the peasant, political democracy in these postwar scenarios only makes sense if it gains him his social rights, so that he can fulfil his role as producer to the full. But before that can happen, the networks of violence must disappear and respect for life and security must prevail. No two ways are possible: the right to vote and to organise cannot coexist with violence and mechanisms of social exclusivity. Thus, the key question is not what the peasant's contribution to democracy is, but what the real possibilities are for rural democratisation.

Democracy is certainly an urban phenomenon in Central America, and the experience of democracy in action in the 1980s confirms this view, for the active exercise of citizenship, respect for the results of elections, the life of the political parties, the headquarters of leaders, freedom of the press, etc., are all things that happen within a centrifugal dynamic. In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, democracy is practised at the centre (the capital cities and some towns) and is weaker on the (rural) periphery. The upper classes make use of it, now enjoying direct participation; for the peasants, there is still just the politics of clientship, the merely formal exercise of the vote, and repression. The conditions in which the peasants participate in politics still have an urban bias, and so people say that the peasants are not suited to political representation but rather to direct action. What is happening is that they still do not feel represented by anyone. The practice of democracy is foreign to them, but the experience of crisis and its current acceleration could re-create peasant organisation.

However, after the terrible sacrifice of the Central American peasantry, a sacrifice that became a true holocaust in the 1980s, the satisfaction of their claims and their incorporation into political life is *the final test of the democratic qualities of the post-crisis political order. Without a reform of the poor peasant sector, not only is democracy impossible, but national viability itself loses its life-blood.*

## NOTES

1. On the contrary, he noted, famines have occurred in ancient kingdoms and contemporary authoritarian societies, in primitive tribal communities and in modern technocratic dictatorships, in colonial economies run by Northern imperialists and in newly independent Southern countries governed by despotic national leaders or intolerant one-party governments. (Sen, 1992: 2)

2. We are moving here in a thematic space where the multiplicity of theoretical views reveals disorder, a multicoloured array of competing concepts which everyone defines according to need. There exist several definitions of what a political regime is, and even more classifications of dubious usefulness. In fact, these are not theoretical opinions but empirical derivations. See Morino (1985: 87) and Sartori (1976).

3. Remember that with so low a level of development of the forces of production and so little investment capital, the decisive factor in the establishment of relations of production is control over the land and its productive potential. The social relations that form the framework for the social existence of the peasants are not a consequence of their backwardness or their lack of culture but the reverse: they are the consequence of the general structure of land ownership, of the development of the productive forces and its reinforcement by the *latifundio* system. Every social relation is one of force, of extra-economic violence put permanently in place to ensure its survival and reproduction.

4. I refer especially to the experiences of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, because these are the three countries that have suffered the most acute social crisis of the century. I speak of the sociological presence of the peasants to underline the qualitative aspect which they brought as a social force to the multi-class coalitions that headed the FMLN, the FSLN, the URNG. That is, it is not the presence of individual peasants that enables us to speak in this way, but the incorporation of whole communities or social groups of peasants.

5. Carlos Vilas documents this in his work *The social subject of popular insurrection and the nature of the Sandinista revolution* (1984: 26, tables 5—8). The originality of Sandinism lies in the fact that it attracted the support of young people, which explains the high student participation. In addition, the nature of the urban population also explains the importance of what are called 'tradespeople' (*gentes de oficio*), which includes artisans, poor people with a trade but without work, *lumpen* and other impoverished groups.

6. In many historical cases, the modern movement has gathered strength only with the mass incorporation of the peasantry, precisely because the peasantry is the most underdeveloped sector of the economy (Cohen *et al.*, 1979: 13).
7. The bibliography on these issues is large, but Carlos R. Cabarrús's book (1983) accurately analyses the rise and development of peasant organisation and the way religious awareness (*concientización*) grew into political awareness, partly explaining the metamorphosis from a peasant movement into a military force.
8. The FECCAS-UTC communiqué *To the Christians of El Salvador and Central America* (FECCAS-UTC, 1978: 67) is an example of the fusion of an ethical-religious perspective with another, more profoundly radical one. The communiqué states that the situation of structural injustice which strikes at the majority is backed up by a legal and political structure which prevents the majority from organising, and that the destruction of capitalism is the only alternative for liberation.
9. The banana workers' unions were the conspicuous face of the popular movement in Costa Rica and Honduras, and the history of their social struggles is now part of the best political tradition. However, the organisation of these rural workers has become enormously weakened since the end of the 1970s. In Costa Rica, the last action of any significance, which was defeated, occurred in 1978.
10. Dependence on political, labour, and state organisations limited the possibilities for a broad peasant movement in the country (Mora (c), 1992: 31).
11. I am referring (i) to Decree 8 of 26 December 1973, (ii) to the Agrarian Reform Law of 1 January 1975 (Posas, 1981; Menjívar, 1985b: 385).
12. At times the peasant organisations, having won legitimacy by their own action, have also had a legitimating effect. The Liberal and National parties and the state have 'rewarded' several peasant leaders with positions as mayors, parliamentary deputies, and other public offices — and just as many sinecures.

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