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Agrarian Reform and Populist Politics

A Discussion of Stephen Sanderson's *Agrarian Populism and the Mexican State*

by
Jonathan Fox*

Stephen Sanderson's *Agrarian Populism and the Mexican State* (1981) begins with the premise that "the salvation or destruction of the present Mexican regime may well rest with that roughly 40 percent of the Mexican populace who now fill the countryside with their hard work and their poverty" (1981: xi). Although he does not enter the debate as to whether urban or rural popular movements will be the driving force of possible future radical social change in Mexico, his assumption is correct. The peasantry has been a central pillar of support (albeit passive) for the regime. To shake that pillar would indeed shake the regime to its foundations.

Sanderson grapples with the form and content of the contradictions inherent in the institutionalized Mexican Revolution's "populist pact." The capitalist economic development process combined with the regime's historic social obligations necessarily generate conflicts between private accumulation and public equity. Sanderson's political economy approach explores the changing nature of these conflicts over time, leaving the reader with a clear sense of the loosening and tightening of the structural limits to reform in Mexico.

The historical background extends to a full discussion of the "liberal legacy," the nineteenth-century roots of the dispossession of the rural majority (chap. 2). *Agrarian Populism* is particularly good at imparting a sense of the texture of the politics of land in Mexico, tracing the contours of the struggle over the role of property in society from the genocide of independent native peoples in the last century (chap. 3) to the crescendo of militant *campesino* land invasions in 1975 and 1976 (chap. 7).

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It is surprising that it took until 1981 for the first comprehensive English-language history of Mexico's agrarian reform to appear. Sanderson avoided the traditional North American approach to the study of Latin American agrarian reform, which focuses on a self-contained public policy by looking at the "reform sector" in isolation from the rest of society. Analysis is often limited to whether or not the reform sector is economically productive or politically useful to power brokers. A few works stand out because they integrate an analysis of the reform itself with a vision of its role in the political economy of the society as a whole (e.g., Collins, 1982; Petras and LaPorte, 1971). De Janvry (1981), for example, recently pioneered the study of the political economy of agrarian reform in terms of its effects on the nonreform sector, in particular its role in accelerating the transition to capitalism in mid-twentieth-century Latin America.

Agrarian Populism is part of this broad effort. It fulfills its promise to tell "the political history of the agrarian reform and its relation to populist politics in decline" (xii) by alternating a focus on the agrarian political economy nationally with a detailed case study of the experience of the state of Sonora. Sonoran presidents dominated the national political scene from 1920 to 1934, from Obregon to the Maximato of Plutarco Elías Calles. Sanderson shows how the struggle for land in Sonora was a key case of the political limits confronting reform efforts from Cárdenas to Echeverría. At critical turning points in Mexican history, Sonora transcended the typical and became the regional battleground on which national battles were fought.

This article will discuss the book in the context of an analysis of the last chapter, "Toward a Theory of Mexican Populism." Sanderson's theoretical contribution is a major step toward the development of a non-economistic class analysis of the Mexican state. He holds that understanding the political ideology of the Mexican Revolution in general and of the agrarian reform in particular requires a new approach to "a political system based on class conflict in civil society and class conciliation in political society" (p. 203). Sanderson holds, then, that

the Mexican state can (as it does in reality) conflict with its own reason for existence, in the short run; it can oppose its need to maintain authority as a capitalist promoter . . . with its need to fulfill the revolutionary promises of social obligation, . . . designed to preserve its image as the primary arbiter of the collective national well-being [1981: 203].

Sanderson thus begins to develop a notion of the relative autonomy of the Mexican state, including both its causes and constraints, that comple-

ments other recent work in the field (Fitzgerald, 1979; Hamilton, 1975; Saldívar, 1981).

Agrarian Populism's theoretical concern is with the changing relations between the state and civil society over time. It situates private capital as a subset of civil society, contrasting with a more structural economic approach, such as Fitzgerald's (1978, 1979), which looks for the locus of control over investment decisions as a starting point for discovering where fundamental political power lies. "Civil society" appears more as a residual category (i.e., nonstate) than as a domain with its own internal dynamics. While the historical weakness of Mexican civil society may have originally caused this to be only a residual category, Sanderson often uses it to mean something more like "social classes." Sanderson clearly situates himself, in any event, in a Gramscian tradition, and differs from more instrumentalist approaches to the point that he concludes that "Mexican history supports a contrary position, that — in Stavenhagen's words — the modern state *created* the bourgeoisie and the working class *as classes*" (p. 204).

While *Agrarian Populism* does not fully demonstrate the point that elements of Mexican private capital in the 1970s "congealed as a positive social and political force" (p. 204, n. 2) to "dictate the major economic and social policies" (p. 202) of the López Portillo regime, it does refer to key *indicators* of the shift in the balance of power, such as Echeverría's failed tax reform effort, and private capital's formation of powerful class-based organizations independent of the state (e.g., the Enterprise Coordinating Council — CCE). These are presented as points of reference, woven into the main discussion, but deal with issues central to the conclusions about the shift of power from the state to private capital from Cárdenas to Echeverría. *How* to show this is still a major methodological problem, particularly since the nationalization of the private banks, but considering that Fitzgerald and Hamilton had tried, it would have strengthened Sanderson's case to have cited them. (For important recent analyses of state-private capital relations, see Basañez, 1981; CEPAL, 1982a; Concheiro et al., 1979; Cordero, 1982; Quijano, 1981, 1983; Rey Romay, 1984; Saldívar, 1981; Tello, 1984.)

THE HISTORY OF THE AGRARIAN REFORM

The substance of the analysis begins with the Porfirian period. Sanderson holds that the Porfiriato had only limited success in its efforts to provide political leadership for state-building and economic development. Its aggregate economic growth masked a political fragility that

led to the revolution and an economic program that limited development to a few export enclaves. This limitation was caused by what Sanderson calls “the great ‘agricultural contradiction’ of the Porfiriato” (p. 30). The agricultural sector was prevented from operating on behalf of national capital formation, and, instead, in order to settle the frontier and control opposition, “the Díaz regime had to use land not as capital, but as a bribe often unrelated to production” (p. 36). By failing to expand the market and open the entrepreneurial class, both agricultural and industrial, the regime “created the conditions for rebellion by the spurned elites” (p. 205)

Sanderson sees “the lack of a dominant progressive class to lead national development” as “a basic problem of Mexican civil society” (p. 204). This vacuum forced the state to move into areas claimed by “the market and a well-developed civil society” (p. 206) in other nations. The state, by moving into these areas, linked successful accumulation to political legitimacy. “The state, not the market, became the symbol of order” (p. 206). (Sanderson does not indicate what it is about this phenomenon that is particular to Mexico, given that it is so common among developing countries regardless of whether or not they experienced mass-based populism.) Sanderson sees the collapse of the Porfiriato as inevitable because “the state undertook capitalist development as a project before the necessary classes existed as genuine social force in civil society” (p. 206). The structural weakness was certainly necessary, but was it sufficient to provoke a revolution?¹

Sanderson follows Leal’s now classic view (1975) of the postinsurrectionary phase of the Mexican Revolution, when “no class or class fraction had sufficient power to impose its will and its own version of progress and domination” (p. 207). Sanderson also contends that the state acted as “the primary agent of the mode of production” because “the Mexican bourgeoisie lacked political control in 1917” (p. 209), apparently agreeing with Leal that the politico-military bureaucracy was the only social force with the coherence and vision to shape the new state. More discussion of the class basis of the revolutionary state itself could have bolstered Sanderson’s earlier view that the state created the modern bourgeoisie and working class, rather than vice versa.

Mexico in the 1920s faced the double problem of politically incorporating the mass of revolutionary participants and extracting an economic surplus from workers and peasants for capitalist accumulation and growth. Sanderson shows the tensions and changes over time:

The state . . . in order to maintain its legitimacy and survive, either had to coopt or surpress other independent social movements which challenged the authority of civil society. . . . [But it] simply did not have the coher-

ence or the physical capacity to surpress by itself all the popular revolts of the post-revolutionary period. Thus, instead of consolidating the Revolution exclusively around the strongest sectors of bourgeois support, the Mexican state had to cement together a weak coalition, including the underclasses, with the promises of social reform under revolutionary auspices. The promises included capitalist growth to the bourgeoisie and distributive equity to the workers and campesinos. While capitalist growth included future bourgeois hegemony, equity for the deprived classes required continuing social obligations administered by the state [1981: 209-210].

This focus on the politics of promise is useful; the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) appears to have a “renewable lease on political legitimacy” (p. 211), as long as some promises are occasionally fulfilled.

Sanderson asks “why the social peace was bought with such volatile concessions as property and the redistribution of wealth.” His answer is that, because of the state’s multiclass base, “the populist solution could not uncouple property from the political realm . . . [it] demanded both ‘free-market’ economic principles and interventionist strategies of redistribution” (p. 210). This answer does not go far enough, however. Only by disaggregating redistribution into income and property and by looking closely at the magnitude and direction of the distribution can one account for the resiliency of Mexican populism. We should recall that most of the state’s redistributive measures have been of *income*, not property. Subsidies are a much less “volatile” form of distribution than is turning over farms and factories to peasants and workers. Redistribution of income rather than wealth does not fundamentally alter property relations, and subsidies and social-security-type measures tend to distribute income *within* rather than between classes, given regressive fiscal policies. Moreover, they are easy to turn on and off in a rather depoliticized way, as budgets and inflation rates rise and fall in real and relative terms.

Presidents since Cárdenas have announced the beginning of the end of the redistribution of land (p. 123). López Portillo’s announcement of the exhaustion of the supply of land to distribute certainly fits Sanderson’s prediction of the death of the reform (p. 225). López Portillo’s 1980-1982 policy of massive food production and consumption subsidies, however, does appear to contradict the prediction, until one makes the distinction between the distribution of income and property. The Mexican Food System (SAM) of 1980-1982 was, it turns out, a temporary redistributive measure, but it may have had the effect of a political substitute for further distribution of land. The concurrent Ley de Fomento Agropecuario (Agricultural Development Law—LFA), on the other hand, ratified existing property relations, and was known by critics as the other side of the coin

to SAM. The LFA legalized for the first time the creation of joint ventures between *ejidos* and private capital, legitimizing the widespread but hitherto illegal practice of rental of *ejidal* land.²

How was the transition made, from reform to counterreform? Under Cárdenas, classes with opposing long-run interests were joined in a Caesarist state-led coalition that “neutralized-statized” that conflict (p. 211). The pre-1940 Mexican state promoted *both* capitalist expansion and worker and peasant organization, with the mediating effects of state intervention in both spheres (p. 211). Sanderson shows how the state began to favor the development of the entrepreneurial class, even under Cárdenas, as the defeat of the latifundistas was followed by a slowing of the pace of land distribution, the disarming of the rural militia (which had backed it up), and the ruling party’s institutionalization via vertical corporate organization rather than democratic class-based organization. It would have been useful to have cited North and Raby’s work here (1977); they detail many of the structural constraints that forced this shift, regardless of Cárdenas’ widely discussed intentions for or against a social transformation (e.g., the mobilization of the Right, the weakness of popular organization, capital strike, and the U.S. economic boycott).

The paternalism of a state defined as the “regulator of social life” (p. 214) and the top-down nature of Cardenista mobilization facilitated a leadership decision to consolidate existing reforms rather than move forward in the face of mounting class conflict. Sanderson points out that the open class struggle encouraged by the Cardenista movement “was mostly between incipient class organizations and regressive pockets of pre-capitalist or anti-revolutionary resistance. When capitalist-worker struggle occurred, the result quite often benefited state-dominated political organization and the rationalization of production” (p. 212, n. 16). Sanderson convincingly argues, citing Córdova (1975), that

Mexican populism, the political brake applied to the social rebellion, was born in the fight of Carranza and Obregon against Zapata and Villa. By “giving the centavo to earn the peso”; the new state maintained a certain amount of control over the shape of the new pact [p. 212].

Sanderson’s analysis of populism highlights the temporary nature of any reconciliation between supposed class equality in the political realm, and continuing inequity in the economic realm. He goes further, in fact, to challenge the corporatist notion that even the Cárdenas regime treated contending social classes equally. The regime’s “*guarantee of economic domination for the bourgeoisie*” is “*an inequality inherent in the populist pact . . . the working class, on the other hand, never receives sanction*

from the state to act independently as a class, because its interests may adversely affect capitalist growth" (p. 215). Cárdenas's populist social pact "was struck . . . with the partial goal of mutual reinforcement. That the contract ultimately meant state control over class conflict would become apparent only after 1940" (p. 216).

Two aspects of the way in which the populist pact was instituted proved to be crucial to the post-1940 development of the relations between the state and social classes. The first was "the organizational mode by which the state achieved political control over the classes in civil society," (i.e., the well-documented pattern of top-down bureaucratic depoliticization of class conflict, combined with the cooptation and/or repression of independent challenges to party-state rule). The second aspect is that of the changing *degree* to which the state is willing — or able — to constrain capital's freedom in order to meet the state's social obligations (i.e., the changing relative autonomy of the state over time). Sanderson ably documents the process on which he bases this analysis: "how various regimes either mobilized or demobilized the country's agrarian forces generally, and the Sonoran campesinos specifically" (p. 216).

What was the nature of the populist pact after 1940? Its redistributive promises apparently emptied of content, "the populist state, in one sense, became merely the political instrumentality of the "mission" of capitalist industrialization" (p. 217). In the countryside, "the promise of land reform became the *ideology* of land reform" (p. 218), as the balance of class power and the state's role in that balance shifted dramatically. The erosion of the material basis for the populist pact is a necessary, but not sufficient explanation for the decline in the regime's legitimacy witnessed during the Echeverría period, however. This is particularly important given that other analysts disagree, holding that "by the end of 1976 the public sector had recovered the legitimacy questioned by the student movement of 1968, at the same time as it had reaffirmed its political leadership questioned by the entrepreneurial movement of 1973" (Basañez, 1981: 206).

Sanderson points to two principal political changes (albeit rooted in changing economic structures). First, by the 1970s, leading elements of private capital had become more willing and able "to act as rulers of civil society *independent of the political will of the state*" (p. 219; see also Saldívar, 1981). State "developmentalism" had successfully nurtured the development of the bourgeoisie as a class. As private capital increasingly set the pace and direction of national capital accumulation, it wanted greater control over public-sector economic decisions. The second change Sanderson highlights was that the state-controlled labor and peasant organizations faced increasing independent challenges rooted in

rank-and-file demands for democracy and redistribution (see, e.g., Baird and McCaughan, 1979).

The Sonoran case clearly shows how the battle for clientele drove the state-dominated peasant organizations temporarily to the Left (e.g., in support of moderate land invasions). The state's flexibility during the Sonoran crisis of 1975-1976, both politically (e.g., the cooptation via the Pact of Ocampo) and economically (e.g., the limited postmassacre land redistribution) showed a vitality on the part of the ruling apparatus that Sanderson is somewhat reluctant to emphasize (see Hardy, 1984, for an effort to account for the continuing force of state peasant organizations in the 1970s). It was precisely this flexibility, this willingness to "give the centavo to earn the peso," that led the government's rural reform ideas into conflict with the less farsighted entrepreneurial class, in particular its agricultural fraction.

Who really won this conflict? Basañez stresses, for example, the national private sector umbrella organization's *failed* call for a national capital strike in defense of the Sonoran *latifundistas* (1981: 199). What are the appropriate criteria for measuring the outcome of a state-capital clash? It was a defeat for capital that most of the land expropriated was not returned, yet the incoming administration insured that it was extremely well compensated.

One result is that today the victorious *ejidatarios*, organized into the Coalition of Collective Ejidos of the Yaqui and Mayo Valleys, continue to be of national political and economic importance. They produce with collective labor, and after years of struggle won their economic autonomy from the state, managing their own credit union, inputs, initial processing, and marketing. They produce 5 percent of the national wheat and soybean crops, with record yields. Their successful combination of economic and political autonomy has encouraged increased coordination with other independent regional peasant organizations around the country. The coalition stands as a permanent ideological challenge to the dominant system, showing, as they themselves put it, that "the collective ejido is more efficient than the parcelled ejidos or private property," and that "there is no way other than the democratization of the system: to achieve that the peasant producers themselves, through their base organizations, fully assume the responsibility of the management and administration of public resources destined for the countryside" (Coalición de Ejidos. . . , 1982: 45-46).

A state reformist thrust was nevertheless clearly blunted in national terms in 1976, and perhaps this was more important than the advances in Sonora. The agricultural entrepreneurs firmly reestablished both their political and economic hegemony in the countryside. They exercised

their power to block substantive reforms designed to ensure social peace in their long run. They won a great ideological victory; their views dominated the debate on the causes of the deepening agricultural production crisis until the launching of SAM in 1980 (Gordillo and Rello, 1980). In the triumphant view of export and livestock producers, it was not their growth and privileged access to state support, but rather the inadequacy of peasant producers and state enterprises that caused stagnation and the loss of self-sufficiency. State policy did help cause the crisis, but by favoring export, industrial crop, and livestock production at the expense of peasant grain production (see, e.g., Barkin and Suárez, 1982; Montañez and Aburto, 1979).

SAM's brief 1981 recuperation of national grain self-sufficiency politically consolidated the position that, in contrast to the private sector view, nonirrigated peasant grain production is possible *if* it is a national priority. To follow the supposedly natural dictates of "comparative advantage" was exposed by briefly ascendant reformist policymakers to be a political decision about which producers are to benefit from state policy (e.g., Luiselli, 1980). As a result, even the budget-slashing De la Madrid administration was forced to pay lip service to the goal of national food self-sufficiency in its first month (*Latin America Weekly Report*, January 7, 1983), and later established a National Food Program (PRONAL) centered, at least rhetorically, on the goal of "food sovereignty" (see Austin and Esteva, forthcoming).

THE END OF REFORM?

Sanderson concludes that the agrarian reform is over "for the time being at least" (p. 221). This proviso is crucial, because the very political and economic forces that have limited degrees of state freedom could conceivably change. If today's independent peasant organizations were to become an effective national force that pushed for structural change, would the state be able to respond *without* reviving land redistribution?³ If the challenge were a serious one, the state would probably combine repressive measures with substantive concessions, as it has in the past, although the nature of the combination is essentially unpredictable.

Sanderson's analysis of the importance of the promise cum ideology of agrarian reform leads one to the conclusion that it will always be legitimate to call for redistribution of land; whether and where it will happen will be a function of the balance of class power. One problem with Sanderson's pronouncement of the end of reform is that it did not leave one

prepared to account for the SAM (e.g., p. 223). SAM did not reform property relations — on the contrary, the LFA reaffirmed them. But given the (albeit limited) increases in producer prices for basic grains and in the share of agricultural spending in nonirrigated areas, SAM appears to have been more “pro-campesino” in economic terms than was Echeverría’s more rhetorical rural project.⁴ To return to an earlier point, the state can exercise some limited control over class tensions via the *income* spigot. The oil-debt boom of the latter part of the López Portillo administration made SAM’s end run around the question of agrarian reform financially feasible. Because of this revenue, limited changes in the state mechanisms of distribution could occur without hurting commercial agriculture (e.g., broader access to subsidized production inputs in nonirrigated areas; see Austin and Fox, forthcoming). Agricultural entrepreneurs could still increase their profits because their somewhat reduced share was of a dramatically increased pie. This still leaves SAM, with all of its limitations, as the most economically significant shift in official agricultural policy since Cárdenas declared in 1938 the beginning of the end of the land reform.

What was there about Sanderson’s approach that led him apparently to underestimate Mexican populism’s degree of vitality? Perhaps the principal cause was his lack of attention to the issue of social differentiation within the peasantry. He addresses some of the issue’s empirical aspects in Sonora when he notes the agrarian reform’s neglect of the more marginal areas, but he does not deal with its national or theoretical importance. Early on he decides to “follow Womack’s and Wolf’s lead” and sidesteps the debates over the class analysis of the peasantry by considering campesinos “‘country people’ in the broadest sense” (p. 3).⁵ While much of the debate often does indeed lead to a dead end, it needs to be addressed in order to delineate fully the limits of distributive reform in Mexico. Amorphous social categories limit a rigorous analysis of how much of what was distributed to whom. The focus of much rural development reform of the 1970s was on redistribution to a very particular fraction of the peasantry, the better endowed (economically and climatologically) and more entrepreneurial fraction that may indeed benefit from increased integration into the market.⁶ The limitations of these reform packages have more to do with their effects on the majority nontarget groups (e.g., increased landlessness).

Reforms may appear to benefit the peasantry, but some fractions may benefit much more than others. SAM may have temporarily subsidized some middle peasants, particularly those of *buen temporal*, but the assurances about the end of land reform may have encouraged the displacement of others, those in less favored zones. Only with an analysis of the

heterogeneity of the peasantry can one develop a complete range of the prospects for reform in terms of who wins and who loses.

Agrarian Populism's essential conclusion is correct: that the structural and political limits to reform, highlighted in the Sonoran case in particular, mean an end to the prospects for "a genuine reallocation of national wealth" through agrarian reform (p. 225). But whether or not this will cause an inherent loss of mass legitimacy for the state is another question, which only the creativity of the regime and the power of the peasant movement will answer.

NOTES

1. This question would call for a close examination of the conjuncture and its class conflicts, but Sanderson does not focus on the insurrectionary period in great detail.

2. For comment on the LFA, see the critical position of the PRI's trade union congressional delegation, reprinted after the LFA text itself in Volume 17 of *Nueva Antropología* (1981: 211-238, 239-247) also in *El Día* (December 11, 1980). See also *Business Latin America* (November 12, 1980: 363-364). While the law was apparently designed to facilitate the penetration of private capital into the "social sector," it contained such bureaucratic obstacles that, combined with opposition, there is little empirical evidence that it was widely implemented. Recently critics have alleged that De la Madrid's December 29, 1983, changes in the Agrarian Reform law were much more "anti-campesino," comparing them to Alemán's modifications of article 27 of the constitution. Calva charges that they will increase the power of local *caciques* and facilitate the granting of "immunity" to large landowners (1984: 4, *passim*).

3. For important discussions of recent trends in the independent peasant movement, see Gustavo Gordillo's articles in *El Día* (June 9, 14, 16, 1984).

4. For example, agricultural and rural development received a greater share of federal investment during the greatly increased spending of López Portillo, when it reached 19 percent in 1980, than during Echeverría, when it peaked at 18.1 percent in 1975 (Nafinsa, *El Mercado de Valores*, 42(37), September 13, 1982). Moreover, Barkin and Suárez (1982: 64) calculate that the nature of this investment shifted significantly. In 1975, 76 percent of agricultural investment was for irrigation, and 77.1 percent of this was spent in the three northern states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas. In 1980, irrigation's share of investment was down to 59.2 percent, only 24.7 percent of which was in the three northern states.

5. While it is indeed true that Womack opts for this "Tolstoyan" approach, Wolf does not avoid the substance of the debate. On the contrary, his "middle peasant" thesis about the driving force of contemporary Third World revolution is a major contribution to it.

6. On the differentiation of the peasantry and the debate over their class position, see the recent reviews and bibliographies in Canak (1982), CEPAL (1982b), De Janvry (1981), and Lucas (1982). On the new kinds of rural development packages, see Edelman (1980), Galli (1981), Redclift (1980), and Tendler (1982). For a particular application of these concerns to SAM, see Durston (1981).

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