The Latin American Left has long been an active ally of peasants and rural workers in their struggle for survival. But urban-based leftist parties have traditionally viewed peasants as unreliable partners in the worker-peasant alliance that would eventually bring a revolutionary vanguard to power. Moreover, many on the Left have sought to frustrate peasant demands for local autonomy, perhaps the most persistent theme of peasant politics over the centuries.¹

Many leftists long thought that peasants’ near-universal demand for land was “petty-bourgeois,” reflecting individualistic desires to become property-owners. The next step was to assume that political “consciousness” had to be brought to them by intellectuals and proletarians. But peasants and rural workers had few external allies to choose from, and at least revolutionaries offered the promise of land, if not democracy. Since the dramatic political and economic changes of the late 1980s, however, the Left and broader social movements have begun to rethink their relationships with one another. Peasant movements are no exception.

After decades of subordination to their political allies, Latin American peasant movements today are in the midst of a strategic turn toward greater autonomy. For peasants and farmworkers, the issue is not whether to ally with political parties, but on what terms. National political parties aspire to the state’s “commanding heights,” and rarely emphasize the democratization of the public arenas of greatest immediate importance to the rural poor—the municipality, the police and the rural branches of central government agencies.

With the transition to democracy, one might think that political parties would intensify their appeals to peasants and farmworkers. After all, peasant and farmworker votes can matter even in countries with large urban majorities. In Brazil’s historic 1989 presidential race, for example, Lula and the Workers Party won the big cities but Collor clinched victory with the support of the hinterland. In Mexico’s 1988 presidential race, rural districts gave Carlos Salinas his official

*Political scientist Jonathan Fox teaches at MIT and is a member of NACLA’s Editorial Board. His book, The Political Dynamics of Reform: State Power and Food Policy in Mexico, will be published this year by Cornell University Press.*
RURAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS MUST represent diverse economic, ethnic and gender interests. The gulf between those with and those without land looms large. Often the landless are left with at best “indirect” representation by slightly better-off smallholders. This process has led to the emergence of separate autonomous movements of farmworkers and smallholders in Brazil, Nicaragua, Mexico and Chile. More frequently, however, key concerns of the landless, such as land reform and labor rights, simply go un-voiced.

No Latin American country has a farmer movement powerful enough to set a minimum standard for wages or working conditions. Even Chile, with its long tradition of trade unionism and its booming export agribusiness sector, has few farmworker unions. As of mid-1991, only several hundred Chilean farmworkers were unionized out of a national farm labor force of between 300,000 and 400,000. Vivid memories of past repression make union organizers hesitant to step up their efforts. Chile’s new labor legislation excludes the country’s largely female seasonal farm labor force, under the ostensibly assumption that the small, predominantly male minority of farmworkers employed year-round represent seasonal workers adequately.

Brazil’s trade union movement leads perhaps the most ambitious national effort to combine “unity with diversity” in representing the interests of the rural poor. The movement aspires to bring together smallholders, and urban and rural wage workers. The CUT labor federation is well known for its militant industrial base, but one third of its membership is in fact rural, and those on the dangerous front lines of the struggle for agrarian reform, which peaked in the mid-1980s, usually identify with the CUT. Agrarian reform and alternative agricultural policies, however, are not top priorities for the national CUT leadership (nor its ally the Workers Party). Rural unionists formed their own department within the federation to ensure their concerns were heard, but are still frustrated by lack of autonomy and support from the rest of CUT.

The Movimento dos Sem Terra (MST) stepped into the political vacuum left by CUT’s limited emphasis on organizing the landless. By the late 1980s, the MST assumed a leading role in radical direct action for land reform. The movement has a partially overlapping, sometimes uneasy working relationship with the CUT Rural Department. Positioning itself outside the “mainstream” of Workers Party politics, the firmly Leninist MST zealously defends its autonomy. With an organized base of up to several hundred thousand, the MST claims to be the main representative of Brazil’s millions of landless peasants.

The Brazilian experience shows that broad inclusive organizations can offer a national forum and improved electoral possibilities, but often do not adequately address the diverse needs of the rural poor. In Mexico, by contrast, new kinds of rural organizations are on the rise—ones that lack urban allies and electoral possibili-
ties, but better represent peasant interests. Eschewing the traditional party-linked pyramids of the Left and the Right known as centrales, Mexican peasants are organizing horizontally-structured national networks.  

The first such network to emerge was the “Plan de Ayala” National Coordinating Council (CNPA), based primarily among indigenous and sub-subsistence peasants. CNPA’s radical direct action tactics on land and human rights issues brought it briefly to national prominence in the early 1980s. But internal cleavages between party-aligned groups and more ethnic- and local-oriented members soon crippled the organization. 

In the mid-1980s a different kind of national network, the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (UNORCA), coalesced. It broke with the traditional dichotomy between official and independent groups in peasant politics. Because UNORCA respected the diverse affiliations of its regional members, groups from across the political spectrum participated. Viewing the conventional repertoire of protest as inherently limited, the network chose to combine mass mobilization and pragmatic negotiations with the state. The UNORCA defined itself as “autonomous” to leave the door open to tactical alliances with potentially combative but nominally official peasant organizations, and to distance itself from opposition political parties whose peasant branches often lacked autonomy. 

UNORCA members united around the shared goal of democratizing the rural development policy process, even though each member organization had different policy concerns: some member groups produce wheat, corn, sorghum, timber or coffee; some have credit problems or want higher crop prices; others seek land; and some represent organized consumers in corn-deficit areas. The UNORCA faces the challenge of bridging other deep gaps as well: between mestizos and indigenous peoples, between Mexico’s North and South, and between grain producers and consumers. 

Today UNORCA is one of the nation’s principal interlocutors for peasants, representing primarily small producers in the Center and North. Remarkably, it held up under the strain of representing both pro-Cardenas and pro-Salinas groups as well as diverse tactical positions on how to protect basic grains in the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement. 

Any effort to combine unity with diversity faces trade-offs between breadth and depth. With respect to representing the economic interests of peasants, Brazil’s CUT is a broader coalition, while Mexico’s UNORCA has greater depth. More challenging still are the questions of how to incorporate autonomous spaces for ethnic and
gender difference, and guarantee democratic participation. Although mass assemblies can be democratic, any organizer knows that a minority can easily manipulate both information and process. Moreover, as organizations become larger, the distance between leaders and base inevitably grows. The public appearance of active membership may actually be driven by economic incentives, common enemies or coercive “micro-political” pressures. In the Nicaraguan revolution, for example, especially after the war erupted, much of what observers called active grassroots participation was really state-induced mobilization.

Within communities, informal means of consultation, reproach, and decision-making can help to compensate for weaknesses in “public” channels for participation. Only rarely do local village organizations actually make major decisions in mass meetings or through voting. More often, such formal procedures ratify decisions made previously through subtle informal debates and pressures. Formal electoral competition should be understood as one of several possible means for leaders to gain power and for members to hold them accountable. Contested elections may be more the result than the cause (or guarantee) of internal democracy. In many groups, disputes are not resolved through open competition for leadership but rather through a more delicate and indirect process of building community consensus.

External actors often play a crucial role in providing the transportation and political space essential to create horizontal region-wide linkages and bring village representatives together. Whether they are church groups, government, political parties or NGOs, these outside groups often see their key contribution as bringing awareness and organizing skills to the oppressed. For participants, however, the main attraction may well be the truck that comes every Sunday to bring otherwise dispersed community leaders together to a meeting where they will be relatively safe. Participants may already know they are oppressed, and may even have their own organizing skills, but they often lack the resources and political freedom to bring people together from distant communities on a regular basis.

Political parties have long accused peasant movements of focusing only on local issues. Peasant movements in turn criticize political parties for using them for their own electoral ends. Regional organizations—acting as resistance leagues, development agencies, lobbying offices or local political parties—can often bridge this gap between national and local politics.

At times, regional movements emerge in areas defined by such external factors as the diocese of a progressive bishop, the scope of a reformist rural development program, a climatic disaster such as a drought or a flood, or the prospect of displacement by a public or private sector mega-project. In Brazil, for example, peasants united across class and ethnic boundaries in protest against planned hydroelectric dams.

Even government anti-poverty programs can create regional opportunities for radical mass organizing. Such was the case with Colombia’s National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC) and Mexico’s Community Food Councils. Launched in 1979, these councils deliberately encouraged autonomous mass participation in the management of a new rural food distribution network in Mexico’s most impoverished regions. While most “participatory” programs are limited to providing cheap manual labor for construction projects, the councils brought representatives of dozens of villages together at the regional level, often for the first time, in a common process.
The Left's traditional disdain for peasant autonomy is rooted in the belief that the democratic process is less important than the economic outcome of policy decisions.

The trend toward elected civilian rule over the past decade has altered the terrain for both peasants and the Left. If nothing else, it has shown that the Left's traditional dichotomous view that democracy is either "real" or nonexistent leaves out most of the ways people are represented most of the time. During the initial phase of democratization, political attention focused almost exclusively on party politics in the national capitals. Now on the table is the extension of effective citizenship rights to the entire population, including the poorest of the poor, who still tend to be disproportionately rural.

The rural poor are on the defensive almost everywhere in Latin America, with the open-ended exceptions of El Salvador and Ecuador. Bloody assaults continue in Peru, Guatemala and Haiti. Where open politics is possible, peasant movements have followed very different paths. Brazil's rural poor have a national political alternative, the Workers Party, which has a powerful voice, but offers peasants few innovative policy alternatives tailored to their specific needs. In Mexico, by contrast, autonomous peasant movements have emerged—perhaps due to the Left's failure to reach out, combined with the state's skilled divide-and-conquer tactics. They have helped to shape the terms of debate about rural development policy and provided real vehicles for change in some regions. But the physical risk taken in challenging the enemies of the rural poor remains high in many regions of both countries.

The election of national civilian governments does not necessarily change the micro-politics of local power relations. And the policy space for redistributive rural development policy remains extremely narrow. However, peasant movements are less and less subservient to their urban political allies. Regional networks, in particular, have found new ways to link otherwise dispersed communities, and to advance peasants' struggle for political freedom and economic development.

A Brazilian peasant. The Left's traditional disdain for peasant autonomy is rooted in the belief that the democratic process is less important than the economic outcome of policy decisions.
consumption (communal kitchens, etc.) at local, regional and national levels; health and education committees; and women's clubs. They have built networks, such as the Women's Federation of Villa El Salvador which María Elena Moyano led for many years and which has 13,000 members.

4. Obviously, not all women in the parties, federations or unions could be considered part of this current, because they don't recognize their own oppression, or because their actions only reinforce the status quo. The most extreme expression of the latter case are the women of Shining Path, whose views on politics and women are very authoritarian and traditional.


6. These accusations made a big splash at first, but were soon marginalized as "women's issues," without substantially changing party dynamics or mentality. This occurred, according to Maruja Barrig, because "the very structure of the Left parties blocked the emergence of a dialogue that could integrate issues of daily life into party militancy." Ibid.


8. Ibid.


10. The IU presidential candidate, Dr. Alfonso Barrantes, did not belong to a party; around him emerged a group of "non-party" or independent leftists. Oddly, the proportional slate proportional slots were set aside for the parties and the independents.

11. Interestingly, defense of the right to sexual preference was maintained in IU's program for culture and education perhaps because a man proposed it, and probably because its inclusion there had a different connotation than it would have had in the program for women.

Environmentalism: Fusing Red and Green


2. See V.M. Toledo, "La Resistencia Ecológica del Campesinado Mexicano," Ecología Política, No. 1 (Barcelona).

3. The worst of these was the November 19, 1984 explosion of a PEMEX gas depot in the heart of San Juan Ixhuatepec (known as San Juanico), a town of 20,000 inhabitants located in the industrial zone of Tlapaltla 30 miles south of Mexico City. This "accident," which killed over 400 and left more than 4,000 injured, gave rise to a struggle for compensation, for the relocation of the municipal dump that threw off the yoke of the official union and formed a municipal "ecology ombudsman." And in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, the unregulated dump into a sanitary landfill overseen by the community and a local community organization in Colonia Minatitlán, in the city of Minatitlán, Veracruz, which managed to transform an unregulated dump into a sanitary landfill oversee by the community and a municipal "ecology ombudsman." And in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, the workers who labored under wretched conditions picking reusable goods in the municipal dump threw off the yoke of the official union and formed a cooperative. They are now compensated directly without intermediaries, set their own prices, and are learning how to read. The cooperative covers medical expenses and funeral costs. For an overview of the social-environmental movement in Mexico, see E. Leff and J.M. Sandoval, "Primera Reunión Nacional de Movimientos Sociales y Medio Ambiente" (Mexico: Programa Universitario Justo Sierra, UNAM, 1985).


8. Recent studies identified 900 ecology groups in Brazil, 700 in Argentina and over 100 each in Mexico and Venezuela. Most of these are very small and many are not active, but the numbers are indicative of the movement's atomized nature, due in great part to the environmental philosophy which stresses decentralization and autonomy. For Brazil, see K. Goldstein, "Searching for Green through Smog and Squalor: Defense of the Environment in Brazil," PhD diss., Dept. of Politics, Princeton University, 1990; for Argentina, see P. Quiroga, "La Dimensión Política," for Mexico, see R. Kurzinger-Wieman et al., Política Ambiental en México: El Papel de las Organizaciones no Gubernamentales (Mexico: Instituto Alemán de Desarrollo/Fundación Friedrich Ebert, 1991); for Venezuela, see M.P. García Guadalupe, Ambiente, Estado y Sociedad, 9. F. Ovejero, "Ecología y Proyectos de Izquierda," Ecología Política, No. 2 (Barcelona, 1991). The socialist governments of Latin America have been limited to the environmental viewpoint, but their environmentalism has been limited to Nicaragua's defense of natural resources and Cuba's policies of decentralized economic planning. The new democracies are more inclined toward neoliberal de-regulation than environmental management. Although "ecology" has become a mandatory staple of political rhetoric and democracy in power remain divorced from the transformative capacity of environmentalism: democratic participation in the management of environmental resources. See E. Leff, "Cultura Democrática, Gestión Ambiental y Desarrollo Sustentable en América Latina," in Conferencia Internacional sobre Cultura Democrática y Desarrollo: Hacia el Tercer Milenio en América Latina (Montevideo: UNESCO/PAX, 1990); J. O’Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism"; R. Bahro, La Alternativa; and O. Ovalles, La Fuerza de la Ecología en Venezuela.


New Terrain for Rural Politics

Thanks very much to Martin Diskin, Mark Fried, Zander Navarro, Ramón Vera, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward for their comments.


2. More generally, there are inherent conflicts between social and political representation for the rural poor. First, depending on local political demography, electoral pressures may lead to a blurring of important class, ethnic and gender conflicts, weakening the social organization's capacity to represent its original base. Second, political parties may permit social organization leaders to "take off" from their bases and, with the help of new national allies, pursue individual ambitions while leaving their original constituency under-represented. Third, political party competition may introduce ideological divisions into organizations previously unified by social and economic demands. Fourth, as social organizations get involved in electoral politics they may endanger their autonomy vis-a-vis political parties even if those parties are their allies.

3. A good example is the Coalición de Ejidos de la Costa Grande, based around Atoyac, Guerrero, one of Mexico's most consolidated, democratic and autonomous regional organizations. Most of the rank and file supported de León presidential run of 1988. The leadership, concerned about the long-term survival of their self-managed economic development project, chose to remain non-partisan, knowing the government's unforgiving attitude toward open political opposition. Rank-and-file Cardenista sentiment expressed itself again in the 1989 municipal elections, which led to months of broad-based anti-fraud protests. After a long, drawn-out conflict, a coalitionist PRI candidate was named to lead a pluralistic municipal council, but the most authoritarian elements in the ruling party struck back again. The state police commander took over the town hall, proclaiming "Aquí triunfa mi hombres paradigom." Meanwhile, PRD leaders bypassed the Coalición in their own closed-door negotiations with the government. While official and opposition party elites pushed the group to define its political allegiance, the Coalición insisted that only by remaining nonpartisan could it defend both its radical economic development project and electoral democracy.

4. The differences between these approaches was especially notable in late 1991, during the national debate over the President's proposal to amend the constitution's land reform provisions. The amendment creates an easy privatization option and opens land-ownership to corporations. These pro-agribusiness measures are justified by a pro-autonomy, anti-bureaucratic discourse which promises to get government off the backs of peasants. The proposal and its "handlers" divided peasant organizations across the political spectrum, including the smaller far left groups, in part because most agree that the heavily state-regulated ejido does require institutional change of some kind. Moreover, from the peasants' viewpoint, PRI domination of Congress made the amendment's approval a foregone conclusion. The PRD response came primarily from national leaders who came out of the populist wing of the ruling party. They asserted that the ejido system works fine, and all it needs is more funding. PRD leaders further charged that all peasant leaders who
criticized some aspects while supporting others were sell-outs. Indeed, government pressure on peasant leaders to fall in line was intense, straining leadership relations with the rank and file. 


6. Cuba may be an exception, but I do not know of recent studies of the conditions of rural labor in the 1980s. On Cuban peasant cooperatives, see Jean Stubbs, Cuba: The Test of Time (London: Latin America Bureau, 1989).


8. Small-holders make up about half the rural CUT membership, and the rest are wage workers, sharecroppers, rubber-tappers and homeless (sometimes known as "squatters"). The rural CUT base is strongest among smallholders of the far South and parts of the North, and is growing among farmworkers in São Paulo and the Northeast, especially in the sugar industry. The CUT estimates its affiliates account for 14%–20% of the rural unions in Brazil. For estimates, see Carlos Botey and Luis Hernández, eds., Popular participation and access to food: "Mexico's Community Food Councils" in Scott Whiteford and Ann Ferguson (eds.), Harvest of Want: Struggles for Food Security in Central America and Mexico (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); and The Political Dynamics of Reform, State Power and Food Policy in Mexico (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, forthcoming).