Peasant resistance to the agriculture transnationalization in Mexico’s South frontier

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Introduction
As Mexico is one of the countries where neoliberal policies have been applied in the most aggressive way (Otero, 2014), one of the phenomena observed there, is an agriculture transnationalization and, with that, a great food insecurity and agrarian polarization. This is similar to the transformations in other countries (Chile, Argentina), with the difference that in Mexico the transition to “free market” was very drastic, and the context was marked by deep asymmetries both inside the country and with respect to the technological, economic and natural conditions that farmers of other partners countries had. While the political and economic restructuration of neoliberal style has shown a series of failures, contradictions and negative effects (power concentration in agrifood chains, monoculture specialization, natural resources degradation, diminished plot areas, migration, labor devalue, etc.), these impacts could be higher in regions where farmers are far from the markets, land is rainfed, small lots tendency, and a reduced capital and infrastructure dotation. If we consider together these aspects we can talk about the neoliberal globalization, always carrying with it contradictions and a diversity of resistances. This is the case that is analyzed in this presentation. The analysis is developed in the Meseta Comiteca region, in Chiapas state, in Mexico. This is characterized in general by peasant agriculture, specialized in corn, in a great part for self-consumption. In the first part of the text we argue a theoretical approaching to neoliberalism, rejecting the idea that it constitutes a homogenous package (on the contrary, it is subject to political and social actors contests, which occur mainly in the national level). Some impacts of the neoliberalism in Mexico and Chiapas are analyzed. After that, we analyzed the processes of agricultural specialization in that region, observing the contradictions it entails. In the third part, we revise the different resistance modes to a certain transnationalization of the agriculture and a local food change, as well as the limits that such actions have in terms of scale, impact and modification of the forms in which
agriculture relations are shaped. Finally, political challenges are analyzed, pointing to
democratic processes of production and market, based on the recognition of the different
logics of the agricultural actors.

**Neoliberalism and agriculture in Mexico**
As the ideological base of the most recent globalization, neoliberalism occupies a central
place in the debates about the development and wellbeing today. This is so, because the
discrepancy that exists between the expectative that the groups promoting the economic
policies had under the free market logics, and the concrete economic, social and
environmental results. Social exclusion, economic inequality and environmental
degradation are only some of the impacts it has had. The idea of enhancing the capital
mobility at the international level, waiting to reduce social disparities, has exhibited
contradictory results. It is clear that such policies constituted a global strategy or project
to restore the capital accumulation and class power (Harvey, 2008; Bonanno y Cavalcanti,
2014; Mittelman, 2002; McMichael, 2000; Bonanno y Constance, 2008).

Neoliberalism has conducted in Mexico and other countries, to the dismantling of welfare
state, and the abandonment of the “individual protection” from the market forces. The
reduction of the social security to a minimal expression, and the labor deterioration are two
cases. Related to agriculture, the logics of controlling nature, reduce risks of farming, and
consolidate an industrial agriculture, are reactivated. These historical phenomena have been
present and exacerbated in the country, in such a way that in the last three decades have
carried out to higher opportunities to the industry agriculture (Otero, 2014; Fletes, Macías
and Madera, 2014). Along with it, there is the labor devalue, that is concentrated in
agricultural regional poles in the country, as a strategy to international competitiveness
(Massieu, 2010). In the food policy side, the country choose for redirecting subsidies from
production to consumption, having as central criteria the wage contention for the urban
population.

In the production, Mexico turned to the international market, with high value crops,
supposedly competitive (fruits and vegetables), that occupied primary land, irrigated, and
concentrated resources (González, 2013). Smallholders and peasants were deemed as
inefficient economic units, and its agriculture abandonment was thought an imminent
process that would take place in the medium or long term. In that sense they were taken
not as agricultural producers but as poor population, target for social policy. With the closing of the state enterprises aimed to price regulation, transformation and marketing, food policy was dismantled. A tendency to reducing plots areas, migration and feminization, began to characterize rural and agrarian life. Overall, this body of strategies has been named “políticas descampesinistas” (dis-peasant policies) (Nigh, 2014). As a consequence, Mexico depends on food imports, which in cereals reach about 50% of national consumption. Along with agricultural prices reduction (only those paid to the direct producer; but not what consumers pay to supermarkets) the scene is a high food insecurity and vulnerability. This keeps Mexico away from a food sovereignty situation; given that it puts food decisions in the “market” sphere, with private agents, most of them international.

It should be noted, we argue, that neoliberalism is not a unified package of policies, which are applied in the same way in different countries or times (Greenberg, 2012). Furthermore, in Mexico, political actors are changing in the distinct periods when such strategies have been applied (Greenberg, 2012; Rodríguez, 2013). The specific forms of neoliberal programs, then, are a product of distinct national political configurations, of the groups and subgroups that participate in its design, instrumentation and legitimation. In that sense, there are alternatives to neoliberal globalization.

On the other hand, there have been discrepancies between discourses and practices in the context of neoliberalism. As Otero (2014) mentions, in advanced countries, neoliberal reform was applied in a partial way. In the national level, in Mexico, the State promoted corn (contradicting the discourse of competitive crops), though in irrigated and entrepreneurial land as in northern state Sinaloa (Appendini and Quijada, 2013). The main subsidy program for cereals (Procampo) is characterized by its distortion. Marketing firms consolidated, resulting winners in the food “crisis”.

Agriculture specialization and transnationalization
In the study region, Comitan, Chiapas, corn predominates as main crop, in spite of the mentioned tendencies and policies. However, from the last 20 years agrarian structure is changing, through the incorporation of advanced technology, wider scope of commodity chains, and the kind of agricultural actors. All this associated with the presence of new commercial crops, promoted in part by State, and also by private local and national actors.
In the period between 2003 and 2014, agriculture surface cultivated had a great drop, as went from 197 to 152.9 thousand hectares. In this period we could observe some relevant processes. In the first place, a corn surface reduction (from 139 to 99 thousand hectares). Second, a light drop of coffee surface, and beans. Third, a productive diversification, since the region goes from 24 to 35 crops and varieties, including hass avocado, peanut, sugar cane, habanero chili, Persian lime, litchi, peach, pinion, mandarin, and tomato surface increased. Region is going to commercial, instead of subsistence crops. These commercial crops use the major proportion of irrigated lands. Is important to mention that in spite of this tendency, the presence of corn in the production units is overwhelming (they have corn and others).

The tomato case

Tomato shows the significant degree in which agrarian, social and productive structure has reconfigured, with the new economic agents. In the middle of tomato area, they is the firm Seminis, belonging to Monsanto, as well as a group of local firms (specialized in hybrid seeds distribution, agrochemical, green houses equipment, irrigation systems, etc.) as Conagro and Agrosima (early named Plantagro), among others. With them, region exhibits the proliferation of food commodities, whose productive and labor networks connect to supply chains out of the state and country. This is a significant phenomenon, because it shows the modification of local biotic resources (one of the relevant dimensions in regions connected to transnational commodity chains, Linck, et. Al., 2014), technology and the prior agricultural specialization in staple foods.

It is important to note that tomato had been introduced since the sixties (Gómez, 2013). However, its present relevance is based in the politic and cultural struggles that Mexico maintains around biotechnology and genetically modified organisms (GMO). The promulgation of Ley de Bioseguridad de Organismos Genéticamente Modificados (Biosecurity and GMO Act, 2005) was resisted and blocked by social organizations (supported by a Federal Judge), that continue fighting against GM and GM corn imports. On the other hand, this process is important because there is a group of peasants entering to tomato production – in the face of the low corn profitability –, undermining local biodiversity, and becoming them market dependents. By the way, other areas (Frontera Comalapa municipality) are sowing large surfaces of hybrid corn leaving creole or landraces.
One interesting group is Yalplas (“running water”), in La Trinitaria municipality. This was integrated specially for the production of greenhouse tomato (in recent years in Mexico this system is known as “protected agriculture”). There were 30 members, all of them young. They formally do not own any land, since they are only ejidatarios’ (peasants which were given land by State, initially being only users of this land, not owners, derived from agrarian reform after 1910 Mexican Revolution) sons, or avecindados (people that has arrived to the locality after the ejido was funded). In each family only one son will be inherited ejidal land, the others will have to buy it. After two years of negotiations they could build two greenhouses, in about one quarter hectare each, obtaining a profitable production which is greater than the corn incomes.

We also find an entrepreneurial group named Grupo Agroindustrial Chiapaneco. It was formed in 2007 by ten local entrepreneurs. These people were already participating in distributing the technological and agrochemical products mentioned above for tomato and vegetables, from seedling to greenhouses building. They have built 8 hectares greenhouses (each costing about 5 million pesos). It is an agriculture with a high investment, “protected”, agrochemical intensive (and also using “biological” substances), drip irrigation, a CEO, and a whole program with annually specific production goals. This firm reaches supermarkets as Wal Mart. They prefer the national market, because they have created a good market in southern Mexico, and also because confront a strong competition from northern areas in the country that can go cheaper to the United States.

So, agriculture transnationalization obeys to the introduction of biotic materials from outside the country, specially “undetermined” hybrid seed (that persist by a long period of several harvests), from the USA’s Harris Moran firm (recently associated to the European Clause), as well as Spaniard greenhouses, among other items. It obeys also to the presence, although minor, of international distribution to USA; and if that was not enough the relation that a lot of producers sustain with Guatemala markets.

**Resistance forms**

In the research about resistance is important to recognize that is difficult to make a simple connection between the subjects of study and certain aspects of the “global system” or the “dominant actors”. With more reason in a context of peasant economy like the one above described. In that sense, we will take resistance, in the first place through understanding it
in plural and in the diversity of forms it can adopt, as well as in the day by day forms in which producers and other actors interrelate and accommodate each other. Second, it is important to pay attention in the collective action “on the part of claimants” asking for spaces (public decisions, marketing, financing, production); alliances between subaltern groups and others politic and social actors; and the specific power practices (Gledhill, 2012). This would allow us to offer interpretations about the significance of the transformations and the aspects in issue.

Based on a survey to farmers, we observe a correspondence with official data about the corn drop in the region. We also found that industrial transformation and value added projects are almost inexistent, although they do participate in commercial networks to direct selling to consumers in two “farmers markets”. Corn reduction is due to low prices, but also is related to farmers generating other income sources as is migration to other states and USA. When corn area is reduced, the first thing families do is assuring to keep the maximum possible corn at home for self-consumption. If corn volume reduces because different circumstances (including now the climatic change and raining instability), families limit or completely stop selling. When they have enough volume, they could sell some corn in small quantities. But, in general, corn is not enough to self-consumption, and many of the families have to buy little volumes of it through the year. We found only two cases of people sewing hybrid corn. Defense and persistence of creole seed is because its better resistance to climate changes (they are rainfed systems), better quality, and the possibility of utilizing different seeds according to the weather. These peasants become biodiversity custodians, as they keep local seeds: mayero, crema, grano de oro, taxa, Cintalapa, chimbo, taxpeño, mopalu, olotillo, Ixhuatán, tehua, with different sewing dates.

It is important the role social organizations are taking, mainly in: 1. A more political organization (Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization- OCEZ) comprising 8,000 producers in Chiapas, whose activities are focused in education, local economy, agroecology and food sovereignty; 2) farmers markets installed by “Canasteras y Pequeños Productores Independientes Zapatistas” (CAPIZ, linked to Zapatista movement) in the Comitan city, with about 833 “tenants/producers” that sell cobs, beans, corn, peanuts, orange, apple, lime, tomato and onion. They constituted at 2009, after fighting against traders that used to manage food distribution. This has permitted that producers have a good choice for selling (however, we are explaining this in the next draft).
Challenges

The study of the productive and agrarian restructuring in Comitan, presents the different contradictions derived and reinforced by the neoliberalism programs. Also, offers a view about the limits of different forms of resistance displayed by producers. Local actors challenge the introduction of “improved”, hybrid or GM seeds. However, in general national organizations (with whom local actions are related) have weakened by the neoliberal policy itself, which took away spaces of participation as are regulation or financing. Other local (capitalized) groups have adopted the patterns of industrial agriculture organization and technology. Respecting to building food sovereignty (an ensign of some organizations in the region), it appears the contradiction appointed by Edelman (2014) – and others like I. Wallerstein-, about the problem to be fixed to the local: peasants concentrated in local markets and keeping local biodiversity, but they do not involve in other nodes of agri-food chains to take a major part of the added value. Incomes in general are very low.

In the realm of policy principles, it seems necessary to recognize the specific peasant rationality, and the social and environmental value of that. Also, to recover the food quality issue, that in the peasant context is associated with quality of life (Appendini y Quijada, 2013).

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