

Review - Land and Freedom

Written by John Gledhill

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JOHN GLEDHILL, JUL 30 2015

Land and Freedom: The MST, the Zapatistas and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism

By: Leandro Vergara-Camus

London: Zed Books, 2014

The MST (Landless Rural Workers Movement) emerged during the 1980s, as Brazil moved back towards democracy after two decades of military rule that took agrarian reform off the agenda. The movement's size is impressive, organizing over a million members in twenty-two of the twenty-six states of a country of continental scale. The politico-military Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which mobilized mainly indigenous peasants in the southern state of Chiapas to take up arms against Mexico's national government in January 1994, commands a much smaller following. Its rural "support bases" today are a small minority in a state in which less than a third of the population identifies itself as "indigenous". Nevertheless, the global impact of the Zapatista movement remains disproportionate to its size amongst anti-globalization activists, for whom it became an iconic symbol of "new ways of doing politics". As Zander Navarro argued some years ago [1], we need to close the gap between idealized images of the MST and Zapatista movements and knowledge about how they actually work in practice. Although Vergara-Camus takes a more positive view of the MST than Navarro, his book seeks to do precisely that. Moving beyond ideologized political preconceptions, one of the most important contributions of this comparison between the MST and the Zapatistas is its concluding exploration of the possibility of creating virtuous interactions between the "counter-power" embedded in "autonomist" politics and the pursuit of reform through party politics and political programs designed to bring together different non-elite sectors of society.

The possibility of using comparison in this way rests on the fact that the MST and Zapatistas differ radically in their relationships with the state and political parties, a reflection of profound differences between the socio-political and agrarian histories of Brazil and Mexico. The relationship between the MST and the political party that it urges its members to support, the Workers' Party (PT), was always delicate but became more so after the PT captured the national presidency. The government's social programs and success in creating jobs provided options that were preferable to MST militancy for many people, and given the importance of agro-exports in financing those programs, the "rural lobby" representing the interests of large capitalist farmers grew in political influence while PT support for land reform waned. Nevertheless, turning an MST encampment into a rural settlement with land titles and services requires the movement to negotiate with the state and secure resources from government agencies. The Zapatistas, in contrast, unflinchingly reject relations with the state, even when erstwhile supporters defect from the movement to access the "bad government's" social programs. They also reject alliances with left political parties as elements of a corrupt and anti-democratic system. Vergara-Camus moves from these well-known facts to offer an original and detailed unpacking of the movements' internal politics and relations with other social and political actors. His analysis is based on fieldwork and a good range of secondary literature.[2]

Although there are clearly differences between regions, Vergara-Camus offers evidence that the MST has a more vibrant internal democratic life than critics give it credit for. He argues that MST specialist Wendy Wolford was wrong to see the MST simply as a mediator between powerless settlers and a state that fully recovers control over local space after settlements are legalized, because the settlers remain empowered as "autonomous" political subjects (p. 147). Although the Zapatistas are often seen as paragons of grassroots democracy, Vergara-Camus points out that the politico-military organization's use of backstage channels of influence complicates the clandestine leadership's

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claims to “govern by obeying” a consensus constructed through deliberation in village assemblies. Overall, his critical discussion is even-handed: he appreciates Zapatista achievements in the administration of justice and conflict mediation through the “Good Governance Councils”, and documents defects in the MST’s governance systems. Nevertheless, he concludes that to the extent to which there are differences, decision-making is more rather than less democratic within the MST than in the EZLN (p. 125).

In neither case could Vergara-Camus be accused of pulling critical punches. There is good discussion of how much empowerment women participants have secured in both movements, which illustrates, *inter alia*, how the special circumstances of active struggle have different implications for women than the “normal” lives that result from successful conquest of the land. He shows how political will alone cannot change social relations overnight and reveals some of the personal dilemmas with which even the most committed female militants have to grapple. The success of the book’s political analysis owes much to its Gramscian framework, which deftly extends the Italian communist leader’s ideas about the relationships between political and civil society into different scenarios from those which originally inspired his “Modern Prince” metaphor.

What most distinguishes this book from recent fashion is its central concern with “political economy”, revisiting debates about peasants, commodity production and capitalism in order to ground the resilience of both movements in their control over land and relatively low levels of commodification and monetization of internal social relationships. Vergara-Camus acknowledges the differences between his cases in terms of production for the market, and that land as territory may have a different significance for indigenous Mexicans than for mestiço Brazilians. Although it is important not to essentialize and de-historicize cultural “indigenosity”, the fact that Vergara-Camus’s inspirations come from Gramsci and E.P. Thompson helps him to avoid the essentialism that he rightly claims characterizes much of the “post-development” literature (p. 292). But it seems equally vital not to see either organization’s rural communities as closed in terms of social and economic relationships and cultural influences, or economic security as guaranteed. The author argues that de-commodification enables people to construct radical alternatives for rural social life based on control of land and a sense of dignity as freedom and autonomy. But in the case of both movements there are big questions to answer about why some people abandon the struggle whereas others remain deeply committed, questions that the book raises but which still demand further research and extension of the analytical framework that the author adopts, although he does offer insights into the hardships and tensions of the kind of “autonomous” life offered by the Zapatistas and the MST.

The biggest questions that this politically engaged piece of scholarship poses arise from its demonstration of two fundamental contradictions. Firstly, neither movement has been successful in constructing a bigger hegemonic bloc of distinct social forces that could revolutionize society as a whole. Although the MST has forged links nationally with the *Sem Teto* (homeless) movement, which pursues similar tactics by occupying empty buildings, its efforts to reach out to poor people living in established urban communities are generally unsuccessful, because few of those people today identify with rural life. The MST’s political culture has historically been unsuited to building alliances with other social movements. Despite the fact that *subcomandante* Marcos, as a non-indigenous urban intellectual of a later generation to the MST founders, has tried to foster national alliance building of a non-sectarian kind, and many young indigenous intellectuals from the villages were eager enough to participate in bridge-building, it proved even harder for urban Mexicans to identify with indigenous rural people from their country’s “deep South”. [3] Lack of connection also reflects the second problem that Vergara-Camus highlights. Despite the growth of urban food gardening in the deindustrialized wastelands of the northern United States, de-commodified rural utopias offer little practical guidance on transforming the whole economy of largely urbanized societies.

In Brazil second-term PT President Dilma Rousseff has been obliged to embrace austerity politics by global financial elites and a hostile congress. Mexico’s social movements and independent media have faced intensified repression. The alternatives offered by the movements Vergara-Camus analyzes may become more attractive to people in hard times (abstracting from the other kinds of alternatives that may be presented by organized crime). Yet in the absence of a politics able to construct a broad coalition of anti-capitalist forces, the defense of an increasingly uncivilized capitalism by violent means may yet overwhelm the anti-neoliberal “dignified rage” embodied in the aspirations of the *sem terras* and Zapatistas.

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Notes

[1] Navarro, Zander, “Mobilização sem emancipação: as lutas sociais dos sem-terra no Brasil”. In Boaventura de Sousa Santos (ed.) *Produzir para viver: os caminhos da produção não capitalista*, Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002.

[2] Vergara-Camus chooses not to engage with some critical work on the Zapatistas by Mexican scholars, represented by Marco Saavedra Estrada and Juan Pedro Viqueira’s edited collection *Los indígenas de Chiapas y la rebelión zapatista: microhistorias políticas* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2010). Although he replicates some of these critical perspectives, the EZLN and its supporters have heavily criticized this Mexican work, and academic researchers have experienced increasing difficulty in gaining access to Zapatista autonomous communities.

[3] The “figure” of Marcos has now been replaced by the indigenous *subcomandante* Moisés. But the person who was Marcos continues to play an important role in interfacing the Zapatistas with “civil society” as “Galeano”, the “figure” of a Zapatista education promoter murdered by paramilitaries. Images are important for Marcos. In the 2006 *Other Campaign* Marcos as “Delegate Zero” left Chiapas on a motorbike, evoking the image of Che Guevara.