

[Review] Leandro Vergara-Camus (2014) Land and freedom: the MST, the Zapatistas, and peasant alternatives to neoliberalism

Article (Accepted Version)

Laing, Anna (2015) [Review] Leandro Vergara-Camus (2014) Land and freedom: the MST, the Zapatistas, and peasant alternatives to neoliberalism. *Antipode*. pp. 1-7. ISSN 0066-4812

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Leandro Vergara-Camus, *Land and Freedom: The MST, the Zapatistas and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism*, London: Zed Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-78032-743-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-78032-742-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-78032-745-7 (ebook)

Peasant rebellions have played a crucial role in the struggle for land in Latin America over several centuries. In more recent decades, these movements have also consolidated against agrarian reforms and property regimes under neoliberal development agendas. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* or EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico, and the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST) in Brazil are at the forefront of this resistance and held as shining examples in the global struggle against free-market ideology. For over 30 years, the MST has fought to reclaim unproductive land owned privately or by the state for landless peasant communities and is now one of the largest movements in Latin America with approximately 800,000-one million member families. Since 1994, the EZLN has demanded autonomy for the region of Chiapas—an area where rural indigenous peoples predominate—and declared war against the Mexican state. Although substantially smaller in size than the MST, the revolutionary leftist political movement has aligned with the wider alter-globalisation and anti-neoliberal movement, gaining significant numbers of supporters in urban areas and internationally.

In *Land and Freedom: The MST, the Zapatistas and Peasant Alternatives to Neoliberalism*, Leandro Vergara-Camus provides a unique comparative analysis of these two movements and contends that they stand out “for the radicalism of their challenge to the current neoliberal hegemony” (p.7). He claims that the movements differ from previous land struggles in Latin America for their marked ability to transcend local issues related to the countryside and for inspiring international debate and solidarity. Through an analysis of the internal dynamics and strategies of each movement, Vergara-Camus offers fascinating insights into the transformative development potential of these peasant alternatives to neoliberalism. The central argument put forth is that both the MST's land occupations and the Zapatistas' struggle for indigenous control over land and local resources are attempts at developing “autonomous rural communities” (p.3). Crucially, these communities depend on access to and control of a territorial space to develop their own structures of power and self-sufficient means of food production. Land is therefore integral for providing opportunities to detach communities from capitalist market relations, as well as to de-territorialise the hegemonic power of the state. Such a reformulation of space in turn strengthens the potential for alternative forms of agrarian development.

A book of this length (368 pages) and depth of complexity is significant considering that there are only a limited number of comparative studies of the MST and the EZLN (see Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Rubin 2002; Zibechi 1999). Furthermore, previous scholars have generally analysed each struggle through the lens of New Peasant Movements, influenced by the rise of postmodernist and post-structuralist perspectives. These studies have focused on issues of discourse, identity formation, culture and meaning. As a result, Vergara-Camus argues that many scholars “have overlooked issues of commodification and monetization of the lives of landless rural workers, subsistence peasants and small family farmers” (p.289). His book successfully addresses this gap through an inter-disciplinary theoretical approach bringing into dialogue “Marxist political economy, critical theories of development, agrarian studies, and an understanding of social change and radical politics heavily influenced by Antonio Gramsci” (p.3). Drawing from “alternative development” and “post-development” perspectives, Vergara-Camus asserts the centrality of power relations in critical development studies. Unlike mainstream theories that view development as “ultimately about individual and community integration into the market” (p.16), the author states that “the struggle for land of the MST and EZLN is fundamentally about challenging capitalist private property and reclaiming control over land” (p.19). Thus, his conceptual approach draws on the field of peasant studies and Marxist political economy to examine the

importance of controlling the means of production in the mobilisation of peasant communities, as well as explaining the pivotal role of land in these struggles.

The methodological framework combines an analytical treatment of the macro processes of the nation-state with an appreciation of the local and everyday practices and experiences of peasant families. The empirical material used is gathered from the author's extensive ethnographic fieldwork in various periods between 2003 and 2009, including lengths of stay in 11 encampments and 22 settlements of the MST and visits to several Zapatista communities with the bulk of research conducted in one area located on the northern fringe of the Lacandon Jungle (*Selva Lacandona*). This insight provides a rare opportunity to grasp the internal practices and dynamics of the movements and the communities that socially produce them. Since most scholars have grounded their analyses in the ideological and discursive politics of these struggles, with a particular emphasis on dominant spokespeople such as Subcomandante Marcos, this is a welcome contribution. Nevertheless, Vergara-Camus has arguably missed an opportunity to draw on more empirically rich material to advance his theoretical contributions. In particular, there is no critical discussion of the labour or ethics behind the negotiation of his access to the communities where the movements operate, and little descriptive detail of the author's experiences in these places. Instead, the main methodological challenge he points out is "to explain variation and commonality" (p.23) between the two movements. The appropriate use of field diary extracts, for instance, could have drawn the reader into a more nuanced understanding of the daily practices involved in movement and solidarity building, as well as the tensions involved in these processes.

The book is structured into five chapters, with each providing a comparative analysis of the two movements through a different thematic lens. The first chapter discusses the effects of neoliberal restructuring in each context, concentrating on the different paths of capitalist agrarian development and state formation in Brazil and Mexico. Vergara-Camus makes use of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation to assert that "the expropriation (dispossession) of peasants from their access to land is an essential condition for the development of a fully capitalist relationship" (p.38). The author then illustrates how the histories of class struggle between landowners and peasants have influenced each country's neoliberal agrarian transition and fostered "very different traditions of resistance and rebellion" (p.9). Whilst the MST emerged in an area characterised by European immigration and family farming, the EZLN is based in a region with little market penetration. Hence, private property and land rights were more entrenched in Brazil than in Mexico, leading the landless peasant communities to have a stronger dependency on and participation in market relations than the Zapatistas.

In the second chapter, Vergara-Camus reaffirms that the maintenance or reclaiming of land and the control over this territorial space is integral for the recovery of the peasant condition, including self-determination of agricultural labour, food production and decision-making processes. The structuring of each movement through different cycles of peasant experiences is examined and it is argued that whilst the landless rural workers aim to recover and reconnect with land, the Zapatistas are trying to reproduce place-based cultural and spiritual values through a wider "decolonization struggle" (p.89). Significantly, though, both movements share the aim of radically transforming the power relations traditionally embedded in society and the institutional spaces of the state.

The third chapter focuses on the internal organisation and decision-making structures of the two movements. Here, Vergara-Camus uses Gramsci's idea of the Modern Prince to contend that the movements have become a school of government that replaces the political party and some of the responsibilities of the state, such as political representation and the provision of basic services. Again, the control of a territorial space, the "autonomous rural community", is deemed a necessary condition for the creation of autonomy and the politicisation and mobilisation of peasant communities. The process of solidarity, cohesion and empowerment is said to foster the democratisation of political power and the modification of gender relations. That said, the author's fieldwork illustrates that there are

ongoing power struggles and internal contradictions. Most notably, although traditional gender roles have been challenged through a parity rule in the case of the MST and the Revolutionary Law of Women in the case of the EZLN, patriarchal relations often revert back after periods of heightened mobilisation. Nevertheless, Vergara-Camus shows that both movements actively challenge the hegemonic power of the state and work to develop their own alternative forms of governance rather than simply retreating into civil society as some alternative development scholars would suggest.

The fourth chapter offers a description of the non-capitalist logic and alternative development models fostered in MST and EZLN communities through subsistence farming and community self-reliance. Vergara-Camus argues that this “subsistence logic” is not part of an inherent peasant culture but arises in a particular context of market relations in which land plays a central role in reproducing the household and ensuring food security. Due to this history of property tenure, land has not been fully commodified and has been given meaning for its “use” rather than “exchange” value. Consequently, the MST and the EZLN have built “their development alternative partly around non-capitalist practices such as solidarity, reciprocity and collectivism” (p.292).

Finally, the fifth chapter turns to address the strategies the movements have adopted towards the politics of alliances, through civil society, political parties and state institutions. The author employs Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony as a “political practice that seeks to change reality, specifically the correlation of social and political forces” (p.218). Notably, the MST has focused on building broader alliances with rural unions and peasant movements to confront neoliberal policies, whereas the EZLN has attempted to build a “national-popular historical bloc” (p.265). The MST has also formed close links with the centre-left Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT), one of the most important left-wing movements in Latin America. Conversely, after the failure of the Mexican government to uphold the agreements of the San Andrés Accords of 1996 granting autonomy, recognition and rights to indigenous people in Mexico, the Zapatistas severed any links with political parties. However, contrary to John Holloway’s (2002) argument that the Zapatistas are anti-politics or anti-state, Vergara-Camus demonstrates that they are also exercising “a politics of radical democratization of the state, whereby power would be distributed and exercised differently” (p.262). Yet, the author is skeptical of the success of each movement to create long-lasting allegiances and resistance networks. Vergara-Camus postulates that this is due to the fact that other movements, particularly in urban spaces, do not have the access to land needed to generate autonomous communities. Furthermore, the Zapatistas’ staunch commitment to political autonomy has lost many supporters at a time when other major political actors have chosen to negotiate with the state.

Vergara-Camus concludes the book by suggesting that the two movements share a number of alternative development objectives for their communities, namely: securing subsistence-based livelihoods; gaining a degree of autonomy from the state; and gaining a degree of independence from the neoliberal market. These peasant alternatives to neoliberalism are premised on the control of a geographic space for the development of democratic structures of power outside of the state and subsistence-based agricultural production outside of capitalist market relations. Due to their divergent histories the MST displays a more pragmatic approach to both market integration and state relations than the Zapatistas. In placing the analytical lens on the political economy of peasant communities, Vergara-Camus goes a long way in showing the relevance of agrarian studies and Marxist inquiry to contemporary understandings of development alternatives. Nonetheless, Vergara-Camus fails to give enough credence to the social and cultural aspects of struggles for territorial autonomy. He explains that “at the root of the landless and Zapatista struggle there is a basic and yet powerful assertion of the right to take control of one’s life, of the right to decide collectively on the way of life that individuals, families and communities want to pursue” (p.296). Yet, there is little reflection on the rise of ethnic-inflected decolonial movements in Latin America and how this has impacted on the objectives and strategies of

indigenous movements like the Zapatistas. By directing his enquiry at peasant alternatives to neoliberalism, longer histories of colonial exploitation and oppression are overlooked. Here, a detailed examination of the work of the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality collective in Latin America could have engendered an interesting discussion over the importance of delinking from contemporary legacies of coloniality (see Mignolo 2007).¹ Further, although the author briefly notes that each movement has received donations from non-governmental organisations and international solidarity campaigns (p.306), not once does he examine the impact of these transnational networks on the development agendas of each movement.

Overall, this book makes significant contributions to current debates in critical development studies over the nature of neoliberalism and radical alternatives to it. The study also provides a comprehensive and detailed—albeit theoretically dense—addition to the corpus of work on peasant and indigenous movements in Latin America. For me, it provides a refreshing read at a time when Marxist thinkers have focused their attention on anti-capitalist resistance in urban centres at the expense of examining contemporary rural movements and their relevance for the construction of radical social experiments. In addition, *Land and Freedom* addresses the vital function of geographic space for controlling the means of social reproduction through non-market based economies and for providing opportunities to develop participatory decision-making practices. Vergara-Camus' book can be highly recommended to a variety of scholars and activists broadly interested in development, Latin American studies, grassroots social movements and transformative societal models.

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June 2015

1 See also <http://waltermignolo.com/the-collective-project-modernitycolonialitydecoloniality/>