

"Experiences of agrarian reform around the world": the legacy of peasant reform in Mexico

By IAPC

The issue of land tenure and land distribution in the Global South is a central and structural issue in understanding the economic and social inequality that pervades these countries, and is an urgent and necessary debate for any revolutionary movement seeking to reverse this inequality in both rural and urban areas. From the time of colonisation to neoliberal capitalism, land has been concentrated in the hands of agrarian and economic elites, at the cost of the detriment of the peasantry. However, there have also been several experiences of peasant struggles, revolutionary processes, and governments that have sought, with different strategies, to reverse this inequality and democratise access to the land. The concept of "agrarian reform" is part of the programme of peasant movements in the Global South; however, partly because the ruling classes have made it a taboo subject, there is little education on it. With this in mind, the book "Experiences of Agrarian Reform in the world", published by Batalla de Ideas (Battle of Ideas), seeks to systematise the experiences of agrarian reform in different parts of the world, with the aim of providing a comprehensive overview and serving as an input for the training of activists. The book was coordinated by Joao Pedro Stédile, Brazilian economist and founder of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil.

According to Stédile, agrarian reform is a term that "was adopted during the 20th century as a synthesis of programmes or proposals for the democratisation of access to land in each country". He recognises, however, that there are different ways of carrying it out, and, as a methodology for organising the information on the different experiences, he classifies them into different types of agrarian reform: classic, reformist, radical, popular, socialist, anti-colonial. This classification is based on the role of the state and social movements in the process. The following chapters of the book are sorted according to this classification, and are compiled from articles on experiences in different countries around the world (United States, Japan, Egypt, Mexico, Bolivia, China, Vietnam, Cuba and Western European countries), written by different authors.

For the first chapter review of this book, we have selected chapter 6, entitled "Emiliano Zapata: Mexico's Peasant Revolution". We have chosen to begin with this chapter because of the importance of Mexican agrarian reform and

its impact on agrarian reform processes in other Latin American countries and even on other continents. This experience is framed within what Stédile calls "radical reforms" in his definition of those processes carried out by the peasants themselves, excluding the need for state intervention by creating laws for this purpose.

The chapter corresponds to an article written in 2016 by Francisco Pineda, a Mexican anthropologist and writer. In this article, he gives a historical account of the events, focusing mainly on analysing the strategies carried out by the Zapatist revolution, and the perspective of its fundamental document: the Plan of Ayala (the full text of which is included in an annex to the chapter, allowing the reader to deepen the analysis of the chapter). The author does not stand from a position that he assumes to be objective or neutral; on the contrary, he acknowledges his own adherence to the Zapatist agrarian reform, and from this position he seeks to delve into the legacy of this process that can be recognised up to the present day, refuting the voices of official history. The author begins by historically contextualising the conflict that provoked the Mexican peasant revolt. He points to colonisation as the origin of land concentration in Mexico, with the massive usurpation of land, the displacement of peasant maize production in order to set up large sugar plantations, and the enslavement of peasants on these plantations.

The foundations of this colonial agrarian regime would remain in place until the 20th century, intensifying with the arrival of the technological changes of the industrial revolution. Although this origin of the conflict can be recognised as common to all Latin American countries, the author points out some particularities of the Mexican case.

On the one hand, the formation of a combined land-owning and industrial capitalist ruling class. On the other hand, the peasant self-determination that has been maintained over the years, based on the tradition of diverse and self-organised maize production. The combination of this context of violence and dispossession with the basis of peasant self-organisation led in 1911 to the social outbreak known as the Zapatist Revolution.

The author's reconstruction of the events gives an account of the evolution of the Zapatist revolution, from the local peasant uprisings to its unification with the formation of the Liberation Army, led by Emiliano Zapata, initiating an armed revolution that succeeded in overthrowing the

dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. But it was the proclamation of the Plan of Ayala that consolidated the revolution and gave it its transforming power. According to the author, this Plan would be "the programme and strategy of the peasant revolution in Mexico", since in its content one can recognise the collective subject (the peasants themselves) and the mode of action (with arms) that it proposes to carry out the agrarian transformation. This is the essence of the Plan of Ayala: although it does not leave aside the institutional level, proposing the need to overthrow the provisional government as a traitor and call for elections, the subject of action for transformation is the people and not the state.

Another important point of the Plan of Ayala is the nationalisation of property from the enemies of the revolution. This task of nationalisation was to be extended to urban properties with the extension of the Liberation Army's territorial control and the seizure of the capital of the republic. At this point, the author gives an account of the integral vision of the Zapatista revolution: it was not only a movement of peasant resistance, but a revolutionary force that sought to install a new order to reverse centuries of injustice, with proposals and actions in rural and urban areas, in the economy, transport, education, health, the press, and even the organisation of a Feminist Centre.

What is interesting to highlight about Pineda's analysis is that it provides insight into the revolutionary ideological perspective of Zapatism, and in this he points out two main points. On the one hand, the historical perspective: Zapatism did not only seek to distribute land, but to reverse the historical debt of colonial agrarian logic and the accumulation of the cities based on the exploitation of the peasants. On the other hand, it sought to reverse the mercantile logic to which the commons were subject: the lands, mountains and waters distributed could neither be bought nor sold, and the nationalisation of oil was proposed.

While official history insists that the Zapatist revolution was defeated with Zapata's death and left no legacy, Pineda points out that this is not the case. The Zapatist revolution eliminated the colonial hacienda regime forever, and the new government had to address the peasants' demands by enacting a law to divide up the latifundia. However, in this strategy, which Pineda calls "reformist", the ideological principles of Zapatism were lost: the peasant was reduced to a "petitioner" against the state, and the application of the law was not retroactive, so the historical scope that sought to reverse

the injustices against the maize peoples since colonial times was lost. On the other hand, foreign oil companies (mainly American) obtained the right to exploit the subsoil, abandoning aspirations of national sovereignty over the commons. This last point is key to understanding the interference of the United States, which, as Pineda recounts, played a central role in the defeat of the peasant revolution, first by supporting the Constitutionalist Army by sending arms and troops, and then by giving diplomatic recognition to the government that succeeded the revolution.

This chapter provides an insight into the principles and strategies of the Mexican revolution. Rather than a detailed account of the historical facts, Pineda seeks to provide an analysis of the objectives that drove the Zapatist peasants, and their historical and comprehensive vision of the agrarian reform they needed to overcome centuries of injustice. The inclusion in the article of quotations from the revolution's own leaders provides first-hand knowledge of their ways of thinking, but also functions as an invitation, a harangue to take up those principles again. Reading it contributes to critical education, and at the same time it imbues us with the strength of one of the most important peasant revolutions in Latin America, both for its symbolic power and for the lessons that can be taken up again for today's struggles.