Withered Milpas: Governmental Disaster and the Mexican Countryside

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Resumen

Los teoristas de la globalización han demostrado como los proyectos destinados a profundizar la integración transnacional económica y política, pueden producir nuevas formas de riesgo y vulnerabilidad. Los desastres - naturales o no - sirven como encrucijadas, por medio de las que se revelan varios enlaces: entre las estructuras de poder locales y globales, entre la cultura ideológica y material, entre las sociedades humanas y los ambientes naturales. Este artículo investiga como los efectos sinergísticos de la integración económica norteamericana, la privatización y corporatización de la agricultura mexicana, los mercados internacionales del maíz inestables, y el cambio climático global, se experimentan como un “desastre gubernamental” en las vidas de los campesinos del estado de Hidalgo, México. El presente estudio analiza como una consciencia particular acerca de la catástrofe es producida y comunicada por medio de un discurso de la desecación, el cual se basa en ideas tradicionales sobre la explotación y la vulnerabilidad. Vivir el desastre como una exclusión permanente de las formas políticas colectivas, sirve para reforzar y respaldar a los proyectos de neoliberalización que funcionan para individualizar las prácticas de ciudadanía en el campo mexicano.

Globalization theorists have demonstrated how projects aimed at deepening transnational economic and political integration produce new forms of risk and vulnerability. Disasters—natural and otherwise—serve as critical nodes through which a variety of links are revealed: between local and global power structures, ideological and material culture, and human societies, and natural environments. This article examines how the synergistic effects of North American economic integration, the privatization and corporatization of Mexican agriculture, volatile international...
maize markets, and global climate change are experienced as a “governmental disaster” by campesinos [small farmers] in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico. It analyzes how a particular consciousness of catastrophe is produced and articulated via a discourse of desiccation, which indexes traditional notions concerning exploitation and vulnerability. The experience of disaster as a foreclosure of collective forms of political agency serves to reinforce neoliberalizing projects that work to individuate practices of citizenship in the Mexican countryside.

PALABRAS CLAVES: neoliberalismo, desastre, México, agricultura, democracia.

KEYWORDS: neoliberalism, disaster, Mexico, agriculture, democracy.

Over the past decade and a half, globalization theorists have demonstrated how projects aimed at deepening transnational economic and political integration produce new forms of risk and vulnerability.1 Scholars working in Latin America have helped to pioneer the study of disasters, which serve as critical nodes through which a variety of emerging links are revealed: between local and global power structures, ideological and material elements of culture, and human societies and natural environments.2 Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002) define disaster as “a process/event combining a potentially destructive agent/force (which they label a “hazard”) from the natural, modified, or built environment and a population in a socially and economically produced condition of vulnerability, resulting in a perceived disruption of the customary relative satisfactions of individual and social needs for physical survival, social order, and meaning” (2002:4). This article examines how the synergistic effects of North American economic integration, the privatization, and corporatization of Mexican agriculture, and global climate change are experienced as a “governmental disaster” by campesinos [small farmers] in the state of Hidalgo, Mexico.

Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (2002) exclude “processes that result from human intentionality” from the category of hazards; nonetheless they seek to consider social perceptions of danger and calculation of risks in their investigation of these hazards (2002:4). This question of intentionality is a thorny one: if hazards are to be defined as unintentional, what then of the structures of vulnerability that enable a hazard to precipitate a disaster? Could failure on the part of state authorities to account for the (more or less obvious) outcomes of policy constitute a hazard? Anthropological analyses of disasters must also attend to how they are experienced and made meaningful. This article further develops the concept of “governmental disaster” as a means of situating Mexico’s rural crisis with respect to ongoing changes in political, social, and ecological climates. I explore the links between material, metaphysical, and metaphorical disasters in the contemporary experience of Hidalgan campesinos, in order to analyze how a particular consciousness of
catastrophe is produced which works to circumvent established forms of collective agency. I trace these dynamics through two moments of national crisis—the campesino protests against NAFTA that resulted in the 2003 National Accord for the Countryside and the 2006–2007 “tortilla crisis”—in which the relationships between democracy and neoliberalism have been hotly contested. What some might pose as the unintended effects of human practices, these campesinos interpret as a form of willful neglect that endangers not only rural livelihoods, but the nation itself. Beyond the issue of intentionality, campesino experiences of and responses to such disasters are intimately shaped by the power-effects of neoliberalizing projects, which have restructured patterns of vulnerability in the Mexican countryside, patterns which are closely tied to modes of social and political agency.

In the winter of 2006, the new President, Felipe Calderón, faced a major crisis as angry crowds throughout Mexico protested the skyrocketing price of tortillas. The price for a kilo of tortillas, the country’s staple food, had more than doubled in the past year to reach 11 pesos. This was four times the rate of salary increases and triple the rate of inflation (Becerra-Acosta 2007). Since the advent of NAFTA, commercial maize processors like Cargill had increasingly substituted home-grown white maize with highly-subsidized U.S. exports “dumped” onto the Mexican market. However, the ongoing U.S. war in Iraq and public outcry over global warming had prompted widespread speculation on ethanol production, rapidly inflating the price of maize futures on the global market. Suddenly, many of the people whose ancestors had originally domesticated maize could no longer afford to consume it. The “tortilla crisis” unleashed widespread accusations of government betrayal from Mexicans who felt trapped into dependency on the United States for their very sustenance. Following on the heels of a highly contentious presidential election, this latest crisis was widely acknowledged as a test of Calderon’s leadership and a harbinger of future economic policy. Protest slogans like “sin maíz no hay país” (without maize there is no country) reflected the material and ideological significance of maize to historically sedimented notions of Mexican nationhood.

Four years earlier, Calderon’s predecessor, Vicente Fox, had confronted a closely related debacle. On January 1, 2003, a farmer’s movement called El Campo No Aguanta Más (The Countryside Can Endure No More) blocked the Cordova International Bridge linking Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, Texas. Marking the anniversary of Mexico’s entry into NAFTA and of the Zapatista rebellion, they seized ports of entry for U.S. agricultural products on the site where campesino armies had struck a blow against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in 1911. Five days later over 100,000 protestors marched to the Zócalo, Mexico City’s main square, to demand a renegotiation of the agricultural chapter of NAFTA and an end to illegal dumping. The campesinos argued that neoliberal policies and environmental degradation from earlier rounds of development had turned the countryside into a “disaster area.”
That New Year’s day I was in the central state of Hidalgo, one of Mexico’s poorest regions, researching rural development and democracy. On top of the policy-induced crises described above, the region had also been experiencing droughts and dramatic flash flooding over the past several years. The protests in Juarez featured prominently in conversations among the campesinos and return migrants who gathered to celebrate in the ejidos where I had been working. Many of them expressed strong support for the El Campo No Aguanta Más movement. However, when I asked why there had been no such marches in Hidalgo, I received the same answer time after time. “Ya se acabó todo” (it’s all finished now), “el campo ya se seco” (the countryside has withered).

In order to diagnose the meaning of this seemingly contradictory response, I begin by considering the cultural categories of crisis generated by the dynamics discussed above. The notion of “governmental disasters,” which emerges from contemporary Mexican debates over the changing relationships between society and the state, is particularly useful for analyzing the crisis in the Mexican countryside. Analyzing disasters like this one as governmental not only reveals how changing forms of rule create differentiated structures of vulnerability, but also enables us to discern how hazards themselves may be the products of human actions. Next, I discuss the role governmental disasters play in political and economic restructuring processes. I examine the specific case of the Tulancingo River Valley, where climatic anomalies and anthropogenic hazards have intersected with newly generated forms of social vulnerability to create a governmental disaster that serves to foreclose traditional collective forms of political agency. The disaster is interpreted locally through discourse of desiccation, which diagnoses the premature death of the countryside as a result of human failures to maintain systems of reciprocity. This perceived rupture of a total system has produced a cataclysmic consciousness among campesinos. Although they resist government attempts to “naturalize” the disaster by pointing out its origins in changing strategies of rule, the erosion of collective rural institutions leaves them to confront an uncertain future as individuals all the same.

**Disasters—Natural and Otherwise**

It has become commonplace for Mexican journalists, political commentators, and activists to refer to the countryside as a “disaster area.” Some have even christened a new category of crisis: the “governmental disaster.” This term has been used to highlight the social and political implications of recent natural disasters, as well as to provoke discussion around the role of national and local governments in precipitating them. Contrasting governmental disasters to “natural” ones, Carlos Montemayor of *La Jornada* emphasized the increasing use of public power to secure
private profit in ways that cause harm to citizens and violate national laws. He suggests that “the disasters occurring within Mexican territory continue to stem not only from natural forces, but from the irresponsibility of the authorities …” (Montemayor 2005). Hence misuse of political power and public authority is categorized as a hazard, alongside “natural forces” like hurricanes and droughts. Rural society is constantly referred to as suffering catastrophic crisis; but the popular mobilizations in 2003 and 2006 demonstrate that many Mexicans reject the notion that the demise of the countryside is simply the result of backwardness or inefficiency on the part of campesinos.

Because food is both sustenance and symbol, agricultural crises may be experiences through which social actors gain new perspectives on the intersections of ecological, political, economic, and social changes. Anthropologists are developing new frameworks for analyzing disasters—natural and otherwise—that build on an understanding of human societies and environments as mutually constitutive. Moreover, new research investigates how certain disasters come to be “naturalized” and how the experience of such disasters shapes forms of political agency. This work engages a growing body of multidisciplinary research into the history of human interactions with changing environments (Díaz and Stahle 2007). Much of that literature investigates how culture, as a set of human and material infrastructures, mediates the impacts of disasters on particular societies. Environmental historians have pointed out that such catastrophes tend to produce differential social impacts in agricultural societies, because marginalized groups have reduced access to emergency resources. Droughts which endure for extended periods may endanger the social and political order by pushing marginalized groups toward unrest or outright rebellion (Florescano and Swan 1995; Enfield and O’Hara 1997; Enfield and O’Hara 1999; Davis 2001; García Acosta et al. 2003; Escobar Ohmstede 2004; Enfield and Fernández-Tejedo 2006). In recent decades, global warming has prompted greater scrutiny of cultural principles and practices that exploit ecosystems beyond their ability to regenerate (Sponsel 1992). The human role in precipitating ecological catastrophes has particularly interested researchers. Anthropologists have emphasized how culture, far from epiphenomenal, mediates ecological processes at multiple levels simultaneously, such that human societies and their environments shape one another reciprocally over time (Headland 1997; Kottak 1999).

Whereas much of the literature on natural disasters has focused on social impacts in terms of the destruction of social and material infrastructures, closer attention to micropolitics is needed to provide a more nuanced perspective on human agency in precipitating and naturalizing disasters. To label disasters “governmental” is to reject the customary implication that they are spontaneous or serendipitous. It situates them as punctuating moments in much larger patterns of
demolition and re-engineering of social, political, and economic infrastructures, which Harvey has referred to as the re-routing of the “sclerotic arteries” of capitalism (1995:3). “Governmental disasters” serve to finish off those earlier material and human infrastructures, paving the way for a new order of things. The naturalization of those processes as inevitable and inexorable, or worse—as an unavoidable consequence of the imagined “backwardness” of milpa agriculture consequently needs to be critically examined.

Far beyond a failure of state agencies to prevent or manage natural catastrophe, “governmental disaster” entails an active reordering of subjectivities and forms of rule. The concept of “governmental disaster” foregrounds questions of power and agency, situating environmental risk in the context of the expansion of global capitalism and highlighting links between rural and urban dynamics often neglected in ethnographies of globalization. As used by Montemayor and other journalists, “governmental disaster” connotes a catastrophe brought about by a government’s refusal to protect citizens from impending harm. Indeed, use of the term often implies a willful disregard for the well-being of the nation on the part of state authorities. This understanding articulates well with Hidalgan campesinos’ sense that the demise of the Mexican countryside is a direct result of the national government’s betrayal of its earlier corporatist social pact and the overexploitation of rural people as second-class citizens. I suggest that these disasters may also be understood as “governmental” in the Foucauldian sense, in that they function to produce subjects who may be governed at a distance through shaping the fields in which they act (Foucault 1991). Hence the experience of disaster as a foreclosure of collective forms of political agency serves to reinforce neoliberalizing projects that work to individualize practices of citizenship in Mexico. Ongoing shifts in the political and economic status of campesinos in neoliberal Mexico influence a sense of lost agency, which is articulated through a discourse of desiccation. In characterizing the countryside and their futures as “withered,” campesinos explicitly link disastrous droughts in their political and natural environments.

Central Mexico has served as the region’s “tortilla basket” since the ancient domestication of teosinte. In recent decades, however, the combined effects of the Green Revolution, privatization, and free trade, and global warming have rendered campesinos more vulnerable to ruin by intensifying cycles of extended drought and extreme flash flooding, while simultaneously introducing newly individualized forms of economic and political risk. Recent natural disasters and climatic anomalies have therefore been closely linked in the minds of campesinos to ongoing crises in rural society. Their experience underlines that most “natural” disasters are in fact socially elicited, experienced, and interpreted.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to categorize their predicament as solely a rural crisis. As the large scale mobilizations of 2003 and 2006 demonstrated, what is
at stake is not only the status of campesinos but rather the cultural politics of large-scale change in Mexico generally. Distinctions between rural and urban are discursively produced, with the rural standing in for an idealized authentic local past and the urban an industrialized global future. Williams (1973) notes that these notions about the city and the country in fact serve as “partial interpreters” of experiences of capitalist transformations (1977: 293). They are “forms of response to a social system as a whole,” a system which constantly remakes country and city alike (Williams 1977: 294). “The industrial–agricultural balance, in all its physical forms of town-and-country relations, is the product, however mediated, of a set of decisions about capital investment made by the minority which controls capital and which determines its use by calculations of profit” (Williams 1977: 294–295). Governmental disasters, then, are one means by which subjects become conscious of these systemic shifts. That is, they serve as “critical events” around which cultural knowledge can be brought to bear, to rework cultural categories in ways that orient new forms of practice (Das 1996). This is especially important in the case of Mexico, where contestation over democratic forms of citizenship practice is ongoing.

According to Douglas (1975), discourses around environments at risk may be understood as techniques of social control, in that they are predicated upon shared notions of a natural order. Cultural notions of the laws and limits of a particular environment, conceived as a total system that includes both human societies and the natural world, lend credence to warnings of endangerment via pollution or human imprudence. I analyze how Hidalgan campesinos interpret and articulate their experiences via a discourse of desiccation, in which political and hydrological droughts combine to bring about the premature death of rural communities and the foreclosure of collective forms of political agency. This helps to explain their seeming fatalism in the face of crisis, despite expert claims that ethanol speculation means a more secure future for campesinos. In their view, the “countryside can endure no longer” not because campesinos lack the will to adapt and survive, but because the land and those who work it have been exploited beyond their natural limits, pushed past the point of recovery, and subsequently abandoned. This folk analysis is based on a shared understanding of the web of reciprocal relationships that formed the historical and material basis for collective political agency and social reproduction in the countryside. Many of these relationships are deeply rooted, but their renovation was enabled in recent history by other links that emerged from the Mexican revolution. According to an older generation of Hidalgan campesinos, decades of human greed have destroyed these reciprocal ties, leaving rural communities high and dry. They view the contemporary crisis as the end of an epochal cycle, a historical erasure of the struggle undertaken by Emiliano Zapata, which is returning Mexico to the days of the Porfiriato.
Drought and Deluge: Situating the Tulancingo River Valley

Renewed efforts to chronicle the history of natural disasters in Mexico have revealed the social character of catastrophes such as droughts and floods in the Meseta Central (Florescano 1969; Florescano and Swan 1995; García Acosta et al. 2003; Escobar Ohmstede 2004; Gill 2006). The Tulancingo River Valley is part of the Río Panuco watershed, situated on the edge of the Meseta Central at the mouth of the eastern Sierra Madre. It lies in a temperate semiarid zone where control of water resources has traditionally been closely guarded by elites. Water remains a key productive and symbolic resource in the region (Enfield and O’Hara 1997). Access to rivers and aqueducts was controlled by hacendados (powerful landowners) until well into the mid-20th century, even after portions of their estates were appropriated in the postrevolutionary land reform. Ejido (collectively held) lands were almost exclusively rain-fed until the late 1970s, when a series of development partnerships between local NGOs, international funding agencies, and the state enabled campesino cooperatives to secure credits for drilling wells and purchasing Green Revolution technology. This “democratization” of access to water represented a challenge to the power of wealthy landowners and a symbolic reaffirmation of the importance of campesino agriculture to national development.

In recent years, however, synergy between global warming and the El Niño phenomenon has led to intensified cycles of drought and deluge in the Tulancingo Valley. Throughout the 1990s, strong El Niño conditions prompted summer droughts between May and August, a crucial period in the growth cycle of rain-fed maize. In 1998, for example, the Meseta Central did not receive its first spring rains (usually expected in March or April) until halfway through May, reducing crop yields by 15 percent (Maganón 1999:112). In addition to climate effects driven by El Niño and La Niña, rising temperatures associated with the greenhouse effect have also led to drought in Central Mexico. Mexico’s National Ecological Institute (INE) has predicted that if global temperatures continue to rise at the present rate, the region’s rainfall will decrease by at least 7 percent. By the end of this century, that could mean that 75 percent of Mexico’s land would no longer be suitable for agriculture, a 50 percent reduction in overall arable land. Researchers at the INE and the Center for Atmospheric Science (CCA) of the National University (UNAM) estimate that Hidalgo will be among the states most dramatically affected by this trend (Flores et al. 1996). This growing tendency toward drought is exacerbated by the exhaustion of regional aquifers; the Río Panuco watershed is among the most vulnerable to overexploitation due to population growth, increased irrigation, and lack of recharge (Jiménez Román and Maderrey Rascón 2004).

Increasingly volatile storms in the nearby Gulf of Mexico associated with global warming have meant that these extended dry periods are frequently punctuated by
violent flash floods that destroy crops, erode farmland, and severely damage transportation and urban infrastructures. Severe floods took place in the Tulancingo River Valley in 1998, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006, and 2007. In 1999, one-third of the average yearly rainfall fell in a 24-hour period, devastating the entire region. High water marks from the 1999 floods are still visible on walls of local buildings. The year 2007 proved to be another record-breaker. Unprecedented summer heat waves were followed in late August by flash flooding caused by Hurricane Dean. Heavy rains fell for more than 18 straight hours, bursting dams and causing the Tulancingo River to overflow its banks. While human fatalities were minimal, the loss of crops, livestock, and homes was dramatic.

On October 23, Tulancingo experienced its first freeze of the year. The National Meteorological Service reported it as a record low temperature, noting that the arrival of freezing temperatures has occurred far earlier than usual for the past three years (Padilla 2007). According to Hidalgo’s State Department of Agriculture, over 9,000 hectares of crops were lost during fall 2007 as a result of weather anomalies. The social impacts of these recent catastrophes are magnified by other changes related both to earlier agricultural development schemes and to the restructuring of local and global markets.

In innovations associated with the rural development programs of the 1970s and 1980s helped to pull some campesino communities out of grinding poverty by increasing their access to irrigation and by facilitating technology transfers that led to increased use of tractors, pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers. Over the short term, these changes increased agricultural productivity and converted the Tulancingo River Valley into a center of artisan dairy production. However, the long-term implications of this period of rapid changes are only now becoming apparent (see also Sonnenfeld 1992). Chemical runoff from agricultural fields and improper disposal of dairy industry byproducts has polluted the Tulancingo River and its tributaries, rendering the water unfit for irrigation or human consumption. Population growth and industrialization in nearby towns have also contributed to water contamination and intensified water consumption. Droughts lead to increased use of irrigation by campesinos with access to wells and pumps. Others who are unable to survive on their rain-fed plots clear cut hillside timber stands to sell the lumber, creating erosion, and possibly altering the water cycle. Together, these factors lead to further depletion of the water table and intensifying resource struggles. Moreover, they render the valley increasingly vulnerable to cycles of drought and deluge.

In recent decades the restructuring of markets in maize and agricultural credits and the creation of new markets in land have further contributed to the vulnerability of campesinos. A new spate of research into the long-term impacts of free trade and neoliberal restructuring on the Mexican countryside has yielded a stark
portrait. The “Reform of the Agrarian Reform,” initiated under Carlos Salinas, entailed a massive public divestment from rural development at the same time as it privatized communal landholdings and opened Mexican markets to highly subsidized agricultural imports from the United States. Although the ejido retains significance as a social and cultural institution in rural Hidalgo, its economic role is greatly reduced.

The neoliberal policy framework implemented by Salinas was continued and deepened by his successors, Zedillo and Fox. Calderón seemed to be reading from the same playbook as he confronted the tortilla crisis in 2006. He responded to the protests by importing more yellow maize from the United States, claiming that increased imports were necessitated by the failure of Mexican campesinos to meet the nation’s subsistence demands. However, Mexican and international scholars have repeatedly contested these claims on the grounds that the tortilla crisis did not result from domestic inproductivity, but in fact came about due to corporate monopolization of food markets enabled by NAFTA (Barkin 2006; Vargas 2006; De la Tejera et al. 2007). Nor was the tortilla crisis driven by increased demand: consumption is down as the basic market basket of products has increased steadily while real wages continue to drop in value (De la Tejera et al. 2007:7). The demise of campesino agriculture has not merely been a natural withering away of outdated modes of production, but rather a clear case of planned obsolescence. The introduction of new forms of financial risk, far beyond the control or even scrutiny of local farmers, helps to govern rural subjects at a distance.

For the past two decades, maize prices in Mexico have fluctuated based not on internal dynamics of supply and demand, but on global corporate strategies. NAFTA originally provided for the liberalization of agricultural trade between the United States, Mexico, and Canada in stages over a period of 15 years, with a series of protections on sensitive products to be phased out one by one. Tariffs on imported maize were phased out in 2008. Originally, the removal of tariffs was intended to promote fair competition between Canadian, Mexican and U.S. producers by developing the comparative advantage of each over a decade and a half. However, the drastic disparity in government support for agricultural production between Mexico and the United States prevented level competition. In 2000, U.S. maize producers received $10 billion in subsidies, an amount equal to ten times the Mexican government’s entire agricultural budget (Amat et al. 2003). While austerity policies encouraged the Mexican government to cut agricultural extension and credit programs to small farmers, the United States government steadily increased funding to their U.S. counterparts. The U.S. Congress passed the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, which raised subsidies to U.S. farmers by an unprecedented 80 percent, to the tune of $18 billion per year by 2010. Enacted mere months before the lifting of tariffs on key agricultural prod-
ucts, the Farm Bill was denounced by campesino organizations as a strategic act of aggression intended to cement U.S. domination of Mexico. Many of these groups swelled the ranks of protestors in Juarez and Mexico City in January 2003.

Traditional tortillas are made with fresh dough derived from white maize. However, as Mexico urbanized in the latter half of the 20th century a commercial tortilla industry arose based increasingly on dehydrated maize flour. Two companies, MASECA and MINSA, controlled production, buying most of their supply from the government broker, CONASUPO. CONASUPO was eliminated in 1999 as part of neoliberal reforms, and MASECA was privatized. Now the Mexican tortilla industry is controlled by a transnational agribusiness oligopoly which includes players like Arthur Daniels Midland, Cargill, and Conagra (Vargas 2006; De la Tejera et al. 2007). U.S. subsidies make imported yellow maize cheaper for large commercial buyers (De la Tejera et al. 2007:18–19). Arroyo (2003) estimated that agricultural products dumped by U.S. producers into the Mexican market were priced at an average of 46 percent below the cost of production on the world market. Purchasing “dumped” maize is easier for major tortilla producers than purchasing homegrown white maize not only because it is facilitated by high-volume brokers, but also because doing so affords them access to cheap credit.

U.S. exporters and government export-financing organisms, particularly the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC), offer low-cost loans to Mexican importers buying U.S. grains … Although rates have decreased in recent years, prevailing credit rates in Mexico in the mid-1990s were over 30%, while the CCC offered between 7–8%. For Mexico-based import companies, the CCC’s sweetheart rates were like rain in a drought. [Carlsen 2007:3]

Large Mexico-based corporations like Bimbo, MASECA, and Lala were routinely allowed to import three times the legal quota of maize and other basic agricultural products established under NAFTA, and successive Mexican administrations failed to cite these violations or to levy the prescribed fines (Ortega 2001). Researchers estimate that had the fines actually been collected, several billion dollars could have been invested in agricultural development programs to increase access to credit, crop insurance, and markets, which most small farmers lack (Galarza et al. 2004; Henriques and Patel 2004; De la Tejera et al. 2007). Yet the Mexican government slashed the budget of the agricultural ministry, closed the rural development bank, and placed most of the remaining agricultural funding into cash-based assistance programs like Salinas’ PRONASOL, which were often strategically disbursed to influence rural voters (Dresser 1994).

In the decade following NAFTA’s implementation maize prices fell 70 percent, and Mexico became the world’s largest importer of maize in 2006 (De la Tejera et al. 2007).
2007:3). Nonetheless, the dramatic boost in imports was not induced by domestic shortages. Maize production remained relatively constant after NAFTA, however little was purchased by corporate processors. Lacking other options, small farmers responded to lower prices by intensifying cultivation, expanding into marginal areas, and investing remittances into agricultural inputs (Henriques and Patel 2004:5). Although agriculture accounts for only 4 percent of the Mexican GNP, it employs 25 percent of the economically active population (Henriques and Patel 2004:4). Even when small-scale producers manage to contract their crops to processors, the price fluctuates between planting and harvest based on the global futures market. In 2006, for example, the price per ton fell from 3,500 pesos to 1,800 pesos by the end of the season. The Mexican tortilla industry speculated that the global price would continue to fall, and opted not to buy from campesinos (Becerril 2007). The result of their bad bet was skyrocketing tortilla prices and deepening rural poverty.

These government policies and corporate strategies introduce new forms of risk into rural life which are compounded by the other forms of ecological, political, and social insecurity discussed above. Like spiraling cycles of drought and deluge, wild market fluctuations are precipitated by human agents, and yet they rob campesinos of the ability to adapt by eroding traditional collective forms of political agency. Whereas earlier generations of Hidalgan campesinos were able to adapt to structural change by banding together with other members of their ejidos to create cooperatives and make claims on the state for development projects, the privatization and breakup of those collective landholdings has meant that families are often left to weather such storms alone. Small farms are increasingly subsidized not by government programs but rather by remittances earned through low-wage migrant labor.

Many interpret the current state of extreme instability as a sign that the limits of the natural system have been breached. They complain that even las cabañuelas, a traditional method of weather prediction based on a count of precipitation incidents in the month of January, no longer functions as it once did. The signs and cycles by which people lived their lives and upon which they staked their survival are fast disappearing. In their view the source of disaster is not external to society, but rather the result of failures of reciprocity. Earlier rounds of development had fueled human greed, campesinos said, causing people to neglect their obligation to maintain the environment and their ties to one another. As a result, they say “the land no longer gives” as freely as it once did; plants that grew wild and sustained campesino families in times of hunger no longer appear with the same abundance. The land seems exhausted, its energies sapped. In contrast to statements by politicians and free market advocates, which naturalize the social disaster in the Mexican countryside, the discourse of desiccation deployed by Hidalgan campesinos...
firmly locates the catastrophe within the realm of human agency. The only thing “natural” about its origins, according to them, is the inherent tendency of the powerful to consume the poor.⁹

“Gente de Maíz”: Campo and Campesinos in Mexican National Ideology

When campesinos in the Tulancingo Valley complain that “la milpa ya no rinde como antes” (the milpa no longer produces as it once did) or that “el campo ya se seco” (the countryside has withered), they are referring not only to changes in agricultural yields, but also to the end of an era in which national politics was firmly grounded in the fate of the countryside. Since the founding of the ejidos in the 1930s, land had been the primary patrimony of campesino families. Maintaining the milpa and teaching one’s children to farm ensured the future of both family and community. Now with rising production costs, rock-bottom maize prices, and unpredictable rainfall, the milpa could no longer be counted on to sustain families, much less turn a profit. “El campo ya no es negocio” (the countryside is no longer a [profitable] business) was a phrase I heard repeated in village after village during my last research visit in summer 2006. Now that the ejidos had been privatized, many reasoned, it might be better to sell their land and to send their children to school or to the United States. “If the milpa no longer yields anything of value,” mused one campesino who had recently received the deed to his plot, “then perhaps we’ll plant bricks and see what comes up.”¹⁰

The countryside has long been important to Mexican nationalism, both materially and ideologically. Roger Barta (2002) documented the post-Revolutionary state’s strategy of “backward projection,” which grounded nationalist origin myths in pre-Columbian empires, projecting the idea of a cohesive Mexican national identity backward across centuries. This was accomplished in part by popularizing the idea of Mexico as a “maize civilization” dating back thousands of years to the domestication of teosinte. Maize figured simultaneously as national patrimony and as the nation’s gift to the rest of the world. Campesinos were its guardians and heirs. Notwithstanding the fact that the “cultural revolution” through which the post-Revolutionary state was constituted failed to create a unified, solidary peasant “class,” it did provide a political grammar through which rural people could make claims on the state (Knight 1994). Even as Mexico urbanized, campesinos remained potent symbols of the country’s roots and stewards of its patrimony, maize. Hence, even today, to declare the countryside a disaster area is not just to indicate an infrastructural failure, but also to announce a national identity crisis. The latest “tortilla crisis” has underlined how closely the precarious fate of the countryside is tied to the uncertain future of the Mexican nation. This ideal was encapsulated in
the slogan of the El Campo No Aguanta Más movement: “Save the countryside to save Mexico!”

Agrarian issues have become a major point of contention in Mexico’s “democratic transition,” underlining the continued relevance of agrarian questions in the age of globalization. As Hart (2002) points out, agrarian questions that emerge from the enactment of neoliberalizing projects are not only about land or agriculture per se. Instead they speak to debates over disappearing social rights and redistributive justice that are often shunted aside or invalidated as official democratization projects become wedded to economic liberalization schemes. Ideological struggles over the fate of the countryside serve as “partial interpreters” of larger shifts in systems of ecological and political mastery and exploitation (Williams 1973:294).

Knight (1994) points out that, in the past, Mexican citizens could make collective claims on the state by exposing the gap between Revolutionary rhetoric and actual state practices. But beginning with the presidency of Carlos Salinas, many revolutionary precepts (like the right to land) have themselves been dropped. According to Lomnitz Adler (2001), the 1988 Presidential Campaign was the first time a discourse of individualized citizenship had emerged in Mexico since the inception of the corporatist model under Cárdenas. When Salinas launched PRONASOL, the revolutionary state which had protected and cajoled campesinos gave way to an “enabling state” that attempted to “empower” them as “entrepreneurial subjects of choice” engaged in a “quest for self-realization” (Rose 1999:147). Salinas blamed bureaucratic ineptitude and classical cacicazgo for the countryside’s inability to develop “civil society” (Salinas de Gortari n.d.). The PRONASOL program has been recycled and renamed by each of Salinas’ presidential successors. This shift from state support of campesino production toward cash-based social programs targeted at individuals has been accompanied by the changes to land tenure schemes aimed at replacing collective holdings with individual ownership. This “reform of the agrarian reform” began in the 1990s with the often contentious process of surveying collectively held lands and awarding individual title and inheritance rights to specific plots. At the close of the PROCEDE program in 2006, 90 percent of the lands formerly awarded to Hidalgan ejidos and indigenous communities in the postrevolutionary land reform had been deeded to individuals (SRA 2006).

Although Mexico’s new presidents have continued to acknowledge the countryside as central to Mexican heritage, they have increasingly treated campesinos as museum pieces rather than constituents or serious interlocutors. The saying “el campo ya no es negocio” (the countryside no longer turns a profit), pertains to politicians as well as to campesinos. Although the “revolutionary pact” between the PRI state and the peasant sector had been dismantled incrementally since the 1980s
when the Debt Crisis marked a watershed and technocrats took over macroeconomic planning to administer structural adjustment policies, the government’s refusal to negotiate with the movement over the conditions of NAFTA’s final implementation indicated a definitive end to the political bargaining power of the rural sector. This was an outright rejection of collective forms of political representation by an administration that no longer depended on a rural power base for legitimacy and no longer wished to engage citizens as massified sectors, but rather as individual voters.

One of the chief demands of the “El Campo No Aguanta Más” movement was the renegotiation of NAFTA to protect small family farms from the dumping of highly subsidized U.S. maize, beans, and milk. Fox’s Minister of Agriculture, Javier Usabiaga, ridiculed the movement’s plan as “a harebrained scheme” in the national press (Cabildo 2003). In Hidalgo, the last 25 years of neoliberal reforms have meant a concomitant devaluation of rural people in public discourse. The more rural families are forced to diversify their economic activities to survive, the less they seem to resemble the idealized figure of the revolutionary campesino. This trend is exemplified by the comments of a retired loan officer from the (now defunct) Tulancingo branch of Mexico’s rural credit bank. As we sat chatting in the plaza one Thursday afternoon, he gestured with disgust toward a passing group of young campesino return migrants wearing baseball caps and T-shirts marked with English advertising slogans. “We had a chance to save the countryside twenty years ago and we failed,” he said. “Now look at them. These are not campesinos. They have lost their identity. Now they are just like any other desclasado. They are not folkloric, just tacky.”13 His comments placed the value of the campesino to the nation firmly in the past, despite the substantial contribution rural migrant remittances make toward sustaining Mexico’s economy.

In the Tulancingo River Valley, campesino subjectivity is deeply informed both by the legacy of revolutionary nationalism and by the experience of governmental disaster. Many people I interviewed described their communities as remolidas, ground down into dust by the rural crisis of the past decades. A powerful sense of finality surrounded the privatization of ejidos and the opening of NAFTA. These policies threaten campesino livelihoods, but they also erode the historical and material bases for collective organizing and social reproduction. For the most part, collective political action and protests by and on behalf of campesinos—like the marches carried out by the El Campo no Aguanta Más Movement and demonstrations against the maize monopolies held during the tortilla crisis—have garnered substantial popular support. Yet they have not been successful in producing policy shifts. Young people who see no future for themselves in the countryside, and no way to change the political climate from a polling booth, often “vote with their feet.” Salinas, CA, is one of the most popular migration destinations from the
Tulancingo region. The ironic connection between the name of that town and the name of the ex-president whose policies helped to populate it with a highly vulnerable migrant labor pool is not lost on homesick young Hidalgans.

Sherry Ortner’s (2006) work on agency and subjectivity is particularly helpful in clarifying how the interlocking crises described above have produced a cataclysmic consciousness in rural Hidalgo. Ortner emphasizes the social embeddedness of agents, whose action is constrained both by ties of solidarity and by relations of power and social inequality. She argues that agency is best viewed as a process entailing two modes of enactment: intentionality and power. Intentionality is concerned with the pursuit of culturally defined projects, whereas power refers to action taken within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force (Ortner 2006:136–139). Ties of solidarity like those forged in the postrevolutionary struggle to claim land, or reinforced in the day to day conduct of ejidal business and ritual cycle of the community, may form the basis for collective projects “on the margins of power” (Ortner 2006:142). However, when livelihood and social reproduction are rendered impossible, when social ties are ripped asunder by migration, in short when the withered milpa can no longer sustain rural society, the “agency of projects” becomes increasingly difficult to maintain (Ortner 2006:144). Neoliberal discourses promoting the rights and responsibilities of the individual have encouraged rural people to accept these changes as natural and inevitable, to confront the crisis in which they find themselves alone, rather than as collectives or communities. Meanwhile, the “reform of the agrarian reform” has badly weakened the ability of the ejido to serve as a material basis for collective organizing in the countryside. This is apparent in the lack of political traction encountered by recent popular mobilizations. According to Ortner the “agency of projects” is precisely the mode of agency denied, disrupted, or disallowed in subordinates by powerful actors in the enactment of their own projects (Ortner 2006:146). Hidalgan campesinos interpret this planned obsolescence of their communities as interconnected with the increasingly dramatic cycles of drought and deluge that point to an irreversible end of an era.

Desiccation and Desertion: Campesino Experiences of Governmental Disaster

Campesinos in the Tulancingo River Valley repeatedly described the countryside as “withered.” The term they used, secarse, denotes two related forms of desiccation: the withering of plants due to drought, neglect or improper cultivation, and the progressive maturation and death of humans and maize. Campesinos deployed a discourse of desiccation to articulate their experience of simultaneous and related shifts in the natural and social climates of their homeland. They interpreted recent anomalies as indicators of a fundamental rupture in the web of reciprocal relationships
among human communities, flora and fauna, and the earth itself, which contributed to their sense of the future as rapidly evaporating. The countryside can endure no longer, they argue, not because campesinos have given up, but because they and the land they work have been exploited beyond the point of recovery.

This discourse of desiccation draws upon an understanding of the human and natural worlds as connected through a web of interlocking reciprocal ties. Proper maintenance of these relationships is achieved by cultivating a dynamic balance between four key categories of life: hot, cold, wet, and dry. The material and symbolic significance of these precepts and practices has been well-documented for Mesoamerican maize cultures both past and present. Chevalier and Sánchez Bain (2003) place particular emphasis on the parallel life courses of humans and maize, a concept that is central to the significance of the discourse of desiccation deployed by Hidalgan campesinos. According to the authors, three underlying principles govern these cultures’ complex and varied humoral worldviews: balance, periodicity, and heliotropic movement. Humans, like maize, move through dynamic cycles of hot and cold states over the life course. Both are germinated and born into cold wet states, and under the influence of the sun’s heat, warm up through a process of maturation and reproduction before eventually drying out completely and dying. Indeed, in rural Hidalgo, healthy chubby babies and water-fat young ears of maize are both described as chulo, while withered maize plants and elderly persons are labeled seco.14 Chevalier and Sánchez Bain (2003) assert that pathology results from threats to the balance between the above states, or to the orderly progression of the nested cycles of warming and drying that repeat throughout the life course. My research revealed multiple terms used to designate unnatural states of dehydration in both maize and humans leading to overall pathology and eventually death. Withered plants and undernourished or disease-weakened people were both referred to as chupado (sucked dry), for example. Chemical fertilizers and whey (a byproduct of the local cheese making industry commonly leaked into local waterways) are both said to “heat” and dry” the earth, and if present in sufficient quantities may “burn up” plants or people they come in to contact with. If addressed promptly and at the correct point in the growth cycle, such pathologies could be remedied, thus restoring the natural progression. Drought-damaged maize plants may be revived and their ears “refilled” if sufficiently irrigated; damaged human communities might be renewed and produce new growth [retoñar] if properly cared for in times of crisis. However, a campesino who is unable to irrigate or waits too long to do so faces a total crop loss. By the same token rural society, like the milpas upon which it is based, can be induced to wither and die before its time via human neglect and overexploitation.

When campesinos refer to their milpas as secas, they are remarking upon both a physical state of dehydration leading to decreased production and a metaphorical
state of “overheating” due to overexploitation. They say the milpa appears per-
manently acabada (finished), no longer capable of sustaining life. Following the 
privatization of ejidos, more and more rural Hidalgans confront such disasters as 
individuals or families rather than as collectivities. The result is often increased 
emigration, which interrupts the processes of social reproduction responsible for 
the enculturation of new generations of campesinos. Many fear that the milpa can 
no longer endure as the material grounds for rural society.

Many campesinos in the Tulancingo Valley who supported Vicente Fox in 2000 
had hoped the new President would renew the historical relationship between rural 
society and the state, ending the long political drought. In retrospect, however, Fox 
is now remembered by many as “the ranchero president who turned the country-
side into a disaster area” (Pérez 2006). The prolonged drop in maize prices under 
NAFTA was attributed to a series of failures on the part of government leaders to 
maintain their historical relationship with the countryside. The government, it was 
said, had “abandoned” the countryside, as a field left uncultivated in the absence of 
its owner. It was not the case that they had preferred the old corporatist PRI system, 
but rather that it was no longer clear how exactly campesinos might effectively press 
their claims on the state. In the words of one ejidal official,

Before (Fox’s victory), the PRI politicians and caciques gave everything to their 
friends, to those who supported them, with votes. In a democracy we suppose that 
everyone should be treated equally. But now, instead of spreading support around, 
or supporting those who need it most, to those who have the most, they (the Fox 
government) give more. And to those who do not even have enough to eat, they give 
them nothing.15

An older woman from a neighboring community offered a similar analysis of 
recent changes to the relationship between the Mexican government and rural 
society. “Before,” she said, “the government used to spoon-feed us. Now they don’t 
give us anything, but they refuse to leave us alone either.”16 While PRI governments 
neglected campesino agriculture for decades, many viewed Vicente Fox’s refusal to 
enforce tariff rate quotas and the government’s collusion with the commercial 
maize monopolies as outright sabotage. Fox was not the first President to neglect 
his rhetorical obligations to the countryside, but when presented with the oppor-
tunity to save it by renegotiating NAFTA or resurrecting agricultural development 
programs, he chose instead to accelerate its demise. “Now they are just sucking the 
Valley dry,” the same ejidal official commented, “wringing out the very last drop.”17

Many Hidalgan campesinos anticipated a future in which maize, the nation’s 
gift to the world, would disappear in its own homeland and be replaced by genet-
ically modified imports. While optimistic economists expect ethanol futures to
continue elevating maize prices thereby stimulating Mexican agriculture, experts on the ground aver that this increase in production is likely to come from corporate agribusiness rather than small family farms. In 2004 Senator Jorge Martínez warned the Mexican Congress that the countryside might never recover from this governmental disaster.

…if we analyze on the one hand the implications of the agricultural crisis (an important decrease in the number of hectares under cultivation, the migration of small farmers and campesinos, changes in land use, unemployment, etc.), and on the other hand we consider the variety of resources and actions that would have to be put into play to reverse these effects, we discover that it will take so much time, and that the magnitude of the damage done is so great, that even if we cannot (or will not) call these effects irreversible, they remain for all intents and purposes, irreversible. [Camera de Diputados 2004; author’s translation]

If campesino futures have already evaporated, then the primary political accomplishment of NAFTA has been to secure the neoliberal economic model against possible democratic challenges. Flooded markets and political desertion, much like the intensified cycles of drought and deluge brought about by global warming, have often been presented as “external” forces beyond the control of human agents. However, groups like El Campo No Aguanta Más have consistently resisted government attempts to naturalize the ongoing disaster in the Mexican countryside by drawing attention to the ways in which the neoliberalizing projects pursued by PRI and PAN leaders alike have precipitated successive crises. Even so, the governmental effects of disaster are clear to Hidalgan campesinos. Neoliberalizing measures have increasingly disabled the agency of projects for rural Mexicans by eroding the material bases of collective organization, rerouting channels of political participation, and relegating campesino protagonism to the country’s premodern past.

**Conclusion: Uncertain Futures**

Disasters punctuate national histories, functioning as critical events through which a variety of links are revealed: between local and global power structures, ideological and material culture, and human societies and natural environments. Indeed, as García Acosta (2002) affirms for historical disasters, we might consider the current crisis in rural Mexico to be rooted both in the proliferation of hazards and in the intensification of forms of social vulnerability. I have argued that the combined effects of North American economic integration, the privatization, and corporatization of Mexican agriculture, and the local effects of global climate change have rendered Hidalgan campesinos increasingly vulnerable to ruin in recent
decades. In fact, the hazards which have precipitated the disaster in the countryside are themselves social in nature. The premature demise of the Mexican countryside may be characterized as a governmental disaster, generated via incremental policy decisions and the willful neglect of authorities. However, governmental disaster does not merely threaten campesino livelihoods; it works to foreclose collective forms of political agency, reinforcing neoliberalizing projects aimed at individuating the practice and limiting the purview of democratic citizenship.

Raymond Williams (1973) held that scholars tend to frame the decline of the countryside primarily as a problem of settlement. That is to say that rural crises are constructed as provocations to rescue old ways of life because they capture something about how our present identities are rooted in a distinct rural past. Governmental disasters, however, are dramatic manifestations of the mutual constitution of country and city via larger dynamics of capitalist transformation. The discourse of desiccation through which Hidalgan campesinos articulate their experience of disaster serves to refute government attempts to “naturalize” the demise of the countryside as a result of impartial market rationalities, the presumed “backward” nature of campesinos themselves, or even a capricious environment. Disaster is commonly thought of as a failure of those infrastructures by which we declare our mastery over nature, an accident which renders society unable to withstand the impacts of external forces like droughts or floods. Hidalgan campesinos, however, see the demise of the countryside as a result of human agency, of a long series of failures to uphold the reciprocal relationships that connect communities to nature and nation. Moreover, this disaster is interpreted against the backdrop of cultural notions concerning the laws and limits of a natural order dependant upon those relationships. Cycles of drought and deluge are experienced not as chance occurrences, but rather as ecological evidence of a dangerous social rupture which heralds the premature end of an era and the permanent foreclosure of the prospect of equality promised by the Revolution.

When campesinos declare that “it’s all over with, the countryside has withered up,” they are mourning the end of a way of life that holds deep meaning for them, and perhaps most importantly the demise of a form of subjectivity born of earlier struggles to adapt to capitalist transformations and to stake a claim within them for their children’s futures. The governmental disaster they refer to is not merely the passing a form of settlement or an infrastructure of mastery over nature, but also a shift in infrastructures of human exploitation that disables established collective forms of political agency. The death of the countryside brings uncertainty about the future of campesino agriculture, but also about the ability of campesinos to shape their own destinies as democratic citizens. Unlike the English peasants Williams describes, they are hardly nostalgic over earlier forms of settlement and exploitation, be they at the hands of the PRI or the hacendados. If this disposition entails
nostalgia of any sort, it is a longing for the lost possibility of historical protagonism. For most of the 20th century, being a campesino meant taking part in producing the nation’s future as well as its daily bread. In the new millennium, the promise of democracy rings hollow when every meal brings a reminder of one’s own seeming obsolescence.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2007 meetings of the Society for Anthropology of North America. The author wishes to acknowledge fellow panel participants and audience members for their insightful comments. Thanks are also due to Paul Martin, Laura Bathurst, and two anonymous JLACA referees who graciously critiqued earlier drafts of the article. Their suggestions were invaluable, and served to greatly strengthen the final argument. Of course, all remaining defects and errors are the sole responsibility of the author. The field research on which this article is based was generously funded by the John L. Simpson Memorial Research Fellowship in International and Comparative Studies and the Chancellor’s Opportunity Predoctoral Fellowship from the University of California, Berkeley. Proper names and some place names have been changed to protect informant privacy.

2 The scholars affiliated with the Programa de Investigaciones Sociales sobre Desastres, FLACSO as well as La Red de Estudios Sociales para la Prevención de Desastres en América Latina (La Red) have produced ground-breaking studies of these dynamics.

3 Although the biofuel ethanol has been produced using maize for decades, the U.S. ethanol industry received a major boost in 2005 when the Energy Policy Act was passed by the U.S. Congress, specifying the inclusion of minimum amount of renewable fuel in gasoline marketed in the United States. The law, enacted in response to rising petroleum prices and increased concern over global warming, prompted a significant expansion in the number of ethanol processing plants in the U.S. Corn Belt. This increased productive capacity created a drain on raw materials. More and more surplus maize was diverted from export stocks, and increased demand along with rising transportation costs and bad weather in other growing regions have led to rapid jumps in the price of maize on the global market. For a more detailed discussion of this public policy framework and its implications, see Baker and Zahniser (2006).

4 Author’s translation. Montemayor’s quote is taken from an article on the San Lorenzo mines; however, this phrase has been used to refer to a variety of events over the past several years including U.S. government mismanagement of post-Katrina relief efforts, the Mexican tortilla crisis, the wall along the U.S. border, and so forth.

5 El Niño is commonly defined as periodic disruption of the ocean–atmospheric system over the tropical Pacific Ocean which produces weather anomalies. During El Niño years, global rainfall patterns are redistributed, resulting in droughts and flooding. El Niño-Southern Oscillation is a global phenomenon in which abnormal warming over the eastern Pacific (associated with El Niño) causes a drop in sea level in the east and a concomitant rise in the west, altering trade wind patterns. A thorough discussion of ENSO is beyond the scope of this article; please see Magaña (1999) for an overview of the effects of ENSO on Mexico’s climate.

6 The picture is complicated by the ENSO and its effects on the Western Hemisphere Warm Pool, which can produce intensified storm activity in the Gulf of Mexico following an El Niño year, as in the 1999 floods which were preceded by the strong 1997–1998 El Niño. Connections between ENSO and global warming with respect to recent Gulf storms are the subject of much debate among climatic scientists. Most of the real-time data collection used to build climate models is performed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a U.S. federal agency that has consistently
downplayed the far-reaching effects of global warming. Computer climate models themselves are quite complex, but they are only as good as the data on which they are based. Detailed data on ENSO only began to be collected in 1976, and Mexico did not begin collecting pertinent regional data until much more recently. While scientists are now able to supplement computer models with archival records and tree ring samples, the connections among these phenomena are admittedly difficult to speak of with absolute certainty. However, many top climatologists agree that recent events in the Gulf of Mexico are consistent with the probable outcomes of computer models that demonstrate a synergistic relationship between El Niño and global warming (see Caveides 2001).

8For complete text of the Farm Bill and supporting information, see http://www.usda.gov/farmbill/ (accessed December 1, 2004).
9Los peces gordos siempre comen a los pequeños. (The “big fish” always eat the smaller ones.) Wealthy and well-connected landowners, businesspeople, and politicians are commonly referred to as “peces gordos.” This traditional proverb is a commentary on human nature and social hierarchy.
10Author interview August 2006.
11Political brokerage.
12The other 10% of the land was held either by groups (mostly indigenous) who refused to submit to the PROCEDE process, preferring to continue the practice of collective ownership, or by ejidos engaged in ongoing internal disputes or in boundary conflicts with neighboring ejidos or private landowners. See SRA (2006). Officially, members of ejidos may not sell their plots to non-members without first securing the permission of other members to legally convert the land to alienable property (dominio pleno). In practice, however, ejidal lands (especially on the outskirts of growing urban areas) have been “sold” by individual title holders to third parties for several years now in the Tulancingo area.
13Author interview April 2003. “Desclasado,” roughly equivalent to the French “déclassé” is an insult commonly leveled at people who seem to have “forgotten their place” in the provincial social hierarchy by those who consider themselves their “betters.”
14Chulo” literally means “good looking,” but in rural Mexico this connotes an attractive fullness of flesh, whether it is used to describe healthy babies, fat ears of maize, green milpas, or “well-built” men and women.
15Author interview, Acatlán, Hidalgo, May 2003.
16Antes a los campesinos, nos daban atole con un dedo. Ahora, pues, ni te dan ni te dejan. Author interview, Acatlán Hidalgo, October 2002.
17Author interview Acatlán, Hidalgo, May 2003.

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