

Rural Grassroots Development

Karl Zimmerer

Department of Geography

University of Wisconsin

Madison, WI 53706

ABSTRACT

The research of Latin Americanist geographers on "rural grassroots development" expanded greatly during the 1980s. The topic's heightened import reflected the environmental, political, economic, and social crises of "modernist" development in the region. The studies of Latin Americanist geographers on the topic involved peasants, indigenous peoples, and religious followers. Much research consisted of case studies of local technologies and economic practices along with contextual examinations of socioeconomic conditions. Concerns in the regions indicate that representation and power, particularly democracy, infuse those areas of geographical research.

The concept of grassroots development occupies a broad and vaguely bounded terrain in the geographical research on Latin America. Combining development with the notion of "grassroots" -- literally "the common people" (Random House 1987) -- it has been dealt with by Latin Americanist geographers representing a wide range of topical interests and theoretical perspectives. The volume on *Direct to the Poor*, co-edited by geographer Sheldon Annis (Annis and Hakim 1988), reveals the sweeping array of grassroots organizations. His partial list of those movements includes "Church groups, labor organizations, Boy Scouts, village potable water associations, communal labor arrangements, worker owned businesses, ethnic burial societies, peasant leagues, tribal federations, and microentrepreneur credit associations" (Annis 1988, 210). The potentially wide-ranging geographical compass of Annis' list, however, is not writ large in the annals of our discipline. Assessing the recentness of attention to grassroots development, both in geography and other social sciences, provides a useful point of departure in reviewing the last decade of relevant Latin Americanist research.

The omission of grassroots development as a category in previous CLAG Benchmarks reflects the less-prominent profile previously posed by the rubric. Indeed, the localization of development seems to have been carried in the shifting currents of global socioeconomic and cultural change that took place during the late 1970s and the 1980s. In Latin America, David Slater (1985a) attributes the growth of social movements such as grassroots development groups to concurrent transformations in the region's large-scale "organizational frameworks," including the following: 1) contemporary social and economic development in the region; 2) a political crisis of Latin American states reflected in the over-centralization of decision-making; and 3) the incapacity of most of the region's governments to provide basic services. Although other interpretations of grassroots development attribute the growing number and size of such movements to a different set of factors (see Annis 1988), the movements themselves are well suited to geographical inquiry. Not only are they entrained in the increasingly differentiated spatial course of social and economic change but many directly address a traditional focus of geographic investigation, the environment. The following review treats the Latin Americanist geography of the past decade (1980-1989) that has dealt with grassroots development. It highlights regionalist research that focuses principally on this form of development while also underscoring a few of the many geographical studies undertaken in Latin America in which such issues receive substantial though perhaps secondary treatment. Sequentially, the review describes research on groups of peasants, indigenous peoples, urbanites (a brief digression) and religious followers. Although it attempts to represent a large and disparate literature as comprehensively as possible, the following account does not intend to be exhaustive but rather attempts to uncover common themes through pointing to the major areas of research.

Peasants have not disappeared from the landscape of Latin America despite the once-common predictions of geographers and other social scientists steeped in modernization theory. Instead, the persistent peasantry of Latin America has become a foundation of rural grassroots programs. Geographer Robert Maguire's (1981,

1986) research and work for the Inter-American Foundation in Haiti exemplifies the turn towards considering peasant organizations as key forces in regional development. Maguire emphasizes the importance of participatory frameworks to aid in socially equitable development. Local-scale economic institutions such as credit unions and [end p. 277] processing cooperatives as well as technologies, especially ones for food storage, have grown up through grassroots programs. The genesis of those programs among broad-based social groups within a region distinguishes them from the efforts initiated and even imposed by national and international institutions.

The material and social life of peasant groups has contributed the *terra firma* to much geographical research that touches on grassroots development. Prehistoric agricultural technologies, long-standing subjects for study in Latin Americanist geography, have been identified as possible elements in contemporary development. The emergence of this past-and-present theme in Latin Americanist geography is demonstrated by John Treacy's (1988, 1989) research on the restoration of terracing technology in the Colca valley of Peru. Treacy's study combines a focus on prehistoric technology with a discussion of its possible role in present-day regional development. Other geographical research of prehistoric agricultural strategies including terracing as well as raised fields has similarly recognized the potential contribution of "traditional" technologies to local agricultural development (Denevan 1988; Knapp 1988; Turner 1980).

Land use strategies practiced by contemporary peasant and indigenous peoples also are increasingly seen as offering social, cultural and ecological cornerstones for grassroots development programs. In many Latin American regions the sound management of environmental resources demonstrates clear ties to the spatial organization of settlement and production that preceded recent socio-economic transformations (Denevan 1984; Dickinson 1986; Hecht et al. 1988; Hiraoka 1985, 1989). Sound management depends also on a wealth of local knowledge, technologies and practices that are used to manage diverse resource assemblages. Common fields of study have included agricultural species and cultivars (Clawson 1985, also Gade and Zimmerer in National Research Council 1989), agroforestry systems (Denevan et al. 1984; Denevan and Padoch 1987; Hecht 1982; Treacy 1982), and soils (Hecht 1989; Williams and Ortiz-Solorio 1982).

The local knowledge of land users has been recognized as a theme of cultural geographical study that needs to inform development efforts (Gade 1988; Wilken 1987, 1989). Incorporating locally based systems of resource management into grassroots development might be especially significant in the vast areas of fragile environments found in Latin America (Denevan 1989). Threatened by the rapid human-induced degradation of edaphic and vegetation resources, successful development in those regions is likely to depend on programs that incorporate peasant and indigenous systems of resource management (Denevan 1981, 1989; Hecht 1985; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Hiraoka and Yamamoto 1980; Smith 1985; Sternberg 1989). Environments that are customarily stressed due to severe or unpredictable bio-physical conditions, even if not imperiled by anthropogenic forces, also are likely to be maintained most effectively through the incorporation of local land-use strategies into grassroots programs (Doolittle 1989; Knapp and Cañadas 1988a, 1988b; Parsons 1982).

Geographical analyses of grassroots development involving the peasantry have extended to small as well as large scales. Peasant households served as the focus for Connie Weil's (1989) examination of economic success among recent migrants to the Chapare region of Bolivia. Using Chayanov's micro-economic model of the household economy, Weil shows that the migrant household's demographic composition is an important but not all-encompassing predictor of its economic status. Judy Carney's (1990) research on peasant farmers' use of *triticale* in the central Mexican highlands has dealt with how "smallholders' knowledge systems facilitate crop experimentation and the adjustment of cultivars to their needs during periods of social and economic change." Sponsored by the International Center for Maize and Wheat Improvement (CIMMYT), Carney's project considers the relationship between large-scale agricultural development programs and local forms of social organization and land-use strategies.

Non-agricultural resources also have been viewed as possible bases for grassroots development efforts. In Mexico and Peru, beekeeping has been shown to yield supplementary income for peasant households that lack the land, labor or capital resources necessary for other commercial activities (Dixon 1987; Kent 1986). Fisheries have provided the subject matter for studies by Marie Price (1988) and Nigel Smith (1981). Frequently organized as common property resources, fisheries are marked by economies of scale that favor community cooperation. Price (1988) studied the development of a spiny lobster cooperative in Belize that supplies fishermen access to credit and capital while apparently keeping catch size within sustainable limits. Belize's lobster cooperative developed under the guidance and support of the state although at the same time it was based on a local organization. Relations between grassroots movements and the state are revealed to be notably less harmonious in other geographic studies.

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The struggle over the fate of the tropical rainforest vividly illustrates the complexity of social relations facing many grassroots movements. Susanna Hecht has analyzed the political forces enmeshing Amazonian deforestation and the attempts by rubber tappers and indigenous peoples to protect their way of life, including the forest (Hecht 1985; Hecht and Cockburn 1989). Among geographers, Hecht's research is seminal in examining the political, economic and power relations between the regional social movement, the alliance of rubber tappers and indigenous people, and "outside" interests consisting of state level political parties, the Brazilian government, lending agencies and foreign NGOs (Non-Government Organizations). Hecht emphasizes that sustainable use of the rainforest relies on the appropriate practices, technologies and knowledge of indigenous people.

The involvement of indigenous peoples in grassroots development entwines concerns of cultural, political and economic sovereignty. Heightened tension over those issues sometimes surfaces as armed conflict. Bernard Nietschmann (1987, 1989) highlights the mushrooming militarization among indigenous peoples attempting to attain control of their home regions or "nations." Nietschmann considers such conflicts to comprise "Third World Wars," which he describes as the armed conflicts between states and indigenous nations. Nations are defined as the "geographically bounded territories of a common people." His list of over 100 such conflicts worldwide contains more than two dozen that are taking place in Latin America. The titling of group land has been identified as an important step for the establishment of indigenous sovereignty by Peter Herlihy (1985) in his studies of Chocó Indians inhabiting Panama's Darien.

Despite its etymological origin, grassroots development does not wither at the gates of the city. Briefly transgressing the boundary of my title to consider Latin Americanist urban geography furnishes a few illustrations of parallel connections between the city and countryside. The 1980s witnessed a flourishing of "bottom-up" efforts at urban development. Two topics that have received particular attention from Latin Americanist geographers are the so-called informal sector and housing. Contrary to the trajectory of economic mobility plotted by Hernan de Soto's book *El Otro Sendero*, Ray Bromley (1982) highlights the social and economic domination of the informal sector and its workers, which presents multiple obstacles to economic betterment. Linda Greenow and Vicky Muñoz (1985, see also Hays 1987) similarly found that informal sector employment contains many constraints preventing the accumulation of wealth. Studying traders in the marketplace of Cajamarca, Peru, Greenow and Muñoz conclude that marketplace growth in the context of chronic rural underdevelopment is unlikely to better the livelihoods of traders, who in many cases are women.

Studies such as those of Bromley, Greenow, Hays and Muñoz underscore structural constraints on the accumulation of wealth and thus the limited opportunity for informal development in the urban economy. To a certain extent, development in the rural sector is constrained by analogous conditions. A decade of economic stagnation in Latin America has debilitated the markets for many goods actually or potentially

produced through grassroots efforts. At the same time, producers in many grassroots projects as well as the urban informal sector are often disadvantaged by unfavorable terms of trade, the volatility of markets and shifting and often unfavorable government economic policies. Articulation between rural producers and the formal sector, frequently represented by agribusiness in the case of peasant producers, has been shown to undermine the socio-economic power and environmental resources engendered in local land use and society (Clapp 1988; Place 1985).

Several budding grassroots movements in Latin America have been assisted by religious organizations, especially Catholic groups adopting the reform-minded program of Vatican II. Peasant groups in Haiti, for instance, have received crucial aid from indigenous Catholic clergy and laymen. Robert Maguire (1981, 1986) underscores how a church-run institute has been fundamental in Haiti's rural development through its training of peasant leaders. Church workers also aid in the expanding effort to develop Brazil's Amazonian rainforest in a socially just and environmentally sustainable fashion (Hecht and Cockburn 1989). The potential role of religious groups in grassroots movements is also demonstrated by Robert Voeks' work in northeastern Brazil (1990). Studying the use of plants by followers of the Condembla religion, Voeks remarks that the flora is used symbolically by Afro-Brazilian people to resist social and cultural oppression. His findings evince one way that the links between management of the environment and cultural and religious identity will need to be considered by development programs in Brazil's northeast.

In concluding, two broad areas of concern for geographical research on grassroots movements deserve mention. A basic feature of many local development movements is that they challenge our capacity to assess the types of unity among social agents as well as the forms of conflict that arise between them. This crisis in the social [end p. 279] sciences is one that requires an expanded understanding of the different constellations of social groups and the relational attributes of society and space in which they carry out their livelihoods. Concerns for the sociospatial relations and environmental roles of social groups such as women and indigenous peoples are fast becoming a foundation of grassroots development programs. Political-economic strategies based on distinct regional identities and a desire for decentralized political power and decision-making likewise have recently gained in importance; see Slater (1985b) on region-based social movements in Peru. Geographers should note that the reassertion of regional movements controverts the inevitable national homogeneity that was once predicted by modernization theorists. Several grassroots movements have been built on a shifting mosaic of groups and issues. One of the largest peasant movement on the Bolivian Altiplano, for instance, is addressing issues explicitly from a combined economic, ethnic and ecological viewpoint.

My second concluding note is a cautionary one. Grassroots development has clearly become a buzz phrase in much current discussion and debate. It has been elevated to the level of jargon in the discourse of international development. As a consequence, geographers ought to recognize the struggle over meanings implicit in the term. One point of contention concerns the issue of power and representation as it relates us, geographers, to them, grassroots movements. The empowerment of such social movements depends not only on their "internal" dynamics but also hinges on their relations to local elites, the state, national and international capital and foreign Non-Government Organizations. The last in particular, the NGO, raises questions about our position as geographers working on grassroots development in the region.

A vigorous debate regarding the sometimes problematic social and political relations of NGOs and grassroots movements is currently being conducted in much of Latin America. It is incautious and uncritical to assume that even NGOs with the best intentions for serving the needs of local people can adequately represent the development interests of social movements, or put in the lexicon of the past decade, "broker" for them. The democratic participation of grassroots groups in the policy and decision-making of aid agencies remains an unrealized imperative throughout much if not all of Latin America. Though replete with imposing difficulties, the democratization of development poses a major challenge to the conceptual capacities of Latin

Americanist geographers interested in future grassroots development.

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