Peasantry and national integration

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Professor Yamasaki's paper on the national integration of Japanese peasantry between the Meiji Restoration and the first years of the 20th century provides a broad and adequate survey of the mechanism and factors of such a process. I quite agree with the definition he gives of this national integration, as a process of involvement in and subordination to "the dynamics of a broader social system formulated as a nation state". We could perhaps add: to an industrial capitalist nation state.

On other hand, I have two main points of disagreement to put forward. The first one is related to the concept of "peasantry". Although the paper does not provide a formal definition of peasantry, in my opinion the concept suggested by the text is insufficient. The elements given as characteristic of the peasantry are too loose and, as I think, secondary:

1) a subsistence economy;
2) a traditional way of life;
3) a limited intercourse with the outside world, "thus constituting a relatively isolated 'world' of rural society".

These three elements may well disappear and yet a peasantry, recognizable as such, still exists.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to give a definition of "peasantry" applicable to the very different periods and societies in which some type of "peasant" is supposed to have existed. Anyway, I think that one of the purposes of this seminar is to try and approach this problem. So I shall hazard, not exactly to define, but merely to mention the factors or elements that, in my opinion, all peasantries share:

1) a certain amount of structural autonomy concerning the process of production; very high in the case of peasants-landowners, very low under a feudal system, but never absent: I do not think it is useful to call "peasants" people who are really rural employees or rural workers, as some Latin American authors do (Aníbal Quijano, Giorgio Alberti, etc.);
2) stable access to the continual use of land, through property — private or communal —, or though several possible forms of arrangement between landlords and peasants;
3) family labor as a central feature, even if, in certain cases, other laborers may be employed in supplement.

A great amount of structural variation is still possible, naturally, even if these elements are accepted as common to all "peasantries".
The second point of disagreement concerns the form in which the role of the state as integrator is presented as "the most decisive factor in the process of national integration".

The state appears then as an entity in itself, related to Japanese society from the outside, as if situated above the class structure of the country. I do believe in a very important degree of autonomy of the political-institutional sphere, but not in its total independence from the society. The author himself points out, very justly, that: "The marked ability of the government and its administrative organization was itself the result of processes taking place during the preceding period, that is the Tokugawa period". But in the text it is not at all clear what classes, class fractions or class alliance brought about, according to the author, the reforms of the last decades of the 19th century, giving sense to the new organization of the state and assuring a social base to the new project of an almost totally reshaped society.

The first part of the paper deals with the process of national integration of the peasantry, its mechanisms of several sorts (political, institutional, ideological, economic, etc.). The second part seeks to explain the success and rapidity of this process by presenting the factors or conditions which enabled Japan to carry out such a thorough transformation. All that is very convincing and interesting, the second part in particular.

The two aspects which I find most interesting are: 1) the effects of the urbanization which took place under the Tokugawa regime; 2) the importance of the wealthy peasants or gônô for the spread of changes in the countryside during the early Meiji period.

The rapid growth of Japanese cities began at the end of the 16th century, under the Oda, Toyotomi and then under the early Tokugawa period. This process is now better known, and it is certainly a very striking one: in less than a century, more than one hundred cities of several kinds, with very different types of population and class structures, grew from former villages, completely changing the economic and social structures of the country: military and administrative cities like Edo, peopled mostly by samurai; commercial cities like Osaka; while the ancient imperial city of Kyoto maintained its traditional cultural and religious importance and developed also commercially.

It could be interesting to compare the potentialities of change of a feudal structure, with the peasant family plot as a base over which a class of landowners exploiters can establish itself, with those of a rural structure such as that of colonial and early 19th century Spanish Amer-
ica, based on big estates worked by slaves or by dependent laborers without any stable access to land use. Even in those countries where the Indian or *ladino* communities and their communal lands did legally exist, it was as a secondary or residual feature. In these conditions, the spread of commercial relations could never lead to the emergence of a dynamic group similar to the Japanese *gônô*; and village solidarity was not really a social factor of paramount importance. So, even if countries like Mexico, Guatemala or El Salvador, roughly at the same time as Meiji Japan, knew quite radical processes of capitalist change, called the “liberal reforms”, which destroyed the structural remainders of the colonial period, the project of society which gave sense to these changes reflected a very different social structure. Under the leadership of mostly rural and commercial bourgeoisies, without the possibility of a process of rapid and thorough industrialization comparable to Japan’s, what the Latin American liberal reforms did was not to integrate the peasantry to the national community, but to destroy or weaken it as a peasantry, keeping the popular masses in general from participating in the benefits of what is called “modernization”.
